

THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF ENGLISH SOUNDS: A STUDY OF PHONETICS

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Abstract

This paper, “*The Intelligibility of English Sounds: A Study of Phonetics*” aims at teaching and learning the correct pronunciation of English Sounds with the help of phonetic symbols. Pronunciation is an inseparable part of English language. Generally English is spoken by the people hailing from different first languages. Intelligibility of English is mandatory in the global world. In English language there is no one-to-one relationship between the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent.

Key words: Intelligibility of English, English sounds, phonetics, Received Pronunciation, communication,

1. Introduction

Joanne Kenworthy, in Teaching English Pronunciation, puts forward the concept of comfortable intelligibility as a suitable goal for the majority of learners.

English language is inevitable to learn since it spread out as the major and dominant language of international diplomacy, business and commerce, science and technology, and the travel industry. So, it has become almost a necessity for people from all parts of the world to speak English.

Pronunciation is an inseparable part of English language. Better pronunciation enhances smartness and smoothness in spoken English. Intelligibility of English is mandatory in the global world since English is an international language. The teaching of pronunciation remains largely neglected in the field of English language teaching. The researchers find out some common misconceptions about pronunciation and factors affecting the learning of pronunciation.

2. Objectives

- The main objective of learning English Pronunciation is to acquire the skill to speak English in an effective and intelligible manner.
- English has always been the Lingua Franca of the world.
- It has been a link language used for communication by people who speak different first languages.

3. Rationale

"English spelling is almost divorced from its pronunciation and forms hardly any guide as to how words should be pronounced." (Mont Follick, *The Case for Spelling Reform*, 1964, page 87).

English spelling is notoriously illogical and unphonetic, but for weirdness, nothing beats the words with the same spelling and different meanings.

The articulation of English sounds is a deeply sub-conscious physical habit. In order to produce English phonemes and sound 'more English', a second language learner has to undo the speech habits of a lifetime and learn to use all his speech organs in different ways. The exercise requires awareness of phonological knowledge of English, training and extensive practice.

4. Review of Literature

The Concept of Intelligibility: Henry Sweet (1900) saw intelligibility as a guiding principle in the teaching of pronunciation, which, for him, was foundational in L2 learning.

Kenworthy (1987) sees intelligibility as being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation. This means that the process of intelligibility will entail that the more words a listener is able to identify accurately when said by a particular speaker, the more intelligible the speaker is.

Communication and Intelligibility: *As Gray and Wise put it, "if we speak to someone who gives no evidence of having heard, the act of communication has not been completed; we must have knowledged that he has heard and responded in some way (1959:10)".*

Effective communication takes place when the speaker is intelligible to the listener or when both are mutually intelligible. Communication and intelligibility are therefore closely related phenomena. There is a certain relationship of give and take that exists between the speaker and the listener.

5. English as an Unphonetic Language

English is an unphonetic language. It is learnt by studying the history of English Language that the sounds of English are not uniform and phonetic as it has been influenced by so many languages, for example, Latin and German, etc. In English language there is no one-to-one relationship between the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent. The 26 letters of English alphabet represent 44 sounds in the **Received Pronunciation** of England (R.P), a variety of speech.

6. Phonetic Symbols and Transcription

Since there is no one-to-one correspondence between the sounds and the letters of alphabet, it needs a different notation in which one symbol represents only one sound. The symbols are

known as the **International Phonetic Alphabet** (IPA). The IPA symbols can be used to transcribe the sounds of any language. **Phonetic transcription** is a universal system for transcribing sounds that occur in spoken language. Instead of 26 letters of the English Language, the phonetic symbols are only used to *translate* the spoken word into script.

The rendering of the written English into spoken English by using symbols is called transcription. The first phonetician who compiled the pronunciation dictionary and wrote a book on pronunciation was Daniel Jones. The next writer to concentrate on phonetics was A.C.Gimson.

All the sounds of English are represented by 44 symbols called phonemes of these 24 are consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds. The 44 sounds of the IPA or International Phonetic Alphabet are very helpful since every phoneme represents only one sound.

7. Phonetic Symbols (44 Speech Sounds):

Consonant sounds are 24; vowel sounds are 20 of which 12 pure vowels and 8 diphthongs.

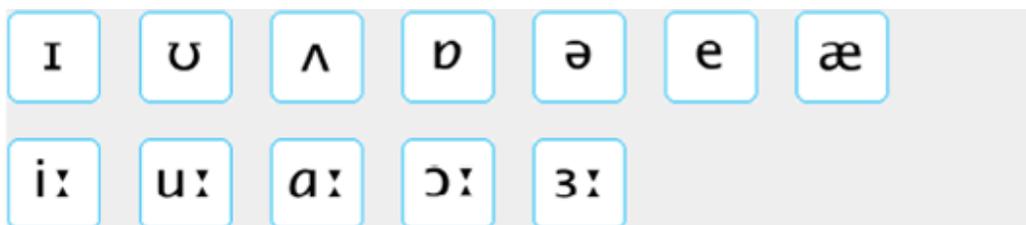


Figure 1-Pure Vowels



Figure 2-Diphthongs



Figure 3-Consonants

The following tables of vowels and consonants can be useful for Learners to comprehend the 44 English sounds with its phonetic symbols and transcription:

S.No.	Symbol	Key Words	Phonetic transcription
1	i:	Feel, meal	/ fi:l /, / mi:l /
2	ɪ	Fill, mill	/ fil /, / mil /
3	e	Net, set	/ net /, / set /
4	æ	Mat, rat	/ mæt /, / ræt /
5	ɑ:	Car, all	/ kɑ:l /, / ɑ:l /
6	ɒ	Hot, got	/ hɒt /, / gɒt /
7	ɔ:	Caught, born	/ kɔ:t /, / bɔ:n /
8	ʊ	Pull, book	/ pʊl /, / bʊk /
9	u:	Pool, rule	/ pu:l /, / ru:l /
10	ʌ	Cut, null	/ kʌt /, / nʌl /,
11	ɜ:	Girl, dirt	/ gɜ:l /, / dɜ:t /,
12	ə	About, ago	/ əbaʊt /, / əgəʊ /

Table 1- Pure Vowel Sounds

S.No.	Symbols	Key Words	Phonetic transcription
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1	eɪ	Play, take	/ pleɪ / , / teɪk /
2	aɪ	My, sigh	/ maɪ / , / saɪ /
3	əʊ	Go, soak	/ gəʊ / , / səʊk /
4	aʊ	Now, shout	/ naʊ / , / ʃaʊt /
5	ɔɪ	Boy, coil	/ bɔɪ / , / kɔɪl /
6	ɪə	Fear, here	/ fiə / , / hiə /
7	eə	Pair, rare	/ peə / , / reə /
8	ʊə	Poor, cure	/ puə / , / kuə /

Table 2- Diphthongs

S.No.	Symbols	Key Words	Phonetic transcription
1	p	Pat, pull	/ pæt / , / pul /
2	b	Bat, bull	/ bæt / , / bul /
3	t	Tap, tin	/ tæp / , / tɪn /
4	d	Dap, din	/ dæp / , / dɪn /
5	k	Kite, king	/ kaɪt / , / kɪŋ /
6	g	Gun, gate	/ gʌn / , / geɪt /
7	tʃ	Chair, chin	/ tʃeə / , / tʃɪn /
8	dʒ	Judge, gin	/ dʒʌdʒ / , / dʒɪn /

9	f	Fan, phone	/ fæn /, / fəʊn /
10	v	Van, vote	/ væn /, / vət /
11	θ	thank, thin	/ θæŋk /, / θɪn /
12	ð	this, then	/ ðɪs /, / ðen /
13	s	sat, sun	/ sæt /, / sʌn /
14	z	Zip, zeal	/ zɪp /, / zɪl /
15	ʃ	Sugar, shoe,	/ ʃʊgə /, / ʃuː /
16	ʒ	Vision, pleasure,	/ vɪʒən /, / pleʒə /
17	m	Man, male	/ mæn /, / meɪl /
18	n	Not, nail	/ nɒt /, / neɪl /
19	ŋ	dung, bang	/ dʌŋ /, / bæŋ /
20	h	how, hall	/ haʊ /, / hɔːl /
21	l	Low, lane	/ ləʊ /, / leɪn /
22	r	Road, ram	/ rəʊd /, / ræm /
23	w	Water, won	/ wɔːtə /, / wɒn /

24	j	you, yolk	/ jʊ:/ , / jəʊk /
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Table 3- Consonants

8. The Pronunciation Rules for Past Tense Markers and Plural Markers:

The pronunciation rules for past tense markers and plural markers involve preservative assimilation and dissimilation, using spelling as a clue.

Past Tense Markers: The alveolar plosives, / t / (voiceless) and / d / (voiced) are inflexional suffixes when used for making past and past participle forms of verbs. The suffixes are always represented by the letter **-d** or the letters **-ed**. The different pronunciations of these suffixes are governed by the following rules.

1. These suffixes are pronounced / t / after voiceless consonants other than / t /.

For example	kicked	/ kɪkt /
	laughed	/ lɑ:ft /
	locked	/ lɒkt /
	pushed	/ pʊʃt /
	stopped	/ stɒpt /

2. The following are pronounced / d / after voiced sounds (remember, voiced sounds include vowels) other than / d /.

For example	begged	/ begd /
	called	/ kɔ:ld /
	loved	/ lʌvd /
	played	/ pleɪd /
	robbed	/ rɒbd /

1. They are pronounced /-ɪd / when the root verb ends in / t / and / d /.

For example	handed	/ 'hændɪd /
	hunted	/ 'hʌntɪd /
	lamented	/ lə'mentɪd /
	landed	/ 'lændɪd /
	loaded	/ 'ləʊdɪd /
	wanted	/ 'wɒntɪd /

Plural Markers: Both Alveolar Fricatives / s / and / z / are inflexional suffixes and plural markers. These are used for making plurals and possessives of nouns and simple present tense third person singular forms of verbs. The suffixes are always represented by the letter **-s** or the letters **-es**. The different pronunciations of these suffixes are governed by the following rules.

1. These suffixes are pronounced **/-s /** after voiceless consonants other than **/ s /, / ʃ /** and **/ tʃ /**.

For example	cats	/ kæts /
	cooks	/ kʊks /
	coughs	/ kɒfs /
	cups	/ kʌps /
	months	/ mʌnθs /

2. The following are pronounced **/-z /** after voiced sounds (remember, voiced sounds include vowels) other than **/ z /, / ʒ /** and **/ dʒ /**.

For example	bags	/ bægz /
	boards	/ bɔ:dz /
	calls	/ kɔ:lz /
	cities	/ sɪtɪz /
	comes	/ kʌmz /
	cows	/ kaʊz /
	ears	/ ɪəz /
	goes	/ gəʊz /
	loathes	/ ləʊðz /
	loves	/ lʌvz /
	plays	/ pleɪz /
	rubs	/ rʌbz /
	sons	/ sʌnz /

1. They are pronounced **/-ɪz /** when the root (i.e., singular noun or the infinitive form of the verb) ends in **/ s /, / z /, / ʃ /, / ʒ /, / tʃ /** and **/ dʒ /**.

For example	buses	/ bʌsɪz /
	bushes	/ bʊʃɪz /
	catches	/ kætʃɪz /
	edges	/ edʒɪz /
	garages	/ ɡærɑːʒɪz /
	roses	/ rəʊzɪz /

9. The Importance of Using a Dictionary

A dictionary is one of the most valuable tools available for improving English language skills. An English dictionary which helps in pronunciation shows the phonetic pronunciation of every word. It also shows the word stress that is a vital element of English pronunciation.

For example: / 'wɔːtə / (water)

The symbols shown between slashes / / are International Phonetic Association symbols which represent the actual sounds. These are the symbols that are used in dictionaries like:

- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
- Cambridge International Dictionary of English
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary
- Collins Cobuild English language Dictionary

So, the learners are advised to use any pronouncing dictionary to identify the correct phonetic symbols in view of learning correct English sounds.

English Accent Coach: is an online tool for developing English pronunciation skills - focusing on vowels and consonants. For those who were brought up speaking a language other than English, it can be as difficult to recognize English speech sounds as it is to produce them. In fact, research has shown that pronunciation can improve when learners are coached to better recognize English sounds. More accurate and rapid recognition of sounds can also help learners to more quickly acquire English vocabulary. Learners can practice the 44 English sounds at the following website: <http://www.englishaccentcoach.com/>

10. Conclusion

Since English is an unphonetic language, English teachers and learners should consider the importance of teaching of pronunciation and the intelligibility of English sounds. They should aim at learning pronunciation using the 44 English sounds or phonetic symbols. The learners should be aware of phonological knowledge of English and they need training and extensive practice.

Therefore, pronunciation is an inseparable part of English language and good pronunciation enhances smartness and smoothness in spoken English. Intelligibility of English sounds is mandatory in the global world as English is an international language.

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