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Lok Raj Sharma
 Associate Professor of English
 Makawanpur Multiple
 Campus, Hetauda, Nepal

Probing into the formation of vowel sounds in English words

Lok Raj Sharma

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Abstract

Learning the sound system of a language is an interesting and challenging task. Understanding the formation of speech sounds requires systematic investigation on the correlation between spellings and their corresponding sounds. This article attempts to probe into the formation of basic vowel sounds of English. The article writer has endeavored to take divergent vowel spellings that form particular vowel sounds. The readers are provided with a brief glimpse about the four term description of the vowel sounds. How an individual vowel sound is produced is described briefly and from where it is produced is shown in the figure. This article is important to the readers who are interested in learning in speech sounds of English.

Keywords: English, pronunciation, spellings, vowel sounds

1. Introduction

English, an international language, is spoken by a large number of people in their diverse fields. People from different countries speak English as their second or foreign language, whereas there are several groups of people who use English as their mother tongue. We can notice that even the people whose mother tongue is English have different varieties of English pronunciation corresponding to the different regions of the English speaking world. We can find some differences in British English, American English, Australian English, and so on. People in the East-End of London tend to speak cockney English, whereas the people in other part of London speak highly polished Standard English of the Oxford or Cambridge educated people. The article writer tries to deal with the spellings and sounds of the Standard English or Received Pronunciation (RP).

Learning English pronunciation has social as well as academic significance. English has been a means of communication with foreign people. Most of the books on science, technology, philosophy, computer, commerce and literature are written in English. If we are unable to speak English, we can't receive knowledge, nor can we share our ideas, opinions and experiences with them. At least we should speak intelligibly, because all agree that that hallmark of good pronunciation is intelligibility. This article will help the readers gain the basic idea about the spellings and their sounds pronounced in the words.

The article writer has gathered different spellings that form vowel sounds in English words. The spellings 'ee', 'ea', 'e', 'ie', 'ei', 'ey', 'i', and 'eo' form / i: / sound in the words 'bee', 'pea', 'he', 'piece', 'receive', 'key', 'police' and 'peon' respectively. The spellings 'i', 'y', 'u', 'o', 'a', 'e', 'ui', 'eo', 'ay' and 'ies' form / ɪ / sound in the word 'bill', 'city', 'busy', 'women', 'manage', 'effect', 'guitar', 'pigeon', 'Sunday' and 'ladies' respectively. The spellings 'oo', 'o', 'ou', 'u-e', 'ew', 'ue', 'ui', 'eo', and 'o-e' form / u: / sound in the words 'moon', 'do', 'soup', 'flute', 'new', 'blue', 'fruit', 'shoe' and 'move' respectively. The spellings 'oo', 'u', 'ould', 'ou' and 'o' form / ʊ / sound in the words 'foot', 'pull', 'could', 'courier' and 'wolf' respectively. The spellings 'e', 'ea', 'a', 'ai', 'ie', and 'u' form / e / sound in the words 'ten', 'head', 'any', 'said', 'friend' and 'bury' respectively. The spellings 'i', 'i-e', 'ei', 'uy', 'y', 'ye' and 'ie' form / aɪ / sound in the words 'climb', 'fine', 'either', 'buy', 'by', 'bye' and 'die' respectively.

Corresponding Author:
Lok Raj Sharma
 Associate Professor of English
 Makawanpur Multiple
 Campus, Hetauda, Nepal

The spellings 'a-e', 'ai', 'ao', 'ay', 'ea' 'ei' and 'ey' form / eɪ / sound in the words 'take', 'pain', 'gaol', 'day', 'break', 'veil' and 'whey' respectively. Similarly, there are other spellings that form different vowel sounds in the words.

The article writer has attempted to probe into the formation of vowel sounds of English so that readers will be able to pronounce the words correctly.

2. Theoretical Review of Literature

2.1 Spelling

A spelling is the correct order of the letters in a word. It is defined as the proper way to write a word, using the correct order of letters. It is the process of forming words from individual letters according to the principles of underlying accepted usage. Oxford Dictionary of English (2003) [15] defines spelling as "the process or activity of writing or naming the letters of a word" (p.1701). Reid (2016) [17] expresses that "English pronunciation is very difficult for foreign learners and it is due to the fact that spelling and pronunciation are two different matters" (p.19). A spelling in different words is spoken differently. It creates a sort of confusion in the learners. Roach (1998) [40] highlights on the nature of spelling and asserts "because of the notoriously confusing nature of English spelling it is particularly important to learn to think of English pronunciation in terms of phonemes rather than letters of the alphabet" (p.3). Gautam (2004) [5] defines a letter as "a written or printed sign representing a sound used in speech" (p.2). Letters contribute to form the pattern of words. An English letter is complex in term of its pronunciation.

2.2 Language and Pronunciation

A language is a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols used for talking or writing. Language is related to the civilization of human beings. It is a vehicle of our culture and identity. Nicholas (1982) [14] views language to be social and "we are constantly involved in the process of social interaction" (p.56). Sapir (1921) [19] asserts that language is a "primarily human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" (p.8). Hockett (1958) [9] considers language as "the most valuable single possession of the human race" (p.1). Every language has its own sound system. The sound system primarily involves vowel and vowel sounds, known as speech sounds. Hyman (1975) [10] asserts that speech sounds are "the product of anatomy and physiology, it is not surprising to find similarities across languages" (p.2). On the other hand, Lass (2010) [13] highlights that "each language has an inventory of sounds, selected from the whole range of possible human noises, which is (or may be) different from the inventories of other languages" (p.3). Two languages may have or may not have some similar features of the sound system. Two languages become different because of their different sounds or phonemes.

Pronunciation is a way a person speaks the words of a language. Language is a powerful means for expressing ideas, opinions, emotional states, information, past experiences, future plan, imaginations and so on. Language is realized through pronunciation that is a vital aspect. Language has a sound system. Giegerich, et al., (2002) [7] affirm that "the sound system is the language-specific

selection and organization of sounds to signal meanings" (p. 2). Trask (1996) [20] defines pronunciation as "the manner in which speech sounds, especially connected sequences are articulated by individual speakers or by speakers generally" (p. 291). Pennington and Richards (1986) [16] assert that "pronunciation is largely identified with the articulation of individual sounds and, to a lesser extent, with the stress and intonation patterns of the target language" (p. 208).

Reid (2016) [17] expresses that "English pronunciation is very difficult for foreign learners and it is due to the fact that spelling and pronunciation are two different matters" (p.19). Pronunciation is the production of speech that is a significant aspect in English language for communicating and contacting people by using words. Each word has letters and each letter has a specific sound. Boyer (2002) asserts that "each speaker has his/her own way in saying words in his/her normal speech" (p.1). Gilakjani (2011) [6] views pronunciation as "the musical tones when the speech flows out smoothly. If there is any weakness in the rhythm, misunderstanding will occur" (p.74). Derwing and Munro (2005) [4] opine "the study of pronunciation has been marginalized within the field of applied linguistics" (p. 379). The writer wants to give emphasis on the aspect of pronunciation.

2.3 Vowel Sounds of English

A vowel is a nucleus of a syllable. Crystal (2003) [3] asserts that vowels are "sounds articulated without a complete closure in the mouth or a degree of narrowing which would produce audible friction" (p.517). It means vowel sounds are produced with a friction of the airflow in the vocal tract. Therefore, they are voiced. Gimson (1990) [8] asserts that speech is "a manifestation of language and spoken language is normally a continuum of sound" (p.44). Connor (2000) [2] views that "vowels are made by voiced air passing through different mouth shapes; the differences in the shape of the mouth are caused by different positions of the tongue and of the lips" (p.79). Similar view is expressed by Verma and Krishnaswamy (1999) [21] who consider a vowel as "a sound produced by the unobstructed passage of the airstream" (p.34). The similar concept is expressed by Roach (2009) who states that "vowels are sounds in which there is no obstruction to the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips" (p. 10). Vowels are voiced sounds. There are 20 vowel sounds of English. They are /ɪ /, / i: /, / e /, / æ /, / ʌ /, / ə /, / ɜ: /, / ɑ: /, / ɒ /, / ɔ: /, / ʊ /, / u: /, / əʊ / and / aʊ /, / eɪ /, / aɪ /, / ɔɪ /, / ɪə /, / eə / and / ʊə /.

3. Method and Materials

This article is based on the qualitative explorative design which employs the secondary data taken from the books on pronunciation of English. The books are "An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English" by Gimson, "Teaching English Pronunciation" by Kenworthy, "A course in Phonetics" by Ladefoged, "Better English Pronunciation" by O, Connor and so on. The syllables function as data that are categorical in nature and they are extracted through making keen observation of syllables that constitute particular consonant sounds. The observation is the method of this study. Twenty vowel sounds are the variables that are highlighted and described from the perspective of their formation.

4. Ways of Familiarizing the Consonant Sounds

The article writer employs the following steps to familiarize students with the formation of vowel sounds of English:

- Displaying the chart of vowel sounds
- Presenting and pronouncing each sound.

- Displaying spelling(s) forming the sound.
- Pointing out the position of the sounds in different words.
- Pronouncing the words.

Formation of Vowel Sounds

4.1 Formation of / i: /

Table 1: The spellings 'ee', 'ea', 'e', 'ie', 'ei', 'ey', 'i', and 'eo' form / i: / sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
ee	bee, seen, tree, cheese, canteen, eel, feel, queen, free, feet, jeep, need, knee etc.
ea	leaf, reason sea, pea, cheap, heat, reap, read, beach, seat, tea, meat, leave, least etc.
e	be, these, complete, she, he etc.
ie	piece, field, siege etc.
ei	receive, seize, ceiling, deceit, receipt, deceive etc.
ey	key, etc.
i	machine, police, prestige, antique etc
eo	People, peon etc.
ay	quay etc.

4.2 Formation of / ɪ /

Table 2: The spellings 'i', 'y', 'u', 'o', 'a', 'e', 'ui', 'eo', 'ay' and 'ies' form /ɪ/ sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
i	in, ill, ink, sit, bit, pin, sin, kill, fill, milk, kick, lick, pick, witch, dish, fish, which etc.
y	busy, easy, lazy, crazy, lady, rhythm, symbol, system, foggy, melody, pansy etc.
u	busy, minute etc.
o	women,
a	manage, palace, village, image, private, vintage etc.
e	pretty, object, effect, exam, England, houses, market, begin, women, naked, wicket, locket, bucket, rocket, pocket, waited, business etc.
ui	guilt, build, guild, guitar etc.
eo	pigeon
ay	Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday etc.
ies	ladies, cities etc.

4.3 Formation of / u: /

Table 3: The spellings 'oo', 'o', 'ou', 'u-e', 'ew', 'ue', 'ui', 'eo', and 'o-e' form /u:/ sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
oo	food, moon, soon, zoo, fool, room, roof, pool, noon, boon, tool, root, shoot, stoop, hoof, proof tooth, spoon, school, choose, goose, boot, coo, boom. Ooze, cool etc.
o	do, to, who, etc.
ou	Soup, group, through etc.
u-e	rude, June, tube, huge, rule, tune, etc.
ew	chew, blew, few, knew, flew, crew etc.
ue	blue, true, value, glue etc.
ui	juice, suit, fruit, bruise, etc.
oe	shoe etc
o-e	move, lose etc.

4.4 Formation of / ʊ /

Table 4: The spellings 'oo', 'u', 'ould', 'ou' and 'o' form / ʊ / sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
oo	good, book, look, wood, foot, wool, took, soot, cook, shook, hook, rook etc.
u	pull, full, bull, put, bush, push, butcher, cushion etc.
ould	would, should, could etc.
ou	courier etc.
o	bosom, wolf, woman, etc.

4.5 Formation of /e/

Table 5: The spellings 'e', 'ea', 'a', 'ai' 'ie', and 'u' form /e/ sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
e	set, bed, went, end, bend, pen, egg, spend, smell, neck, get, bet, gem, let, send etc.
ea	head, bread, dead, breath, health, deaf, measure, pleasant, pleasure, etc.
a	many, any, etc.
ai	said, again etc.
ie	Friend
u	bury, burial etc.

4.6 Formation of /ɜ:/

Table 6: The spellings 'ir', 'er', 'err', 'ear', 'ur', 'urr', 'wor', 'yr' and 'our' form /ɜ:/ sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
ir	bird, third, first, thirst, girl, sir, shirt, birth, dirt, firm, dirty
er	her, certain, serve, verb etc.
err	Err
ear	earth, hearth, earn, learn, yearn, pearl, early, search,
ur	burn, curd, curl, church, curse, purse, turn, burn, nurse, hurt, curtain, fur, murder etc.
urr	purr,
wor	word, work, worse, worst, worship, world, worth, worm etc.
yr	myrtle,
our	courtesy, journey, scourge etc.

4.7 Formation of /ɔ:/

Table 7: The spellings 'or', 'aw', 'ou', 'au', 'a', 'ore', 'oor', 'oar', and 'our' form /ɔ:/ sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
or	cord, horse, sword, born, form, force, torn, north, short, corn etc.
aw	saw, draw, yawn, awful, lawn, jaw, yawn, law, straw, raw, paw etc.
ou	bought, ought, thought etc.
au	cause, caught, daughter, fault, taught etc.
a	all, talk, salt, water, war, quart, ball, fall, chalk, call etc.
ore	more, before, tore, shore, sore, score etc.
oor	door, floor,
oar	oar, board, hoard, roar, soar etc.
our	court, four,

4.8 Formation of /ə/

Table 8: The spellings 'a', 'ar', 'e', 'er', 'or', 'our' 'u', 'and 'ure' form /ə/ sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
a	abandon, about, afraid, advise, account, along, assume, america, allow, among etc.
ar	arrest, arise, arrive, appear, collar, particular etc.
e	parent, perhaps,
er	father, mother, sister, teacher, master, writer etc.
or	doctor, orator, sailor, tailor, etc.
our	colour, favour, neighbour etc.
u	suppose, suggest etc.
ure	figure, future, nature,

4.9 Formation of /æ/

Table 9: The spellings 'a' and 'ai' form /æ/ sound, as in:

Spellings	words
a	at, fact, that, thank, band, hand, pat, rat, pan, than, match, catch, lamp, marry etc.
ai	plaid, plait etc.

4.10 Formation of /ʌ/

Table 10: The spellings 'u', 'o', 'ou', 'oo' and 'oe' form /ʌ/ sound, as in:

Spellings	words
u	up, brush, fun, gun, sum, lunch, pump, pulse, shut, such, much, buzz, must, suck etc.
o	come, some, done, none, oven, mother, among, monday, nothing, month etc.
ou	country, rough, young, couple, enough etc.
oo	blood, flood etc.
oe	does

4.11 Formation of / ɒ /**Table 11:** The spellings 'o', 'a', 'ou' and 'au' form / ɒ / sound, as in:

Spellings	words
o	dock, dog, sorry, gone etc.
a	was, what, swan, want, watch, quality etc.
ou	cough, trough etc.
aw	knowledge, etc.
au	Because, sausage, laurel etc.

4.12 Formation of / ɑ: /**Table 12:** The spellings 'a', 'al', 'au', 'ar', 'ear', 'ua' and 'er' form / ɑ: / sound, as in:

Spellings	words
a	after, pass, bath, tomato, father, branch, class, art, dance, marble, castle, jar etc.
al	calf, calm, half, palm etc.
au	aunt, auntie, laugh etc.
ar	part, card, cart, hard, march etc.
ear	heart, hearth etc.
ua	Guard
er	clerk, sergeant etc.

4.13 Formation of / aɪ /**Table 13:** The spellings 'i', 'i-e', 'igh', 'ei', 'eigh' 'uy', 'y' and 'ye' form / aɪ / sound.

Spellings	Words
i	climb, etc.
i-e	time, shine, white, ride, hide, rime, dine, fine, bite, like, bike, nice etc.
igh	high, light, might, night, sight, thigh, delight etc.
ei	either, neither, etc.
eigh	height etc.
uy	buy, guy, etc.
y	by, shy, cry, dry, fry etc.
ye	bye, dye, eye etc.

4.14 Formation of / eɪ /**Table 14:** The spellings 'a-e', 'ai', 'ao', 'ay', 'ea' 'ei' and 'ey' form / eɪ / sound,, as in:

Spellings	Words
a-e	take, bake, rate, shake, late, mate, case, change, page, tale, sale, base, waste etc.
ai	aim, fail, tail, faint, faith, wait, waist, straight, rain, pain, gain, rail, etc.
ao	gaol etc.
ay	day, pay, say, play, away, gay etc.
ea	break, great, steak etc.
ei	eight, feign, reign, rein, veil, weight, etc.
ey	they, whey, etc.

4.15 Formation of / ɔɪ /**Table 15:** The spellings 'oi', and 'oy' form / ɔɪ / sound, as in:

Spellings	words
oi	boil, soil, toil, noise, voice, void, coin, joint, point, choice etc.
oy	boy, toy, enjoy, annoy, destroy employ etc.

4.16 Formation of / eə /**Table 16:** The spellings 'air', 'are', 'ear' and 'eir' form / eə / sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
air	air, fair, chair, hair, pair,
are	care, bare, dare, mare, scare, share, spare, stare, fare,
ear	pear, bear, tear (v), wear, weary etc.
eir	their, heir etc.

4.17 Formation of / ɪə /

Table 17: The spellings 'ear', 'eer', 'eir', 'ere', 'ier', 'ia', 'ea', 'eu' and 'eo' form / ɪə / sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
ear	dear, fear, hear, clear, tear (n), beard etc.
eer	beer, cheer, deer, peer,
eir	Weird
ere	here, mere,
ier	fierce, pierce etc.
ia	trial, vial, phial etc.
ea	idea, area etc.
eu	Museum
eo	theology

4.18 Formation of / ʊə /

Table 18: The spellings 'oor', 'ure', 'ewer', 'our' 'uri' and 'ue' form / ʊə / sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
oor	moor, poor
ure	pure, cure, sure, endure
ewer	sewer etc
our	tour, gourd, dour,
uri	curious, spurious, furious, during, purify, security etc
ue	Influence

4.19 Formation of / aʊ /

Table 19: The spellings 'ou', and 'ow' form / aʊ / sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
ou	out, about, doubt, loud, shout, house, mouse, louse, sound, found, ground etc.
ow	cow, how, now, town, allow, vowel, row etc.

4.20 Formation of / əʊ /

Table 20: The spellings 'o', 'oa', 'oe', 'ou', 'ow' and 'o-e' form / əʊ / sound, as in:

Spellings	Words
O	so, no, go, lo, old, both, folk, ghost etc.
Oa	boat, road, soap, oak, foal, toast, roast, boast, load etc.
Oe	toe, doe, foe, hoe, sloe,
Ou	soul, though, shoulder etc.
Ow	know, show, grow, blow, snow, low, yellow etc.
o-e	tone, bone, home, shone, pose, rose, dose, rode,

Vowel sounds can be classified broadly into two types: monophthongs and diphthongs. Monophthongs are pure or single vowels. A monophthong is a vowel which is produced without noticeable change in vowel quality. There are 12 monophthongs: /ɪ/, /i:/, /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ə/, /ɜ:/, /ɑ:/, /ɒ/, /ɔ:/, /ʊ/ and /u:/. A diphthong is speech sound which involves two vowels. A diphthong is a glide from one vowel to another, and the whole glide acts like one vowel sound. There is a noticeable change in the quality of vowel when we pronounce them. A diphthong like a monophthong makes only one syllable as it has been regarded as a phoneme. There are 8 diphthongs in English. They are /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /ɪə/, /eə/ and /ʊə/.

The article writer has included varied spellings that form various vowel sounds as far as possible. This article is expected to provide the readers with the basic concept of the formation and production of vowel sounds of English. It will make easier for the readers to learn the pronunciation of vowel sounds to some extent. The readers, teachers and students are advised to notice the pronunciation of each

spelling in words by consulting the English dictionaries or good grammar books on pronunciation along with listening to the native speakers on television or You Tube.

5. Conclusion

Probing into the formation and production of vowel sounds is a not an easy task. If we have a strong desire for learning a difficult thing like sound, we can learn. This article concludes that different vowel spellings can form a vowel sound, the same spelling is pronounced differently according to its position in the words. Correct pronunciation of words can be a matter of disputes, but we should try our best to follow the pronunciation of some sort of the Standard English to make our expression understandable and clear. This article works for this purpose to some extent.

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