TROUBLESOME ENGLISH VOWEL SOUNDS

Giulia Suciu
Senior Lecturer, PhD, University of Oradea

Abstract: English vowels – as simple as they may appear - seem to cause foreign learners of English a lot of trouble when it comes to their correct pronunciation. Mispronouncing a vowel can immediately give you away. You automatically know you're not doing it right, but at the same time you have no clue what is wrong with your pronunciation. Being misunderstood may represent the difference between passing or failing an exam or an interview. The present paper aims to point out the main factors that make English vowels so troublesome and the variables one needs to pay attention to, in order to pronounce them correctly and avoid misunderstandings or awkward situations.

Keywords: vowels, length, nasalization, voicing, intonation

SOUNDS

Each language is composed of different sounds, some of them unique to the language in question, making it all the more difficult for foreign learners to master the language. For example, the TH sound – which may be transcribed phonemically in two different ways /ð/ and / θ/ - exists only in English and Greek, which makes it a real challenge for foreign learners of English. That is why, in a report commissioned by HSBC, entitled 'The Sound of 2066'[1], linguists predict that the TH-sounds will disappear completely in the capital of the UK. "In the future we are likely to see the standard TH sounds being lost altogether… The TH sound – also called the voiced dental nonsibliant fricative – is likely to change to be replaced an "f", "d", or "v" meaning "mother" will be pronounced "muvver" and "thick" will be voiced as "fick".' But despite the fact that English has more consonant sounds than vowel sounds, consonants do not seem to be as difficult to grasp as vowels.

VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

Vowels and consonants are terms we are all familiar with, but when it comes to defining them from a scientific point of view, things are not as simple as it may seem at first sight. A very simplistic approach would characterise vowels as 'open' as opposed to consonants which are 'closed'. "Vowels have been described as sounds in the production of which the air stream does not come against any considerable obstacle on the way out from the lungs through the mouth"[2] hence the term 'open'. Vowels sounds being open, they are not 'felt' as much in the mouth as consonants, making it more difficult to pin them down. On the other hand, consonants are produced by using different articulators to block the air – hence the term 'closed'. Being produced by a definite interference between the organs of speech, consonants are easy to be understood and pronounced. To make things even easier, throughout a word, consonants are

[1] Watt, Dominic and Brendon Gunn. 2016. *The Sound of 2066*, available at https://www.about.hsbc.co.uk/news-and-media/the-sound-of-britain-in-2066, accessed on the 24th of September 2018
[2] Chitoran, D. 1977. *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Bucuresti: Editura Didactica si Pedagogica, p.151

produced more or less in the same way, which – as we will later point out – is not the case for vowels.

What's more, there are sounds that are thought of as consonants, but their pronunciation does not involve a clear obstruction of the airflow. (e.g. /h/, /w/). Another aspect is that there are languages which have different ways of dividing sounds. For instance, the sound /r/, perceived as a consonant by speakers of English, Romanian etc., is treated as a vowel is some dialects of Chinese.

ENGLISH VOWEL SOUNDS

But let's focus on the English vowels and try to pin down the aspects that make it so difficult for foreign learners of English to grasp them.

There are only five written vowels in English – a, e, i, o, u - but English spoken in the British accent has 23 different ways of pronouncing vowel sounds (almost as many as the letters in the alphabet). To make things even more complicated, there are situations in English when letters that are written as consonants are pronounced as vowels:

e.g. myrtle - /ˈmɜːtl̩ / where the consonant letter 'y' is transcribed phonemically using the long vowel sound /ɜː/

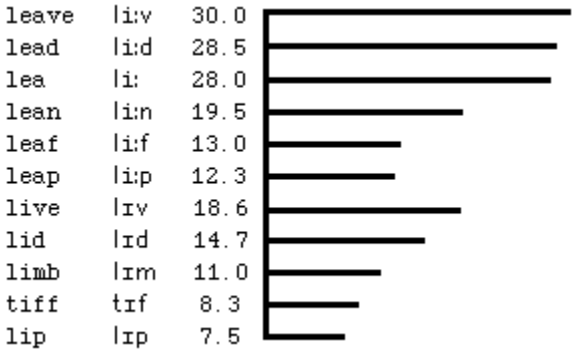
English vowel sounds are divided into monophthongs and diphthongs, but this paper will focus solely on monophthongs. For an accurate description of vowels, phoneticians use several criteria, such as the position of the soft palate, the movement of the tongue, the degree of opening, the length, the degree of muscular tension and the position of the lips. Most of the above-mentioned criteria are fairly straightforward and easy to describe, either by making reference to the position of cardinal vowels (cardinal vowels are a set of reference vowels, systemized by Daniel Jones in the early 20th century.) or the basic lip positions used in describing the articulation of vowels (rounded, unrounded, neutral).

It is the length of the vowel sounds that poses most of the problems to foreign speakers of English. Length refers to the length of time one needs to pronounce a certain sound and it can be measured in centiseconds.

Every learner of English is familiar with the famous minimal pair 'sheep-ship'. (Or with the book bearing the same title – *Sheep or Ship*, written by Ann Baker). The main difference between the two words is the length of the vowel: /ʃiːp/ versus /ʃɪp/ . In the first example the vowel sound is emphasized, while in the second example the vowel sound is almost lost or skipped over, the consonant sound being emphasized. This opposition already confuses foreign learners of English, as there are languages throughout the world that have very simple vowels that do not vary in length (Romanian for instance), hence the difficulty for Romanian speakers of English to make the distinction between long and short vowels.

Theoretically speaking, English monophthongs are divided into short vowels: ɪ, e, æ, ʊ, ɒ, ʌ, ə and long vowels iː, uː, ɜː, ɔː, ɑː. And still theoretically, long vowels tend to be longer than short vowels in similar contexts. However, "it is necessary to say 'in similar contexts' because the length of all English vowel sounds varies very much according to the context (such as the

type of sound that follows them) and the presence or absence of stress."[3] The truth is that no vowel sound in English has a fixed length. Take a look at Gimson's[4] example, in which he compares the length of time necessary for the pronunciation of / iː/ and / ɪ/.It is quite clear that



the same sound can be pronounced differently depending on the context.

Which are the factors that influence the length of a vowel? In connected speech, vowel sounds may modify their length due to several reasons:

- VOICING – The consonant sound directly after the vowel sound will affect its length. Vowels are clipped (shortened) when followed by unvoiced consonants. Therefore, when a vowel is followed by a voiceless consonant, its length is shorter. If we compare the words *bean* and *beat*, we will see that the vowel /iː/ in *beat* is shorter than the same long vowel //iː/ in *bean*, because it is followed by the voiceless consonant /t/ whereas in the first example, the vowel /iː/ is followed by the voiced consonant /n/.

To take matters even further, if we compare the words *beat* and *bid*, although they are transcribed in dictionaries as /biːt/ and /bɪd/, in actual connected speech, the long vowel in *beat* is normally shorter than the short vowel in *bid*, because of the voiced/voiceless consonant that modifies the length of the preceding vowel.

- REDUCING – "Weak vowels after the stressed syllable eat into the space available for the 'long vowel'. In connected speech, this causes long vowels to reduce in length significantly."[5] Take the following examples:

e.g. carp - / kɑːp/
carpet - / ˈkɑːpɪt/
carpenter - /ˈkɑːpɪntə/

In connected speech the long vowel /ɑː/ will be progressively shorter in each word, because of the weak vowels that follow the syllable.

- NASALISATION – Though English vowels are all oral, they might be slightly nasalised when they occur before nasal consonants - /m/, /n/, /ŋ/ - within the same syllable.

[3] Roach, Peter. 2000. *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Cambridge University Press, p. 19.

[4] Gimson, A. C. 1980. *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*. London: Edward Arnold, p. 98

[5] Hudson, Joseph. How Long is an English Vowel Sound. 24th of January 2017, available at https://pronunciationstudio.com/english-vowel-length/, accessed on the 26th of September 2018

e.g. bat - /bæt/ (/æ/ - oral)
ban - /bæn/ (/æ/ - nasalised)

- INTONATION – As a rule, a vowel with primary stress is longer than one with secondary stress. A tonic syllable (i.e. the most emphasized syllable) has a long vowel. In the following examples, notice the change in length as we switch the tonic syllable by means of intonation.

e.g. You're a bad DOG. ('dog will be longer)
You're a BAD dog. ('bad' will be longer)

MUCH MORE THAN SIMPLE SOUNDS

Apparently, there is more to vowels than meets the eye. Dr. Benno Max Leser Lazario[6], an Austrian scientist, dedicated 25 years of his life to the study of the power of vowels in the healing process. He studied the effects of vocal vibrations in the human body, concluding that while we exhale, the production of vowels causes a vibratory auto-massage of the internal organs, thus reaching the deepest tissues, intensifying blood circulation etc.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Although there are only 5 written vowels in English, the fact that English spoken in the British accent has 23 ways of pronouncing these vowels confuses any foreign learner of English. Moreover, the long-short opposition seems to cause further problems, as many languages throughout the world do not have this opposition. To make things even more complicated, vowel length in English may be affected by many factors. But once we raise our awareness to the different factors that may affect the length and the overall pronunciation of English vowels, we will stop seeing them as 'troublesome', and maybe even enjoy using them rejuvenate our body, according to the findings of Dr. Lazario.

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