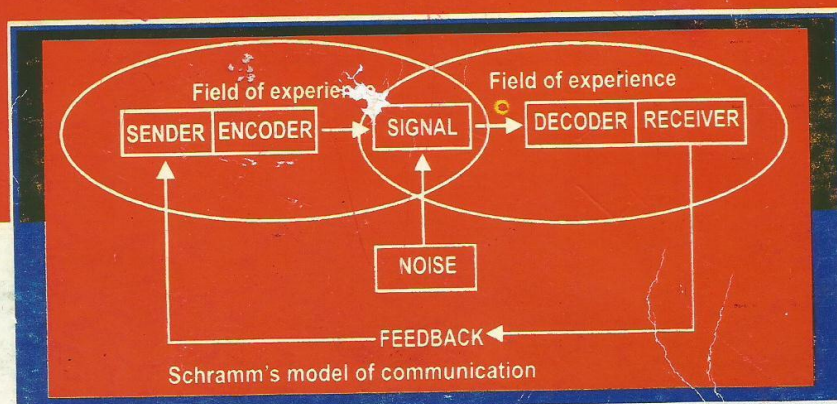


BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS

FOR STUDENTS OF
SCIENCE AND
HUMANITIES



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First Published 2005
Second Edition 2015

ISBN: 978-38291-1-4

Printed at:
Unilorin Press
University of Ilorin, Nigeria

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Chapter 6

BASIC ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION SKILLS

Ibukun T. Osuolale-Ajayi & Monsurat A. Nurudeen

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is the transmission and transaction of meaning between two or more people verbally and non-verbally. Thus, for communication to ensue, there must be a sender (the encoder) and the receiver (the decoder). Man is the only animate being with the ability to communicate orally and graphically. The ability to articulate and combine sounds to form coherent and meaningful words or sentences in a discourse is one of the skills a language user who is physiologically sound needs to have in order to survive in the human society. In other words, speaking skill which is one of the productive skills of language is necessary for the expression of one's thoughts, feelings and intentions. It is therefore essential to constantly improve one's speaking abilities. This chapter will precisely discuss the speech organs, speech sounds, syllable and stress, intonation, phonological errors made by average Nigerians and tips on how to improve one's spoken English.

2. ORGANS OF SPEECH

The articulators involved in speech production can be seen in the diagram below:

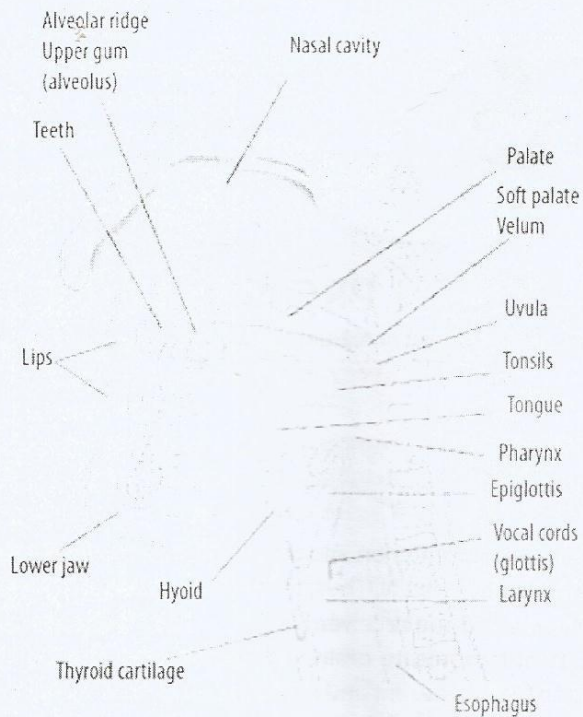


Fig. 1: A diagram showing the human organs of speech

For speech production, some organs in the body are required for the articulation of sounds. These speech organs are called 'the articulators'. The production of English sounds starts from the lungs which produce 'eggressive pulmonic airstream'. The eggressive pulmonic airstream is pushed out by the lungs through the trachea to the larynx. The larynx contains two thick muscular tissues that are elastic in nature. These two thick muscular tissues are called the vocal cords or vocal folds.

Roach (2009, p.8) states that muscles in the larynx are responsible for different modifications in the flow of air from the chest to the mouth. The elasticity of the two vocal cords allows them to be either drawn together or apart. The space in-between these two organs is referred to as the state of the glottis. When the vocal cords are apart, the air coming from the trachea is able to pass through them freely. Sounds produced when the vocal folds are apart, allowing for free air passage, are voiceless

sounds. However, sounds produced when the vocal cords are together and air cannot pass through the passage freely are referred to as voiced sounds. After the air has passed through the larynx, it goes through the vocal tract which ends at the oral and nasal cavities.

The soft palate which is between these two cavities can either be raised or lowered. When the soft palate is raised, it blocks the nasal cavity and brings about the production of oral sounds. However, if the soft palate is lowered, it blocks the oral cavity and air passes through the nasal cavity. This results in the production of nasal sounds.

3. VOWEL SOUNDS

Vowel sounds are sounds produced when there is no obstruction in the vocal tract with vibration of the vocal folds. Vowel sounds are voiced sounds and can act as the nucleus of syllables. Vowel sounds are divided into monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs. Roach (2009, p.11) submits that the unique feature of each vowel sound can be observed by carefully considering the shape and position of the tongue as well as the length of sound in the process of articulation. Long vowel sounds are usually indicated with the diacritic mark /:/ . We shall examine monophthongs and diphthongs next.

Monophthongs

The monophthongs in English are vowels produced at one point in the mouth. They may either be short or long. Monophthongs in English are also called pure vowels and are twelve in number. These sounds are represented in the following diagram.

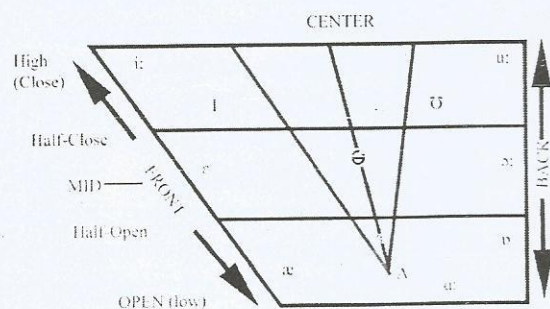


Fig. 2: Showing the twelve monophthong sounds in English

Word examples of monophthongs are:

1. /i:/ spelt 'ee' in see, 'e' in legal, 'ie' in belief, 'uay' in quay
2. /ɪ/ spelt 'i' in pig, 'e' in bucket, 'y' in tidy, 'ay' in monday
3. /ɛ/ spelt 'a' in ate, 'ea' in wealth, 'ie' in friend, 'e' in bet
4. /æ/ spelt 'a' in pat, mat, rat, 'ai' in plait,
5. /ɑ:/ spelt 'a' in father, 'ar' in part, 'au' in laugh
6. /ɒ/ spelt 'a' in was, 'o' in hot, 'ou' in cough
7. /ɔ:/ spelt 'a' in law, 'ar' in oar, 'ou' in bought
8. /ʊ/ spelt 'oo' in foot, 'o' in woman, 'u' in pulpit,
9. /u:/ spelt 'o' in womb, 'oo' in food, 'ue' in glue
10. /ʌ/ spelt 'o' in love, 'u' in hut, 'oo' in blood
11. /ɜ:/ spelt 'er' in germ, 'ir' in bird, 'ear' in earth
12. /ə/ spelt 'a' in around, 'er' in father, 'or' in conductor

Diphthongs

Diphthongs which are also known as glides are vowels rendered with a movement from the position of one short vowel towards another. During the production of diphthongs, the tongue glides from a first sound to the second sound. Ofuya (2007, p.22) submits that in Received Pronunciation, the starting point is always the position of a short vowel sound and the direction in which the tongue glides is towards the position of another short vowel. Word examples of diphthongs are:

- /eɪ/ as in rotate, prey, goal
- /aɪ/ as in bite, finite, high
- /ɔɪ/ as in boy, coinage, foible
- /əʊ/ as in boat, dough, brooch
- /aʊ/ as in about, outlet, house
- /ɪə/ as in beer, idea, pierce
- /eə/ as in wear, rarely, air
- /ʊə/ as in pure, tour, truant

4. CONSONANT SOUNDS

Consonants are speech sounds produced with either partial or total obstruction of the airstreams in the oral or nasal cavity. Consonants are classified according to:

- i. The state of the glottis
- ii. The place of articulation
- iii. The manner of articulation

There are twenty-four consonant sounds in English. These sounds are presented in the table below:

N.B. In the left column, -V stands for voiceless sound and +V for voiced sounds.

State of the Glottis		Place of Articulation	Manner of Articulation
+V	-V		
p	b	Bilabial	Plosive
t	d	Alveolar	Plosive
k	g	Velar	Plosive
f	v	Labio-dental	Fricative
h		Glottal	Fricative
θ	ð	Inter-dental	Fricative
s	z	Alveolar	Fricative
ʃ	ʒ	Palato-alveolar	Fricative
tʃ	dʒ	Palato-alveolar	Affricate
	w	Bilabial	Semi-vowel
	j	Palatal	Semi-vowel
	m	Bilabial	Nasal
	n	Alveolar	Nasal
	ŋ	Velar	Nasal
	l	Alveolar	Lateral
	r	Post-alveolar	Frictionless continuant

Table 1: Short Descriptions of Consonant Sounds

1. /p/: voiceless bilabial plosive (as in picture, trap)
2. /b/: voiced bilabial plosive (as in bible, book)
3. /t/: voiceless alveolar plosive (as in table, bucket)
4. /d/: voiced alveolar plosive (as in dirty, dish)
5. /k/: voiceless velar plosive (as in kettle, keg)
6. /g/: voiced velar plosive (as in gift, good)
7. /f/: voiceless labio-dental fricative (as in freedom, flow)
8. /v/: voiced labio-dental fricative (as in voice, view)
9. /h/: voiceless glottal fricative (as in hospital, house)
10. /θ/: voiceless inter-dental fricative (as in think, thank)
11. /ð/: voiced inter-dental fricative (as in that, they)
12. /s/: voiceless alveolar fricative (as in safe, soap)
13. /z/: voiced alveolar fricative (as in zip, zone)
14. /ʃ/: voiceless palato-alveolar fricative (as in shoe, shade)
15. /ʒ/: voiced palato-alveolar fricative (as in measure, vision)

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| 16. | /tʃ/: voiceless palato-alveolar affricate | (as in <u>ch</u> ild, <u>ch</u> urch) |
| 17. | /dʒ/: voiced palato-alveolar affricate | (as in <u>jud</u> ge,) |
| 18. | /w/: voiced bilabial semi-vowel | (as in <u>w</u> indow, <u>qu</u> ick) |
| 19. | /j/: voiced palatal semi-vowel | (as in <u>t</u> une /tju:n/, <u>p</u> ure /pjʊə/) |
| 20. | /m/: voiced bilabial nasal | (as in <u>m</u> um, <u>m</u> ilk) |
| 21. | /n/: voiced alveolar nasal | (as in <u>n</u> anny, <u>n</u> ame) |
| 22. | /ŋ/: voiced velar nasal | (as in <u>f</u> inger, <u>a</u> nger) |
| 23. | /l/: voiced alveolar lateral | (as in <u>l</u> ove, <u>l</u> add <u>l</u> e) |
| 24. | /r/: voiced post alveolar | (as in <u>r</u> ound, chem <u>is</u> tr <u>y</u>) |

Exercise 1

- i. Briefly describe the process involved in the production of English speech sounds.
- ii. Give the sounds of the underlined letters in the following words:
 - a. Sizzle
 - b. Pillow
 - c. Master
- iii. What are the major differences between monophthongs and diphthongs?

5. SYLLABLE AND STRESS IN ENGLISH

Syllable and stress are interwoven phonological building blocks. Syllables can influence the stress patterns of a language and also affect the successful oral skills of an individual.

Syllable

A syllable is a unit consisting of one vowel which may be preceded or followed by one consonant or more. A syllable is also the smallest unit of sound which can be pronounced. It can be seen as beat in an utterance. A word that consists of a single syllable for instance, 'English cow' is called a monosyllable and is said to be monosyllabic. A word of two syllables is called a disyllable and is said to be disyllabic, while a word of three syllables is a trisyllable and thus trisyllabic. Similarly, a word of more than three syllables or any word of more than one syllable is a polysyllable; hence, polysyllabic. A syllable in English consists of three segments: onset, nucleus and coda. The nucleus is usually the vowel which constitutes the peak of a syllable and it is a mandatory element. The onset is the consonant sound at the beginning of a syllable. The onset occurs before the nucleus, while the coda is the consonant sound that follows the nucleus. Some syllables consist of only the nucleus with no coda. A syllable with a coda is called a closed syllable and the one without a coda is called an open syllable or free syllable.

The syllable of a word can either begin with a vowel or a consonant or more. The phenomenon of having two or more consonants together is termed consonant clusters. As a result, the elements in the structure of a syllable can be represented as $(C_{0-3})V(C_{0-4})$. (C_{0-3} and C_{0-4}) are the possible numbers of optional consonants clusters at the initial and final positions in the English syllable; the brackets indicate optionality. V (without a bracket) indicates an obligatory nucleus which is always a vowel sound or a syllabic consonant. The arrow at the top of the formula is to indicate a strict linear order in which the elements in the structure of the syllable must occur. The formula can be expanded to provide few possible syllabic structures with their equivalent examples in the following:

V as in are	/a:/
VC as in arm	/a:m/
CVC as in bell	/bel/
CCV as in play	/pleɪ/
CCVC as in plays	/pleɪz/
CCCV as in spray	/spreɪ/
CCCVC as in sprite	/spraɪt/
CCVCCCC as in plants	/plænts/

Stress

Stress is the prosodic feature of the phonological unit 'syllable' in English. It is the intensity with which a syllable is produced or uttered. A stressed syllable is considered more prominent as it is usually rendered louder than an unstressed syllable. A stressed syllable is that, which is produced with relative emphasis, which can result in increase in pitch, loudness, length and quality. The factors of pitch, loudness, length and quality affect the prominence of a syllable. Syllables may sometimes be made prominent by means of one or only two of these factors, i.e. pitch and length, the other two factors have less effect. In length for example, long vowels and diphthongs are more prominent in speech than short vowel phonemes. The general recognised degrees of stress in English Language are: primary stress, secondary stress and unstressed or tertiary level. The primary stress is received by a syllable with a strong stress, i.e. syllable pronounced more forcibly than the surrounding ones. The primary stress is often represented by a superscript mark in transcription (') which is always before the stressed syllable, e.g. understand /ʌndə'stænd/, enter /'entə/. The secondary stress is weaker than the primary stress. It is received by a syllable with a medium stress. In transcription, it is usually marked with a subscript (,). The unstressed syllable is a syllable that is weakly produced in words; it is a syllable that is rendered with the absence of any recognisable amount of stress. The unstressed syllable is usually not marked. In English, all content words which include (nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives and adverbs) are stressed and they receive the primary stress. Grammatical or

structural words which include: (auxiliaries, articles, pronouns, preposition and conjunction) are not usually stressed when they occur in sentences (connected speech).

Monosyllabic words are stressed (both content and structural) when they appear in isolation and they carry the primary stress as in 'see, 'in, 'day, etc. Word stress is also present in disyllabic and polysyllabic words for example: 'present, 'table, ma'chine, 'slender, ,edu'cative, ne'gotiate, eco'nomics, de'mocracy, etc.

There are many two-syllable words/disyllabic words in English whose meanings and classes change with a change in stress. Nouns in this category are stressed on the first syllable while verbs are stressed on the second syllable, e.g.

Noun

'export
'refuse
'rebel
'convict
'subject

Verb

ex'port
re'fuse
re'bel
con'vict
sub'ject

Misplacement of stress on syllables can result to misinterpretation of words. Examples of such word stress misplacements commonly used by Nigerian students are *ma'dam* instead of *'madam*, *tri'balism* instead of *'tribalism*, *'salad* instead of *sa'lad*, *'perfume* instead of *per'fume*, etc.

Exercise 2

1. Provide three word examples each for these syllabic structures: VC, CCCV and CCVCC
2. Write out five words that are differentiated through stress and indicate the stress and the word class, e.g. 'insult (Noun) and in'sult (verb).

6. INTONATION

Intonation is the rise and fall of the pitch of the voice in spoken utterance. It is also the variation or quality of sounds as used by a speaker. English language is intonational and rhythmic unlike most Nigerian languages that are tonal. In connected speech, the voice pitch is not static as it rises and falls continuously. One of the skills a learner of English needs to develop is how to make his or her utterances in English linguistically undulating and this, of course, starts from knowing how to use stress.

There are two types of intonation and they are: rising tune and falling tune. The functions of these tunes shall be considered next.

Rising Tune

1. The rising tune is used to demand for information which requires a Yes or No reply, e.g.
 - Is Mercury the hottest planet? ↗
2. It is used to make polite requests, e.g.
 - Can you help me. ↗
3. Rising tune is also used in listing items in a speech, e.g.
 - The atmosphere is made up of troposphere, ↗ stratosphere, ↗ mesosphere ↗ and thermosphere. ↘ (Please note that the final item in the sentence has a falling tune because it marks the end of the declarative sentence).
4. A rising tune is also used to mark a brief pause in the middle of a continuative speech, e.g.
 - You must go there right away ↗ (and return with my money).
 - If you can do it, ↗ (see me immediately).

Falling Tune

1. Falling tunes are used in declarative sentences, e.g.
 - G.N. Lewis is one of the people that propounded the concepts of acid and bases. ↘
 - There are fifty-four countries in Africa. ↘
2. Imperatives and exclamations are said with falling tunes, e.g.
 - Shut up! ↘
 - Oh no! ↘
3. Falling tunes are also used to indicate the end of 'WH' questions, e.g.
 - What are the types of acids used in laboratories? ↘

Exercise 3

Identify the tone type (rising or falling) in the following:

A: Did he leave the note?

B: I left the house before he arrived.

A: So, you did not see the note?

B: Didn't you hear me the other time?

A: What! How dare you talk to me like that? Leave at once!

7. PHONOLOGICAL ERRORS MADE BY AVERAGE NIGERIANS

According to Oloruntoba-Oju and Alabi (2013, p. 176) there are a number of phonological errors made by average Nigerians; this is as a result of the carryover of the linguistic habits of their indigenous languages into the English Language. This act is also referred to as interference. Some of these errors are listed below:

1. Under-differentiation of sounds: This occurs when a sound in mother tongue is used for more than one sound in English. Average Nigerians tend to use a vowel sound in their mother tongue for other vowels in English. For instance:
 /i:/ is realised as /i/ e.g. in 'people'
 /ɜ:/ is realised as /ɔ/ e.g. in 'world'
2. Overdifferentiation of sounds: This arises when distinctions made in Nigerian languages that are not realised in English are forced on the English language. Examples are:
 /ɔjel/ for 'oil' in Igbo language
 /kwɔD'rent/ for 'current' in Hausa language
3. Reinterpretation: This happens when a sound in English is realised as its close counterpart in English. Hence,
 /ə/ is interpreted/ realised as / ɑ /, /æ/ as / ɑ / e.g. in 'about'
4. Sound substitution: This is occasioned by the substitution or replacement of sounds absent in Nigerian languages. For example:
 /ð/ is realised as / d / e.g. in 'they', 'that'
 /tʃ/ is realised as / ʃ / or / s / e.g. in 'wash', 'chicken'
5. Tendency to match orthography with pronunciation: Some Nigerians tend to pronounce words as they are written. However, in English there is no correlation between the spelling of words and how they are phonemically realised.
6. At the suprasegmental level, Osisanwo (2007, p.143) identifies some characteristics of Nigerian English speakers as manifested in the following: syllable, stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.
 - a) Stress: Some Nigerian speakers of English reverse the order of primary stress and secondary stresses in words. For example:

SBE	NE
FIREwood	fireWOOD
MAdam	maDAM
 - b) Rhythm: Nigerian languages are tonal and consequently syllable timed which has an effect on the standard British English which is stress timed as syllables are given more intensity and quality than they are in English RP and are differentiated from one another mainly by pitch levels and vowel quality. Thus, providing differences in the rhythm of English RP and Nigerian English.

- c) Intonation: as earlier discussed in the major subsection of intonation, most of the Nigerian indigenous languages are tonal languages, while English is described as an intonational language. Each syllable of a given speech is of nearly the same length and given the same stress. Some Nigerian speakers of English tend to associate stressed syllables with a high tone and unstressed syllables with a low tone.

8. HOW TO DEVELOP PRONUNCIATION SKILL IN ENGLISH

Oloruntoba-Oju and Alabi (2013, p.177) identify some major issues to be borne in mind towards the development of pronunciation. Some of these issues are:

- a. Have a positive attitude towards speaking of good English.
- b. Do not depend on written English as a guide.
- c. Know how to effectively use the pronouncing dictionary.
- d. Stick to just one standard variety. Do not inter-mingle different varieties. e.g. American and British varieties of English.
- e. Try to improve your speaking skills by listening to BBC, VOA, etc. recorded voices of native speakers.
- f. Be more conscious of your areas of mother tongue interference.

9. CONCLUSION

The chapter has been an overview of articulators used in the production of English sounds, phonemes (vowels and consonants), syllable and stress in English, intonation, some phonological errors made by Nigerians and some issues to bear in mind towards the development of appreciable oral pronunciation skill in English. The issues discussed are essential in achieving fluency and proficiency in spoken English. Thus, a deliberate, consistent and purposeful study of the content in this chapter will assist in boosting oral communication skill.

Suggested Answers

Exercise 1

i. See the section on organs of speech.

ii. (a.) /z/

(b.) /au/

(c.) /ɑ:/ and /ə/

iii. Monophthongs are single phonemes produced in one point in the mouth and they are eight in number. Diphthongs are phonemes made up of properties of two different monophthongs. In the production of diphthongs, the tongue glides from a phoneme to another. Diphthongs in English are eight in number.

Exercise 2

A.

1. VC—e.g. egg, add, urge

2. CCCV—e.g. screw, skew, straw

3. CCVCC—e.g. snub, stand, sport

B. Examples:

	Noun	Verb
1.	INcrease	inCREASE
2.	DEsert	deSERT
3.	CONduct	conDUCT
4.	REcord	reCORD
5.	PROject	ProJECT

Exercise 3

A: Rising tune

B: Falling tune

A: Rising tune

B: Rising tune

A: Falling tune

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