

## **English Sound System**

Letters and sounds must not be mixed up. Sounds are spoken and letters are written. Although letters remind us of corresponding sounds, but they cannot make us pronounce sounds which we do not know. In English there are 26 letters but 45 sounds. As a result spelling of words does not guide pronunciations, e.g., the letters i, u, o, e and a in city, busy women, pretty, village stand for same vowel sound which is in 'sit'. Moreover, in English there are some silent letters. Therefore, there is an alphabet or symbol for each 45 sounds of 26 letters. These alphabets or symbols are called 'phonetic alphabets', or 'phonetic symbols'. These symbols alone present exact sound for pronunciation. The International Phonetic Association (IPA) has given these symbols.

### **Sounds of English and Phonetic Symbols**

The sounds of English can be divided into two :

- (1) Vowel sound, and
- (2) Consonant sound.

### Vowel Sounds and Their Phonetic Symbols

P. Christopherson<sup>1</sup> has defined vowels as, "Vowels, then, may be defined as voiced sounds in the production of which there is no obstruction whether partial or complete of the air passage." It means when there is no closure of the air passage by various speech organs, partial or complete, the result will be a vowel sound.

Although there are only 5 vowels viz : a, e, i, o, u there are 21 vowel sounds. These vowel sounds are divided into two :

- (1) Pure vowel sound or vocoids,
- (2) Diphthongs or contoids.

(1) **Pure Vowel Sounds.** When the sound consists of a single vowel sound, it is called pure vowel sound. They are 12 in number. The phonetic symbols of the sounds with example and their phonetic transcription are as follows :

S. N.	Phonetic Symbol	Words Example	Phonetic Transcription
1.	(i:)	see	s i :
2.	(i)	sit, it, bit	sɪt, ɪt, bɪt
3.	(e)	get, let, met	ɡet, lɛt, mɛt
4.	(a)	man, rat, can	mæn, ræt, kæn
5.	(ɑ:)	ask, blame, farm	ɑ:sk, blɑ:m, fɑ:m
6.	(ɔ)	not, hot	nɒt, hɒt,
7.	(ɔ:)	hall, all	hɔ:   ɔ:
8.	(u)	put, good	put, ɡud
9.	(u:)	food, boot	fu:d, bu:t
10.	(ʌ)	but, cup	bʌt, kʌp
11.	(ə:)	work, bird	wɜ:k, bɜ:b
12.	(ə)	above, ago	ə'bu:v, ə'ɡoʊ

The use of colon (: ) with the vowel sounds shows that they are longer than others. The position of various speech organs in giving pure vowel sounds are presented in Table 7.1.

<sup>1</sup>P. Christopherson : *An English Phonetics Course*, p. 25.

**TABLE 7.1**  
**Position of Speech Organs in Giving Pure Vowel Sounds**

S. No.	Sym- bol	Part of tongue raised	Height to which the tongue is raised	Position of Lips	Opening between the jaws
1.	i	Front	Nearly close	Spread	
2.	i	Front	Slightly higher than half close	Spread	Slight Slight
3.	e	Front	Between half close and half open	Spread	Medium
4.	æ	Front	Between half open and open	Spread	Medium to wide
5.	a:	Nearly back	Open	Neutral	Fairly wide
6.	ɔ:	Back	Open	Slightly rounded	Medium to wide
7.	ɒ	Back	Between half open and open	Between open and close rounded	Medium to wide
8.	u	Back	Above half close	*Close rounded	Medium
9.	ʊ	bnk	Nearly close	Close rounded	Narrow
10.	ʌ	Nearly	Neutrally open	Wide	
11.	ɪ:	Central	A little below half close	Neutral	Narrow
12.	ɪ	Central	Between half close and half open	Neutral	Medium



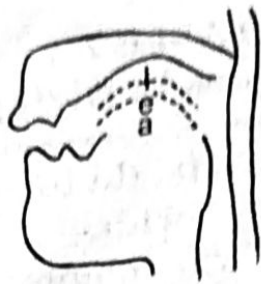


Fig. 7.6. Tongue Position for I, e, a

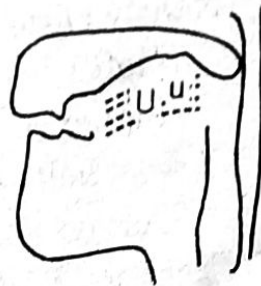


Fig. 7.7. Tongue Positions for u, ʊ, ɔ, ɒ

These pure vowel sounds are classified in the following manner :

**I Type of Classification.** Open, half open, close and half close according to the height of the tongue.

**II Type of Classification.** Front, central and back according to the part of the tongue raised.

**III Type of Classification.** Rounded, neutral and spread according to the position of the lips.

**IV Type of Classification.** Tense and lax according to the condition of the muscles of speech organs.

(2) **Diphthongs.** The word diphthongs came from Greek and means 'double sounds'. It is combination of two vowel sounds pronounced as a single syllable. Each sound starts on one of the vowel sound and finishes on another. It is a glide from one vowel to another. Diphthongs are also called impure vowel sounds because they do not have the purity of one sound only. They are 9 in number. The phonetic symbols of diphthongs, words of example and their phonetic transcriptions are as follows :

S. No.	Phonetic Symbol	Word Example	Phonetic Transcription
13.	(ei)	day, cake	dei, keik
14.	(ou)	hold, you	hould, you
15.	(ai)	high, my	hai, mai
16.	(au)	now, cow	nau, kau
17.	(ɔi)	boy, toy	bɔi, tɔi

18.	(ie)	dear, air	diə, iə
19.	(εe)	mare, air	mΣə, Σε
20.	(uə)	moor, tour	muə, tuə
21.	(ɔə)	four, door	foe, d ɔə

Diphthongs are of two types :

(1) Closing and (2) Centring.

A diphthong is called a closing diphthong when the movement is towards the closer position of the tongue e.g., ei, ou, au. A centring diphthong is when the movement is towards the centre of the tongue, e.g., i ə. ε ə, u ə.