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PRACTICAL TIPS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH VOWELS TO CHINESE SPEAKERS

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Practical Tips for Teaching English Vowels to Chinese Speakers

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Over the past decade, graduate programs, especially in sciences and technologies, have seen an ever growing influx of students from China; and more recently, university and high school programs are experiencing a similar influx. Most Chinese students express frustration with their communication skills when they arrive in the US. Even cream-of-the-crop students admitted into Ivy League universities have trouble ordering a simple meal or communicating with a sales clerk, let alone with their classmates or professors. This is due to the fact that what they hear or say is often different from what they have been taught to hear or say. Of course, a lack of vocabulary (including colloquialisms) and cultural knowledge are part of the problem, but pronunciation is also a major factor.

As with students from many other countries, Chinese students arrive with varying levels of English language proficiency. They also come with a mixed understanding of English pronunciation. Many have been taught using British English (BE) in junior high school; then, they learn North American English (NAE) in high school. Chinese teachers of English also

have a major influence of student knowledge and acquisition of English. Unfortunately, sometimes there is misinformation taught.

Since English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers now frequently encounter sections of their classes in which the majority are Chinese native speakers, it is wise for ESL teachers, particularly those responsible for teaching oral proficiency, to understand these students' needs. This paper gives practical tips for ESL instructors when teaching NAE vowels. Some of these tips can be applied to students from any language background; others target issues Chinese speakers have.

1. Phonetic alphabets

Most ESL teachers are familiar with at least one phonetic alphabet, but it is beneficial to be familiar with the phonetic alphabets that your students have been taught as well. In the case of Chinese students, this is often the one that is promoted by the British Council (e.g., Kim, n.d.). Students from Taiwan are taught using the “KK” notation system (Kenyon & Knott, 1944/1953), which is closer to American notation. Some of the British Council symbols differ from those used in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and those used in American textbooks and dictionaries. For example, ‘yet’ is /jet/ in BE notation, /jet/ in IPA, and /yɛt/ in

most NAE notations. Table 1 summarizes the notation similarities and differences. What is important is that both the teacher and the students use the same phonetic alphabet in class.

TABLE 1

A comparison of British and North American English notation systems

	BE	NAE	Examples	Comment
1	i:	i	key, <u>beat</u>	
2	ɪ	ɪ	kiss, <u>bɪt</u>	
3	e	ɛ	<u>egg</u> , <u>bet</u>	
4	æ	æ	<u>flat</u> , <u>bat</u>	
5	u:	u	<u>food</u> , <u>boot</u>	
6	ʊ	ʊ	<u>took</u> , <u>put</u>	
7	ɔ:	ɔ	<u>law</u> , <u>bought</u>	Many Americans merge this with /ɑ/
8	ɑ:	ɑ	<u>father</u> , <u>baht</u>	
9	ɒ		<u>what</u> , <u>spot</u>	British
10	ʌ	ʌ	<u>rough</u> , <u>butt</u>	
11	ə	ə	<u>banana</u> , <u>about</u>	unstressed or reduced /ʌ/
12a	ɜ:		<u>bird</u> , <u>Bert</u>	British
12b		ɜ ^r /ɜ ^r /ə ^r /ə ^v	<u>bird</u> , <u>Bert</u> , <u>paper</u>	American
13	eɪ	eɪ	<u>play</u> , <u>bait</u>	
14a	əʊ		<u>so</u> , <u>boat</u>	British
14b		oʊ	<u>so</u> , <u>boat</u>	American
15	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	<u>toy</u> , <u>boil</u>	
16	aɪ	aɪ	<u>light</u> , <u>bite</u>	
17	aʊ	aʊ	<u>ouch</u> , <u>bout</u>	
18	ɪə		<u>fear</u>	British
19	eə		<u>there</u>	British
20	ʊə		<u>pure</u>	British
21	aʊə		<u>our</u>	British
22	eɪə		<u>layer</u>	British

2. Varieties of English

Besides the differences in notation, Table 1 also illustrates many of the differences between BE and NAE pronunciation. It often does not matter whether a student pronounces a word using BE or NAE, as either would be comprehensible. For example, ‘Harry Potter’ as either /hæri pɒtə/ (BE) or /həri pɒtə/ (NAE) would be understood by an American. Of course, there are many regional, racial, ethnic and other variations of English as well. Being familiar with as many as possible can help a teacher avoid labeling a pronunciation as “wrong” when it is rather just a different variety of English.

3. Vowel chart

Beyond choosing a phonetic alphabet, it is very helpful to teach NAE vowels with reference to a vowel chart. Variations in jaw, lip, and tongue position create the different vowel sounds as air flows through the oral cavity. Lip and jaw positions are easy to show in class (and practice with the help of reflections in a mirror or smart phone); for example, the lips are very rounded when pronouncing /u/, but spread for /i/; the jaw is dropped for /æ/, but moves slightly for /eɪ/. Tongue position, on the other hand, is much more difficult to illustrate, yet it is the position of the tongue that is most crucial in the accurate pronunciation of vowels. This is why it is necessary to use a vowel chart when describing where the tongue is positioned. Figure

1 is an example of a vowel chart that illustrates the tongue's position—and movement in the case of diphthongs—in vowel production (for a very detailed description of the NAE vowel system, see Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010)).

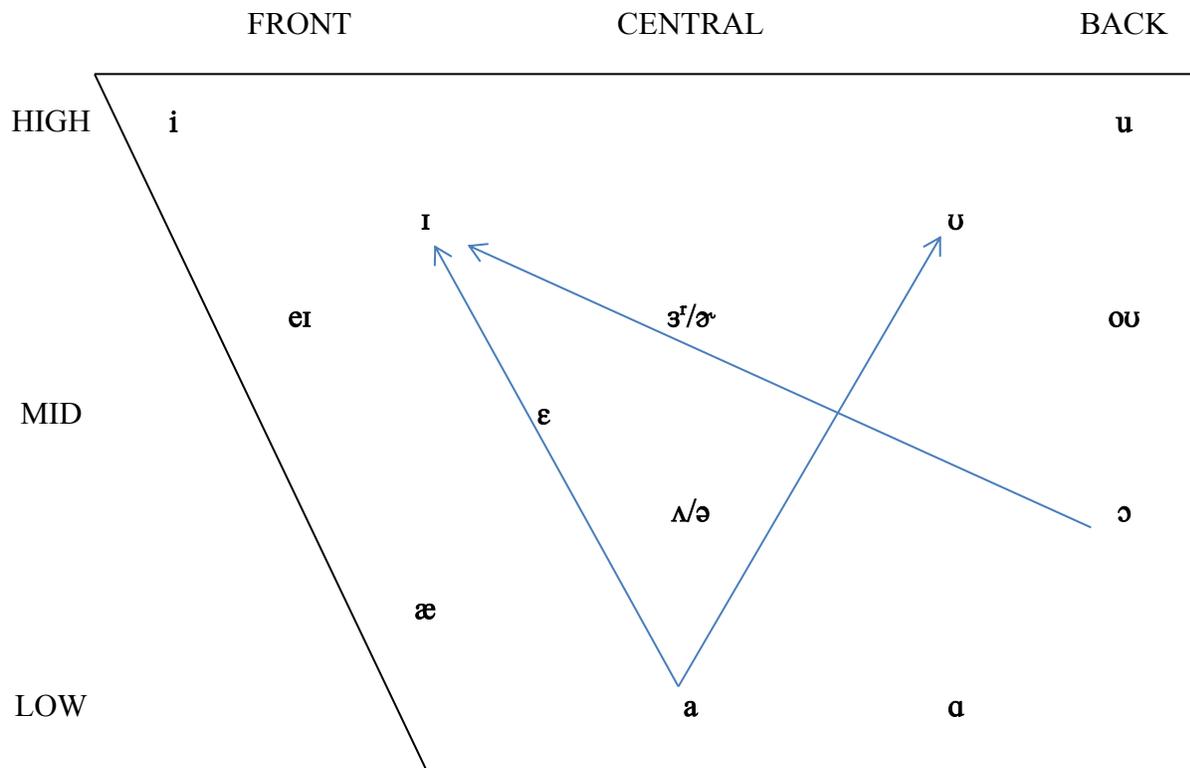


Figure 1: North American English vowel chart

4. Vowel shift

One of the differences between BE and AM is that BE mid and low vowels shift forward in NAE (see Table 2). In some American dialects, e.g., Midwestern, this vowel shift is taken a step further than in other American dialects. Most of the time, these variations in

pronunciation can be attributed to “accent.” However, they can sometimes cause confusion, and it is helpful for teachers and students to know these areas of confusion; for example, in ‘I put a glass/gloss on the table,’ BE pronunciation of ‘glass’ is the same as NAE pronunciation of ‘gloss,’ i.e., /glas/.

TABLE 2

Vowel shift from British to North American English

	Vowel shift	BE	NAE
caught	/ɔ/ → /ɑ/	/kɔt/	/kɑt/
pot	/ɒ/ → /ɑ/	/pɒt/	/pɑt/
what	/ɒ/ → /ʌ/	/wɒt/	/wʌt/
fast	/ɑ/ → /æ/	/fɑst/	/fæst/
Barry	/æ/ → /ɛ/	/bæri/	/beri/

5. R-coloring

The pronunciation of /r/ is prominent in most varieties of NAE outside of New England, and it has a strong influence on vowel quality. This phenomenon is known as r-coloring. The lack of r-coloring in BE is one of the reasons that BE has more vowels than NAE (see Table 1). Students from China often lack r-coloring as well, so misunderstandings can occur with NAE /ɑ/. As Table 3 illustrates, ‘Barb marked them’ without r-coloring would sound like ‘Bob mocked them’ to most Americans.

TABLE 3

Confusion between /a/ and /ɑ:/ without r-coloring

NAE	/ɑ/	BE
hot	/hɑt/	heart
mock	/mɑk/	mark
Bob	/bɑb/	Barb
cotton	/kɑtən/	carton

6. Confusing terminology

Perhaps the greatest area of confusion and misinformation comes from the use of the terms 長 “long” and 短 “short” to describe vowels. Almost all Chinese students come to ESL classes believing that the difference between /i/ as in ‘beet’ and /ɪ/ as in ‘bit’ is that /ɪ/ is a shorter version of /i/. However, /i/ and /ɪ/ are completely different vowels, *not* longer or shorter versions of the same vowel. In fact, because vowels that proceed voiced consonants (e.g., /d, v, dʒ, ð/) are longer than vowels that precede voiceless consonants (e.g., /t, f, tʃ, θ/), the /ɪ/ in ‘bid’ is actually longer than the /i/ in ‘beet.’

Practice with following sentences is usually helpful in illustrating this point to students:

	shorter	longer	
She gave me a ...	beet	bead	/i/
	bit	bid	/ɪ/

To avoid vowel length confusion, avoid categorizing vowels as “long” and “short”; use the terms “tense” and “lax,” instead. Lax vowels are characterized by being more central in tongue position and more relaxed in lip position. They also cannot be in open-syllable words (e.g., there are no English words for /tɪ/, /tɛ/, or /tʊ/). Table 4 lists the tense and lax vowels.

TABLE 4

Tense and lax vowels of North American English

Tense Vowels	Lax Vowels
/i, eɪ, ɑ, ɔ, oʊ, u, aɪ, aʊ, ɔɪ/	/ɪ, ɛ, æ, ʌ, ʊ/

7. Tone interference

ESL teachers often contrast vowels by practicing with minimal pairs of vowels (e.g., ‘beat/bit’ ‘lock/luck’). The natural intonation pattern to do contrast is the closed-choice intonation pattern (up and down), as in ‘beat’ ‘bit’ or ‘lock’ ‘luck.’ The problem here is that because Chinese is a tonal language, students focus on the rise or falling tone instead of the actual vowel quality. In other words, students may think the difference between the two vowels is tonal (rising or falling) in nature. Instead, practice minimal pairs either by using the same tone or by use the words in sentences:

Statement intonation

feel fill

I had a bad feeling/filling.

Yes/No question intonation

bean bin

Are those your beans/bins?

8. Difficult vowels

Chinese has fewer vowels than NAE, so it is natural that they have difficulty with pronouncing many NAE vowels. In general, almost all of the lax vowels are difficult partly because Chinese does not have most of these vowels and partly because they believe they just have to shorten a neighboring tense vowel. But with a correct understanding of how vowels are produced and with practice, they can begin to hear and produce these lax vowels. Teaching students to move their lips, tongue, and jaw will help with the production of /eɪ/ and /oʊ/ (in contrast with /ɛ/ and /ɔ/). Finally, the diphthongs /aɪ, aʊ, ɔɪ/, especially before nasals (/m, n, ŋ/) and /l/, need to be practiced. In the case of diphthongs, half is often deleted or students compromise with a vowel in the middle of the movement. For example, /ɛ/ is along the tongue route in the diphthong /aɪ/, so many Chinese students pronounce ‘smile’ /smaɪl/ as ‘smell’ /smɛl/.

In conclusion, while many students may have an initial aspiration to “sound like a native speaker,” they soon come to realize that such a goal may take more practice and time than they expected. Assure them that having an accent of any type is not necessarily

problematic. In fact, by sheer number, “Chinese English” is becoming a World English of its own right. Yet, many in America have trouble understanding heavily accented English. Our job, as ESL teachers—especially in an academic environment where many international teaching assistants are from China—is to help our students understand what is said to them and help them be comprehensible to others.

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