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ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION:
A CASE FOR HALF TRUTHS AND WHITE LIES
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Despite a significant increase in interest in recent years, the word phonetics still fills many students and teachers alike with trepidation. Although more and more time and space is being given to the practice of phonemes in English text books, there is often a tendency to shy away from implementing them in class. The reasons most often given are that it is too difficult an area to approach, an added complication to an already complicated language. On the other hand, few would question the importance on an acceptably accurate pronunciation and, in my experience, most students who have made the initial effort to learn the phonetic alphabet, tend to agree that it serves as an invaluable long term guide through the complex and often anarchical maze of English pronunciation.

The problem with phonetics in a classroom situation is often how to approach it and make it user friendly. Here in this paper we shall be looking at ways of making phonetics more accessible but to achieve this end, it is sometimes necessary to bend the truth, offering a somewhat diluted version of what is, in reality, a somewhat more complicated matter. For this reason, I have entitled this paper Half Truths and White Lies, and I apologize in advance to the purists for taking and suggesting phonetic liberties in the name of what I consider to be the ultimate aim of pronunciation in an EFL class: “acceptable ineligibility” - a loose term which covers a multitude of sins. This essay is aimed particularly at the problems of Castilian speakers of English. I will be dealing with the comparative difficulties of the vowel sounds.

Castilian, in terms of pronunciation, is a comparatively logical and organized language in which the written word obeys phonetic rules. Whereas in English the commonly taught question “How do you spell...” is useful, the Castilian equivalent is comparatively redundant since, once pronounced accurately, a correct spelling in Castilian is fairly obvious for a native speaker with a minimum level of education. Rather than spelling the word, the speaker would probably choose to repeat it more deliberately.

Most possible orthographical doubts in Castilian are usually confined to certain pairs of consonants such as b/v, glj, yll, zlc, q/c and in Andalucía z/s. Vowels offer little cause for confusion since the Castilian vocalic system is made up of five regularly pronounced sounds. This is a mixed blessing, since students tend to use a comparative approach when learning a second language, translating foreign sounds into their own language system. In
the case of English, there are 12 vowel sounds, many of which do not fit comfortably into
the Castilian penta-vowel system... and there’s the rub!

For those of you uninitiated in the joys of phonetics, the figure below (fig 1) is a vowel
trapezium, used by phoneticians to represent the place in which vowel sounds are produced.
Although it might look complicated, it is really nothing more than a representation in chart
form of the mouth and its capacity. The terms close and open refer to the distance between
the tongue and the top of the mouth. The terms front and back refer to the part of the
tongue which is raised. On this chart we can plot where and how vowels in any language
are produced. The phoneme /ɛ/ for example, is produced with the front of the tongue raised
almost touching the top of the mouth, and can therefore be classified as a close front vowel.
The phoneme /ʌ/ on the other hand is produced with the back of the tongue only slightly
raised, far from the top of the mouth, and is thus classified as an open back vowel. The
borders of the map are the limits of vowel possibilities, and /ɛ/ is therefore pretty near the
limits of how close and front a vowel can be. If one tried to raise the tongue much higher it
would make contact with the top of the mouth and the sound would cease to be a vowel and
would instead enter into consonant territory. Figure 1 shows the position of the twelve
English vowel sounds and the five Castilian ones (in brackets). As we can see, in some
cases both languages share similar vowel locations, and in such cases the use of the
Castilian equivalent when speaking English may be acceptable since, although a foreign
pronunciation may be detectable, intelligibility is not affected. In other cases, where
Castilian has one vowel sound in a certain region, English has two and it may not be
sufficient to merely produce the Castilian sound. In other instances, English sounds can be
found where none exist in Castilian, thereby obliging the Spanish learner to enter new
phonetic territory and leaving him/her no alternative but to adopt a new phoneme rather
than adapt one from his/her existent phonetic repertoire.

We shall now look at the English vowel sounds, analysing the difficulties they present
and looking at possible ways of approaching them. The twelve RP vowels are the
following:

/ɪ/ as in pit
/ʌ/ as in part
/ɪ/ as in pet
/ɛ/ as in pet
/ʌ/ as in boot
/ə/ as in port
/æ/ as in pit
/æ/ as in pert
/ɜː/ as in putt
/ɜː/ as in but (weak form)

English pronunciation has long been associated with Ship or Sheep ...but what is the
difference between ship and sheep? Yes, of course it is the difference between /ʃ/ and /ʃ/,
but what is that difference? There is a tendency to explain it simply in terms of vowel
length - the ɪ sound in sheep is longer than that of ship. This is in fact misleading and only
partially true - a half truth which I consider unacceptable as it gives rise to potential
confusion and misunderstanding. The classical comic example used to illustrate the
difference between /ʃ/ and /ʃ/, and the importance of an accurate pronunciation is the
infamous shit/sheet example, accompanied by the “true” story of the Spaniard who tries to
complain to the London hotel manager about the dirty state of his bed-linen with toilet-
thumour consequences. There is a tendency amongst both native and non-native teachers to
emphasize the difference in length and, so as to avoid this faux pas, students practice
producing an extra long artificially exaggerated (i) sound which, unfortunately more often than not, still doesn’t sound like sheet and remains painfully like the undesired swear word.

The problem is not so much one of length, but one of quality. If, for example we say the word ship and extend the vowel - shiiiiip, no matter how long we hold the vowel for, it will not miraculously transform into a sheep. Similarly if we shorten the vowel in sheep to a minimum length the word will remain recognizable “ovine”, rather than “naveal” to the ears of a native speaker. As we mentioned before, /ʌ/ is an extreme front close vowel, while /ʊ/ is front but half-open and that is the real distinguishing factor. The common tendency is to compare these two sounds to the Castilian one, however in fact the Castilian (i), is somewhere between the two sounding longer than /ʌ/ but shorter than /ʊ/ (see fig 1), which is why confusion may occur.

The true phonetic distinction involving small yet important differences in tongue positions and muscle tension is perhaps too complex to go into in an EFL class, yet small visible aids can be used to help students differentiate between the two. While /ʌ/ is produced with neutral lips, /ʊ/ requires the lips to be slightly spread, and students are often encouraged to smile when pronouncing words like beach, sheep, sheet etc. Although this once again is a lie, it can be considered a white one. Clearly native speakers do not go round smiling every time they produce an /ɪ/ sound. It is true to say that there is tension in the commissures, and there may be an element in lip spreading when pronouncing individual words, but in normal speech the small modifications of tongue position height are usually externally hard to detect. One can test this by saying hit/heat or shit/ sheet in front of the mirror. One does not need to be a specially competent ventriloquist to produce these minimal pairs without any visible change in the lips. In view of this, it is not surprising that distinguishing between the two close front vowels is one of the major problems for deaf lip-readers.

The student blessed with the good ear for languages will have a wide enough phonetic range to perceive and produce the minor differences without the need to contort his/her mouth, but for the majority these tangible aids are extremely useful. Thus although smiling when producing /ʊ/ may look and sound slightly artificial, it seems justifiable in the name of ineligibility.

The case of the close back vowel is a similar one. Whereas the Castilian language has one sound in that vicinity (u), RP has two, /ʌ/ and /ʊ/. Once again, as we can see in fig 1, the Castilian sound lies somewhere between the two. The difference again is not simply one of length, as commonly taught, but more importantly one of quality. While /ʌ/ is produced with neutral lips, the visible distinguishing feature of /ʊ/ is that it is produced with rounded lips (leaving about the space necessary to insert a cigarette or a pencil). A typical Castilian mispronunciation leaves /ʌ/ sounding too long and /ʊ/ not long enough, however, unlike the case of the close front vowels, an accurate distinction between the two is perhaps not as imperative since ineligibility is rarely affected by an inaccurate pronunciation. Whereas there are numerous minimal pairs containing an opposition between /ʌ/ and /ʊ/, few exist for /ʌ/ /ʊ/, with pull/pool and full/fool 2 being the most common. In fact, in some Scottish accents this opposition is neutralised and the aforementioned minimal pairs, if distinguished at all, are differentiated to the sensitive ear by merely a slight variation in vowel length.

The open vowels present as much a problem as the close vowels or even more so. Whereas in Castilian there is one sound in English there are three: /æ/, /ʌ/ and /ʊ/, and the numerous minimal pairs (e.g. cat, cut cart) provide fertile ground for misunderstanding. The difference between /æ/ and /ʌ/ is the bane of teachers and students alike. The problem is often accentuated by the fact that Spanish learners can often not actually hear the difference between them, and so it may be necessary to exaggerate the difference. To produce /æ/ I tell my students to open their mouth as wide as possible widthways and lengthways as to trying to bite a huge chunk out of an apple. The results are surprisingly satisfactory. This, however, is bending the truth to its limits for, as we can see in figure 1, /æ/ is not really that open, and in fact, in RP at least, the difference between /æ/ and /ʌ/ is comparatively small. It is consequently relatively hard to see and hear for Spanish students, accustomed as they are to just one a sound. The principal phonetic distinction in reality is that /æ/ is a front vowel while /ʌ/ is a central one, an extremely difficult notion to convey as one can not ask the average student to raise the front of his/her tongue at will - few people have such lingual control. A possible alternative is to tell students to get ready to say (e) (a Front vowel) but instead say (a). This is good advice indeed (if students can perform the feat) as /æ/ is between an e and an a. In many ways /æ/ is closer to le/ than /ʌ/, since both are front vowels and in fact, in an Upper RP or posh pronunciation, words like black, bag, man etc are produced as /æ/ or /æ/, as is the case of a South African accent.

One of the major problems with this vowel lies precisely in the fact that it may be realised in so many different ways, both internationally and within Great Britain, ranging from mid open to open and from produced front to back. In my particular London pronunciation the a in bag or man is fairly open and so I can therefore feel at ease with my conscience that my white lie has an element of phonetic truth. As far as /ʌ/ is concerned, I

2 The minimal pairs cited above may also be distinguished by “Breaking” where some native speakers include /ʌ/ between /ʌ/ and the dark /ʌ/ thereby giving pool and fool a diphthong quality.
would accept a Castilian a sound as near enough to be acceptable. Again purists might disagree as the Castilian sound is slightly more open, but I feel it is a case of damage limitation. It is true that the Castilian (a) sounds more sonorous, sharp and defined than /a/ but both, on the other hand, are central vowels and I feel the main aim must be to create a clear distinction between the two short English a sounds in such a way as to not cause confusion to the ear of the native speaker. Once again the English speaking world can not agree on a universal realisation of these sounds. In RP there is /æ/ for cut, cup, sun, although most British people north of Watford Gap hardly ever produce this phoneme, preferring instead the far easier /a/ in such cases.

The great North-South divide is not only characterized by those who pronounce cup as /kap/ and those who prefer /kap/, there is also the tell-tale /glas/ versus /glas/ “debate”. RP says the latter is the “standard” pronunciation for the word glass. I personally am a “/glas/” man, although I have absolutely no problem with the equally valid “Northern” alternative and do not suggest that “standard pronunciation” should be adopted artificially. Nevertheless, to learners and teachers who are flexible or undecided, I would encourage the use of /æ/, not, I hasten to add, out of “Southern élitism” or because I consider it more correct, but for one simple reason - it’s easier for students and causes less confusion. Very few Spanish learners manage to produce a faultless /æ/, and if the sound can be avoided so much the better, especially when there is an acceptable alternative (albeit posh to the ears of some!).

To argue my point I cite the more than anecdotal case of the commonly used auxiliary can. In the affirmative strong form for both North and South it is unavoidably pronounced /kæn/. In the negative form however, a Northern pronunciation would result in /kænt/, which is fine as long as it is pronounced accurately. In my experience however, the Andalusian speaker tends to omit the final consonant and the result is that the listener is often unsure whether the speaker can or can’t. If, on the other hand, the i in the negative is clearly pronounced there is another danger. Given the Spanish propensity to pronounce /æ/ as a central a, the result is that, more often than not, the word is somewhat embarrassingly pronounced as /kanti/. In both cases the long open back /æ/ would solve the problem.

/æ/ is the sound that dentists or throat specialists ask us to make. They do this because it is an open back sound which affords them a maximum view of the back of the throat with the minimum lingual interference. Their Spanish counterparts normally ask their patients to say a long (a) which is a similar sound, although more central. Spanish learners of English tend to shorten /æ/ so to the English ear it may be confused with /æ/, and they therefore should be encouraged to extend the sound (as if in a dentist chair) while opening their mouths wider vertically.

Pronunciation, although important, is clearly only one element in learning a language, and it is unrealistic to expect school teachers to dedicate large amounts of time practising small phonetic differences when they have a hefty syllabus to get through. For this reason we must be pragmatic and limit our objectives to an essence, teaching new sounds when necessary but resisting the temptation to over-teach when the minimal gains can not justify the time invested. The English /æ/, for example, is not exactly the same as the Castilian (e), but is so close that the difference seems hardly worth mentioning.

On slightly more difficult ground is the case of the phoneme /æ/. If we look at figure 1 we see that this phoneme is quite different from its Castilian counterpart (o) which is more close with lips more rounded. Nevertheless, despite the fairly large distance between them, the realisation of the Castilian (o) instead of /æ/ seems acceptable as they are similar enough not to cause any undue confusion, particularly as there is no other sound with which to mistake it. It would be recognized as a foreign realization but ineligible nonetheless. Ironically, although the Castilian (o) is closer in terms of place of realisation to the /æ/ sound, this sound can sometimes be problematic since, although both are back vowels between half-close and half-open, the English sound requires more rounded lips and has a drawl which is absent in the Castilian vowel. Therefore, even with a lengthening of the vowel, when Castilian speakers pronounce words like caught, walk, short, forks, order, to the English ear they sound more like cot, wok, shot, fox and odder respectively.

Clearly in most cases once such words are placed in a context possible misunderstanding diminishes yet, unlike /æ/ and /æ/, I feel that this phoneme should be treated as a new sound. Besides emphasising length, the visual key is rounded lips. If /æ/ required cigarette smoker lips, /æ/ needs rounded lips as if smoking a cigar.

The Castilian speaking learner tends to confuse the word walk with work. In this specific case it is perhaps understandable since logic might tell us that the latter should be pronounced like born, form or pork, but as we all know the English language often defies logic. The phonemes /æ/ and /æ/ are notoriously difficult to distinguish, thus for many, combinations such as The First World War are particularly difficult to pronounce.

The phoneme /æ/ is too often incorrectly explained or thought of as a long /æ/, and in fact in some books and dictionaries it is confusingly transcribed as /æ/. Once again the

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3 Francisco Sánchez Benedito (1986) notes that the Castilian (e) is somewhat more open when it appears in the final position.
typical mistake is to explain it in terms of length. In The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) the phoneme /e/ is very different from /a/, and the length should not affect this difference in quality. Take for example the word *bed* and extend the vowel, *beeed* and it will remain recognizable as a place to sleep and will not be heard as *bird*.

There is a wide range of mispronunciations of /ə/ mainly because this phoneme covers a wide variety of vocalic spellings.

- *er*: serve, stern
- *ear*: heard, earth
- *ir*: shirt, birth
- *ur*: turn, church
- *or*: work, worse
- *our*: journey, courtesy

The tendency, because of the phonetic nature of their own language, is for Castilian speakers to produce the sounds as written, therefore *shirt* may be pronounced with a front vowel while a back vowel might mistakenly be used in *church*. The *or* in *work* is often pronounced as *or*, thereby causing confusion since the result sounds like *walk* to the native ear. When two vowels are seen together in words such as *earth* or *journey* there is a logical temptation to produce them as diphthongs.

The phoneme /ə/, along with /ɛ/, is one of the hardest sounds for Castilian speakers to produce correctly, since it does not resemble any of the five Castilian vowels. If we imagine the five Castilian vowels in terms of a triangle with (i) and (u) being close vowels (front and back) respectively, (ɛ) and (ɔ) the half-open being both half open and (a) being an open central vowel, the /ə/ sound along with the /ɛ/ would be placed somewhere in the centre.

Most English vowels have a reasonably close Castilian counterpart. /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ for example, as we have seen, are not the same as the Castilian (i) but, as they are both in that area, the Castilian speaking student has a point of reference and can adapt the sound he already knows, with slight labial and lingual modifications. In the case of /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ however, the Castilian speaking learner is in new phonetic territory without a crutch to lean on and must therefore learn to produce new sounds. The phoneme /ə/ is initially a difficult sound for many students to imitate as it is a central, half open sound, and is thus hard to find the exact lip and tongue position. As an initial approach it is useful to bombard the foreign learner with the sound so it becomes familiar and they recognize it passively before using it actively. This sound is actually one of the most commonly used sounds in the English, since, besides the words which contain that phoneme, it is often used when thinking or stalling for time.

e.g. Er...erm....I think...er....

It is perhaps a case of making students aware of the “thinking sound”, getting them to pull you up on it and imitate you every time you use it. If you are a particularly articulate and clear thinking teacher who rarely *erms* and *ers*, it might be worth starting!

Interestingly enough, these *fillers* changes depending on accent. In London “Cockney” the *thinking* sound, while still produced centrally, is more open than in RP, while in a Liverpool “Scouse” accent it is more close. This coincides with the corresponding regional variations in the pronunciation of the /ə/ vowel. Therefore in response to the mathematical poser “What’s 2 x 5 x 3?”, a spontaneous answer from a native speaker might be: *Err...thirty*. Pronunciation might vary regionally, but the thinking sound would normally coincide phonetically with the vowel sound in the answer irrespective of accent (although “*Ums*” and “*Ahs*” might be used!)

The /ə/ like /ɛ/ is difficult because it is a central, half-open sound which has no Castilian equivalent. It can replace all five written vowels in weak unstressed syllables (woman, gentlemen, observe, possible, suppose), and once again the Spanish tendency is to produce these vowels as written. It is particularly difficult for foreign learners to produce in isolation since it is so short and neutral. So a possible approach might be to encourage students to forget it exists. By this I don’t mean avoid confronting it, but to reduce it to the minimum sound necessary to reach a consonant. On the blackboard the vowel could be erased so as not to encourage the often irresistible urge to pronounce it as written. An apostrophe is placed where the vowel once stood.

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4 When talking of /ə/ I limit myself to the RP non-rhotic phoneme without an /r/ component.
Without the visual distraction of the written vowel to misguide them, students tend to then produce the words using a minimal sound resembling /a/.

Thus concludes a quick overview of the twelve English vowel sounds and the problems they pose for Castilian speakers in general. From a purely phonetic point of view what I have written, by its very nature, must be simplistic for clearly there are many variants. Castillian vowel realisations obviously differ from province to province, not to mention village to village and it is useful to know the idiosyncrasies of the local accent as a closer knowledge of the regional pronunciation of your students might help in predicting what sounds may and may not present potential problems. A case in point is the a vowel in certain areas of Córdoba which, being more open than in “standard Castilian”, may be helpful when approaching the phoneme /ɛ/.

Here we have dealt almost exclusively with those sounds existing in RP, and most students who visit an English speaking area are often given a rude awakening when they discover that few people actually pronounce the way they have been taught, in the same way that the Castilian I learnt has little to do with that spoken in Andalusia. Yes, RP is another lie - only a small percentage of the English speaking world actually speaks RP - but is there a greater common denominator? There is often a discrepancy, consciously or unconsciously, between how we teach and how we actually speak. Most of us, in fact, do not use 12 vowel sounds...we use far more. Take for example the word reporter /rəˈpɛrətər/. Is the /ɛ/ in the first syllable the same as the /ɛ/ at the end of the word? Probably not. Most natives (RP speakers included) would pronounce the two sounds slightly differently. In my London pronunciation, I use a more open allophonic variant of the weak form in the final position represented by the IPA symbol /ɛː/. But is it really necessary to tell our students that? It is enough to get our students to produce a /ɛ/ of any kind let alone its allophonic variants! English pronunciation is hard enough without telling the whole truth.

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