

Why this *Kolaveri* about Teaching Vowel Sounds at HKG Level?

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Abstract

There is an aggressive rage or haste (kolaveri) in India to teach spoken English (especially, in English medium schools) because of the increasing demand of urban elite and middle class parents to make their wards learn fluent English. Parents coming from economically weaker sections of society, too, have become aware of the importance of English due to media exposure, including social media. The article is based on teaching vowel sounds (through one of the English textbooks) to children at the higher kindergarten (HKG) level at a public school in Jaipur. The first part of the paper discusses how the teaching of vowel sounds is undertaken at this level through the textbook, Step Up with English Primer. This is followed by a discussion on how teaching from such books can distort the very foundation of students and induce inappropriate learning style in them. The paper emphasises teaching of sounds as these are considered to be the base of spoken English.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language has been pervasive in India for decades. According to Krashen (1985), acquiring a new language is a bit more challenging for young learners than adults. Moreover, young 'acquirers' are always taken for

granted. This paper tries to address one of the misconceptions related to developing verbal communication skills in young learners, in general, and vowel sounds, in particular. Even after more than seven decades of gaining Independence from the British, methods of teaching English in the country have by and large

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been confined to the same obsolete conventional patterns. There is no denying the fact that these conventional methods have their own advantages.

In this regard Mark Twain says, “...foreigners always spell better than they pronounce.” These words underline the essence of English language teaching and learning in India. Students are able to spell the most difficult tongue twisting words. The ‘Spell Bee Competition’, organised in the USA every year, in which Indian children participate and win, stands testimony to that. The basic reason behind this is that most students bank on rote learning and gaining theoretical knowledge, irrespective of the subject. This is true about the teaching-learning system in India, in general — for example, in science, it is theorems and valances, mathematics has formulas, history has dates, and civics is about rights and duties. Similarly, in English, it is spellings, sounds, structures, poems, passages and rules of the language about which most of the learners have a somewhat theoretical understanding.

The idea of educating the youth for building a new India sounds promising but the irony is that if these youth (constituting 60–70 per cent) have a weak foundation at the primary level, such thoughts seem to be hollow. It is all the more so in institutions of higher education, in general, and central universities, in particular, where the medium of instruction in all departments is

English. Little attention is paid to the fact that a majority of students come from villages and rural areas of the country with hardly an exposure in English. As a result, they keep struggling all through their academic years, trying to comprehend the subjects being taught in English.

While going through an English textbook being used in one of the reputed English medium schools in Jaipur, it came to light that it is not just students coming from rural areas of the country and belonging to economically weaker sections of the society who have little exposure to English. In fact, ‘privileged’ students, whose parents can afford expensive public schools, are also being imparted incorrect information through ‘substandard textbooks’.

In these schools, the students get an edge over those deprived of this opportunity in rural areas as they have an English environment. As a result, most of them become better oral communicators in the language. But at the factual level, they are weak and this starts taking root at an early age through the use of substandard textbooks. The textbook on which this article is based is *Step Up with English Primer*.

TEACHING VOWEL SOUNDS AND PHONEMES

The book consists of 34 (actually 33, error in numbering) short chapters carrying colourful illustrations. The 64–page book covers sounds (vowels and consonants), articles

(definite and indefinite), demonstratives and possessive pronouns, verbs (action words), open-ended responses in case of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to simple questions, prepositions and some ‘wh’ question words.

ANALYSIS

It was analysed that too many topics have been covered in the book. Moreover, it seems that the book has been written to impress parents and teachers rather than serve its basic purpose, i.e., imparting retainable knowledge to the ‘young’ students. It was also found that none of the topics has been dealt with in detail in the book. Every topic has just been touched upon as if to add to

the number of chapters and pages. If sounds are considered to be the basis of speaking, then all sounds should have been dealt with appropriately but the book fails to do so. Moreover, chapters that talk of vowel sounds give factually incorrect information. Each chapter talks about one particular vowel. So, in all, there are five chapters that talk about the ‘five’ vowel sounds, i.e., a, e, i, o and u (Appendix A), and not ‘20’.

It seems that the publisher has extracted information from multiple books and has created a compiled version, bothering little about the damage it may cause to learners in their formative years. Table 1 illustrates the sounds that have been given in each vowel chapter.

Table 1: Vowel sounds as given in the textbook, *Step Up with English Primer*

Chapter No.	Contents	Actual sound(s) as per RP ¹ (IPA ²) represented through examples in the chapters	Examples of other sounds given under the same head
1.	Revision of alphabet	—	—
2.	Sound of the vowel ‘a’	/æ/ e.g., bag, cat, rat, tag, lad, etc.	/eɪ/ e.g., say, way, lay, take, lake, etc.
3.	Sound of the vowel ‘e’	/e/ e.g., hen, pen, red, wed, wet, etc.	/ɒ/ e.g., dear, ear, gear, near, etc. /iː/ e.g., beep, deep, keep, jeep, etc.
4.	Sound of the vowel ‘i’	/ɪ/ e.g., lid, pin, sit, dip, lip, dig, etc.	/aɪ/ e.g., rice, dice, nice, etc.

¹Received Pronunciation (often abbreviated as RP)

²International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

5.	Sound of the vowel 'o'	/ɔ/ e.g., cot, pot, rod, pod, cop, top, etc.	/u:/ e.g., zoom, loom, room, broom, etc. /aʊ/ e.g., down, brown, town, etc.
6.	Sound of the vowel 'u'	/ʌ/ e.g./ sun, bun, nut, jug, cup, gun, mug, etc.	/ə/ (weak) e.g., could, would, should, etc. /ʊ/ (strong) e.g., could, would, should, etc.
7.	Vowel Song (Appendix B)	Short 'a', e.g., 'pan' Long 'a', e.g., 'cake' Short 'e', e.g., 'pen' Long 'e', e.g., 'he' Short 'i', e.g., 'hit' Long 'i', e.g., 'ice' Short 'o', e.g., 'pot' Long 'o', e.g., 'no' Short 'u', e.g., 'bun' Long 'u', e.g., 'you'	pan: /pæn/ cake: /keɪk/ pen: /pen/ he: /hi:/ hit: /hɪt/ ice: /aɪs/ pot: /pɒt/ no: /nəʊ/ nun: /nʌn/ you: /ju/ (weak) /ju:/ (strong)

CAUSES OF CONFUSION

Such confusing information is the root cause of generalisations, misunderstandings and wrong embedding of information. From Table 1, it can be deduced that the students get confused right from the beginning, which leads to wrong embedding of vowel sounds.

According to the textbook, there are five vowel sounds in English, i.e., a, e, i, o and u. This very understanding of vowels is faulty and weakens the foundation of the learners. The young learners retain this understanding lifelong and use indefinite articles on the basis of their linguistic intuition rather than

logic based on their understanding of sounds. The students tend to equate letters with sounds as is the case in their Language One or L1 (assuming it is Hindi), in which there is one-to-one correspondence of letters and sounds. The learners and teachers, assuming that the same rule applies to English as well, choose the above five letters from the 26 letters of English alphabet and treat the remaining 21 as consonants. This is the root cause behind the misunderstanding about sounds and letters in English.

No two languages are identical and the myth about language relativity should be busted among teachers (Huiling, 2013). We may try drawing

parallels in languages originating from the same land. But assuming that two languages originating from two distinct lands must be identical is unimaginable. The English alphabet has 26 letters and 44 sounds — 20 vowels and 24 consonants (Crystal, 2007).

The consonant sounds have a one-to-one correspondence (to some extent) with the letters (Appendix C). So, it is in the learners' L1. But when it comes to vowel sounds, there is a lot of variation in terms of Hindi and English. Whereas, Hindi is a syllable-based language, English is a stress-time language. In Hindi, there is one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds, but it is not the case in English. The letter 'a' may have the sounds /a:/, /ə/, /æ/, /eI/, etc. Similarly, the letter 'e' may have the sounds /e/, /ɛ/, /i:/, etc. The letter 'i' may represent the sounds /I/, /aI/, /i:/, /e/, etc. In the same way, the letter 'o' may represent the sounds /ɔ/, /u:/, /ʌ/, /u:/, /ʊ/, etc., while the letter 'u' may represent the sounds /ʌ/, /ə/, /ʊ/, /u:/, etc.

To add to the confusion, there are no diphthongs in learners' L1, whereas, in English, there are eight diphthongs, each of which is a fusion of two vowel sounds. When there are multiple sounds that each of the so-called vowels represent as per the textbook, there is bound to be a lot of confusion in the learners' minds, which will persist and gradually get embedded in their thought process.

Vowel Song

A is my name.
Two sounds I give
Short 'a' in pan.
Long 'a' in cake.

E is my name.
Two sounds I have
Short 'e' in pen
Long 'e' in he!

I is my name.
Two sounds I know
Short 'i' in hit.
Long 'i' in ice.

O is my name
Two sounds I give
Short 'o' in pot
Long 'o' in no!

U is my name.
Two sounds I make.
Short 'u' in nun
Long 'u' in you.

As a result of this, the pronunciation of words by second language learners is mostly incorrect. Table 1 shows examples of words given in the vowel chapters related to particular sounds, along with the representative words. The letter 'a' represents the sound /æ/. But there are few examples of words with the sound /eI/, assuming it to be the long sound of 'a' as given in the Vowel Song (Appendix B).

Similarly, sounds that are given to represent the letter 'e' in the book are /e/ and /ɛ/ and /i:/, assuming the first one to be the short sound and the third to be the longest one. The textbook is silent about the second sound, a diphthong.

Likewise, the letter 'i' produces two sounds, i.e., /ɪ/ (short sound) and /aɪ/ (long sound). For 'o', the examples given represent three different sounds, i.e., /ɔ/, /u:/ and /aʊ/ but the 'Vowel Song' talks about /ɔ/ as short sound and /əʊ/ as long sound. It is silent about the sound /u:/. According to the song, the last letter 'u' has /ʌ/ as its short and /u:/ as long sound. However, the irony is that in the chapter, the examples that are given to represent the sound 'u' apart from the representative sound /ʌ/ also have words with the sounds /ə/ and /ʊ/. Such examples and the Vowel Song confuse the students because of the different sounds they produce.

The next point of confusion is because of words like 'could', 'would', 'should' and 'you' in Chapter 6 to represent the short sound /ʊ/. But the problem is that these words have a strong /ʊ/ and a weak sound /ə/. These modal auxiliaries when used independently take the strong sound. But when used as auxiliaries, they take the weak sound. For example, the strong form of 'could' (/kʊd/) is used for emphasis (e.g., he could be wrong), contrast (e.g., I don't know whether she could or couldn't succeed), or at the final position (e.g., the Prime Minister tried to check the rising prices as well as he could). In the same manner, the strong form of 'should' (/ʃʊd/) is used for emphatic pronunciation (e.g., you should have sought permission), contrast (e.g., who are you to tell me what I should or

shouldn't do?), or in the final position (e.g., both of you should). The strong form of 'would' (/wʊd/) is also used for emphasis (e.g., they definitely would), contrast (e.g., no one knows whether they would or they wouldn't) and in the final position (e.g., she knows that he would). Likewise, the pronoun 'you' is pronounced /ju:/ (strong form) when we talk in terms of contrast (e.g., will you or he pay the fine?) or while emphasising (e.g., it was you who compelled us to take this decision) (Jones, 2003). Such kind of seemingly simple but otherwise subtle aspects of pronunciation should not be given as examples because they baffle the students. As a result, they always generalise the rules while using vowel sounds.

SUGGESTIONS

Some of the suggestions that may help improve textbook writing at the primary stage are as follows.

- There should be no rush to include a lot of topics in a textbook at the primary stage. Each topic to be taken needs to be dealt with in detail, rather than being touched upon in a passing way. All vowel sounds (both pure vowels and diphthongs) in the book, *Step Up with English Primer*, should have been taken up in one go. Rivers (1967) says, "The material for these early lessons should not be artificially constructed to include only certain sounds and not others. The material should consist of

utterances selected because they are natural and useable.”

- In fact, teaching vowel sounds at the HKG stage is challenging both for the teacher to teach and the learners to comprehend. So, the lessons should start with teaching of consonant sounds, with one chapter devoted to each sound, giving all possible variants in which that particular sound could be represented in spellings. This could, then, be followed by vowel sounds.
 - The book should ideally begin with stating the difference in the sound system in the learners’ L1 and English. This will enable the learners to become more receptive to what is being taught in terms of sounds in the other language and would also help them avoid drawing out parallels and/or generalisations. It will also give the right direction to the teacher even if one’s initial understanding of sounds is faulty. These sounds can, then, be integrated with vocabulary and grammar to give a more contextual exposure to the learners. Fernandez (2011) talks about the effectiveness of communicative ways in the context of “grammar of the target language”. This is more applicable in the context of acquiring the correct pronunciation.
 - Before publishing, the book should be edited by an ELT expert or linguist to check embedding of
- wrong information at the early stages of learning.
- According to Kerr (1947), books at the primary level “...vary widely in their construction and in the editorial philosophy behind them, and that they are written for a variety of purposes.” But the obvious philosophy behind publishing books like *Step Up with English Primer* is earning profits rather than providing quality information. Therefore, books at this level should be strictly monitored by the respective academic boards so that no substandard stuff is published by merely compiling incorrect information. Kerr (ibid) adds: “The best and most profitable use of...books results only if their use is planned carefully, they are selected wisely, and their materials are intelligently prepared and presented.”
 - As the teaching of sounds is a ‘technical’ topic, learning them through textbooks at such an early stage may be quite dull and boring for most young learners. So, the learning of such topics should be made more enjoyable by supplementing textual lessons with activities, games and audio–visual aids, which provide repetition. In this regard, Rivers (1967) says, “The younger the child, the more s/he enjoys sheer mimicry, and more frequently s/he may be engaged in activities, which are repetitive.”

- For early and lasting gains in learning sounds, a language laboratory (if available) can also be integrated with textual learning of sounds. In schools, where there are no language labs, phone recorders and mobile apps can be used by the teacher to provide practice in pronunciation to the students. The use of these measures can ensure correct pronunciation, articulation through repetition of words, phrases and sentences, and make the learners confident.

topics to be taught. Moreover, there is a rush to include a bit of everything rather than taking up one topic at a time and explaining it in depth. There is no denying the fact that things have to be kept simple at the primary stage and the level of complexity must be raised gradually. But the irony is that each class and each book followed in English is different in different public schools. There is no consistency and continuity. Each book at each level is trying to load a lot of content, without considering if the learners will be able to comprehend that much. Also, little attention is paid to check whether the teachers are competent enough to teach technical topics like pronunciation to the young learners.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that not much research or monitoring is done while taking up

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