



## Understanding Pronunciation Difficulties Among Undergraduate Students in Front Vowel in English

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the pronunciation problems of the undergraduate students in front vowels in English. It investigates the problems occurred only in pure vowels. In other words, it is an attempt to find the problematic sounds and factors that cause mistakes while speaking English language, and therefore to find some techniques to improve their pronunciation skill*

**KEYWORDS :** Pronunciation, International Phonetic Alphabet, Pronunciation Difficulties

### Introduction

Pronunciation plays a pivotal role when it comes to speaking skills. Pronouncing with perfection is a goal for every second language learner. Nation stated that “when some teachers and students complain about difficulties in speaking, they are often taking about pronunciation” (75). This paper attempts to find a way to attain such real perfection. This study opens an eye to the real problems of rural students, whose dream is to learn and speak English language. Phonetics is an unheard territory for the majority of students.

Speaking and reading are considered the most important and difficult task in the foreign language learning process. Majority of students of Tamil Nadu particularly from rural background face lot of difficulties to communicate and even to read in English language.

Second language learners speak the target language in a different way. They mingle the sounds of English with their first language (or) native language and speak in a different way. Students wish to speak fluently in English but their pronunciation is completely unacceptable manner. Avery and Ehrlich pointed out that “distinction between tense and lax vowel pairs of English almost creates problems” (96). Adult learners from rural background have many difficulties to pronounce words or sentences correctly. Second language learners amalgamated their mother tongue sounds with English sounds. It makes learners to fail in their communicative process.

### Research Methodology Objectives

The objective of the study is to examine the pronunciation problems prevailing in front vowels among undergraduate students in southern district of Tamilnadu. This study covered students from government, aided and self-finance colleges. This study was designed to observe pronunciation problems of both male and female students.

### Samples

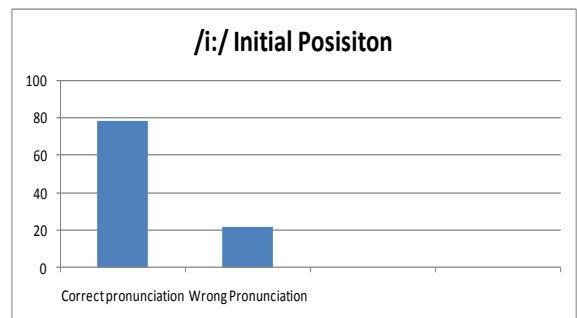
The quantum of the samples is two hundred students from five colleges of Tamilnadu. Among two hundred samples, hundred were female and hundred male students. 90 % of the students were studied from Tamil medium school, and whose parents are not much educated. Most of them were first graduate learners, so they felt difficulty in learning all subject matters in English at the college level.

### Questionnaire

A special questionnaire was designed to collect data. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section contains general information of students. The second section has thirty three words which cover four pure vowels which occurs initial, middle and final sounds.

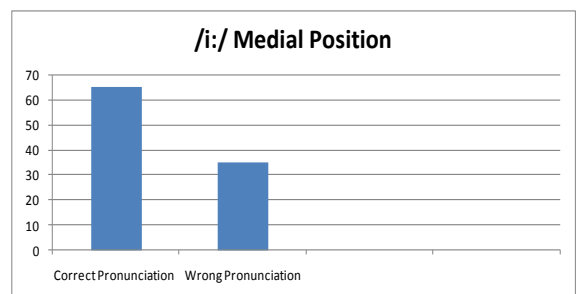
### Results and Discussions

#### Chat 1. The sound /i:/ initial position.



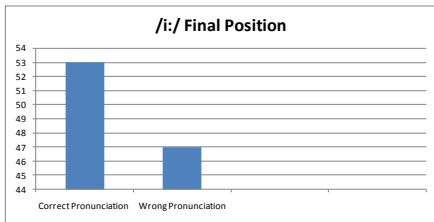
The above chart explains that 78% of the students have pronounced the sound /i:/ correctly. The remaining 22% of the students have pronounced wrongly. Among 22% of the students 12 % were male students, the remaining 10% were female students. Some of the students substitute /i/ instead of /i:/. The sound /i:/ is very easy for students to pronounce because the corresponding sound is available in Tamil language. The following words 'each, eagle, easy eastward, even and evil' are easily pronounced at the initial level.

#### Chat 2. The sound /i:/ Medial Position.



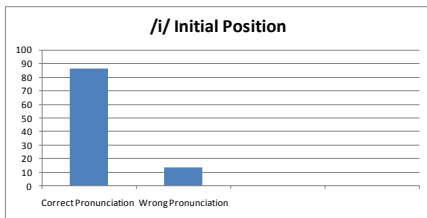
The above bar chart vivifies that 65% of the students pronounced correctly and 35% of the students have made wrong pronunciation. It is understood that the most of the students shorten the extreme front vowel sound /i:/ at the medial level of the word for example the following words mean, need, seen, police, repeat are mispronounced and shortened by the students. /i:/ is a tensed vowel sound but most of the students pronounced in a relaxed manner. The students felt easy when they pronounced the following words 'beat, seal, beach, weak and cheese'. This study found that some of the students were not ready to learn proper pattern of pronunciation. Even teachers do not give more importance to pronunciation.

**Chat 3. The sound / i:/ Final Position.**



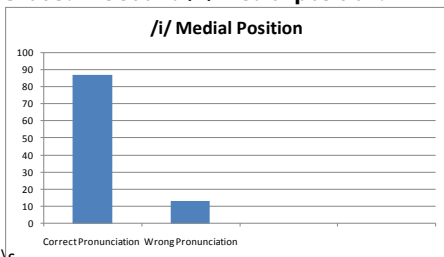
The above chart indicates that 53% of the students pronounce /i:/ sound at final position of the words in correct manner. The remaining 47% of the students commit mistakes. The prominent problem is shortening the long vowel sound. For example the following words key, ghee, agree, free, knee, degree. See and bee are shortened by the students. Students do not know the difference between long and short vowels.

**Chat 4. The sound / i/ initial position.**



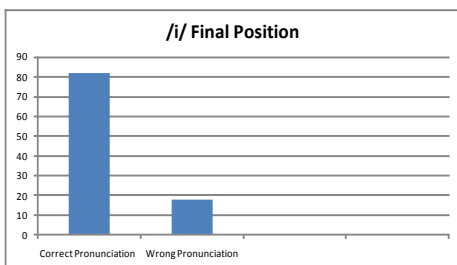
The chart suggests that 86% of the students performed well in uttering /i/ sound at the beginning level. Only 14% of the students commit errors. The sound/i/ is a short vowel which is very easy for them to pronounce because the similar sound is available in Tamil language. So, students are able to recognise/i/ sound at the initial position. The following words are, Ill, ink, inch, it, issue, important, Insect and industry correctly pronounced by students.

**Chat 5. The sound / i/ medial position.**



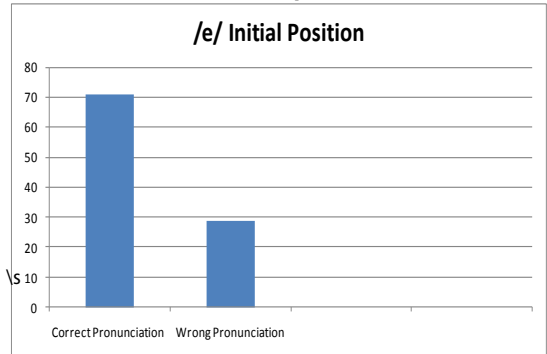
As far as the front vowel sound /i/ is concerned the rate of correct pronunciation is so high. 87% of the students pronounced the given words correctly. Merely 13% of the students did wrong pronunciation. It is easy for the students to pronounce the sound /i/ at the middle of the words for example sit, give, this, dinner, build, symbol, system, and gym are pronounced correctly. The sound /i/ is available in Tamil language so students are familiar with the sound. Among 13% of the students 5% were female and 8% of the students were male.

**Chat 6. The sound / i/ final position.**



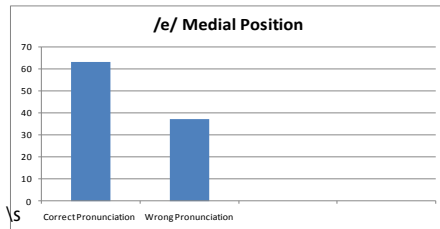
The chart shows that 82% of the undergraduate students pronounced correctly the front vowel sound /i/ at the final level. The remaining 18% of the students struggled in pronouncing /i/ sound at the final position. The sound /i/ is a short vowel but some of the students lengthened the sound as long vowel. For example, the following words 'city, dirty poly' are lengthened by the students. Among 18% of the students 10% were female and 8% were male.

**Chat 7. The sound / e/ initial position.**



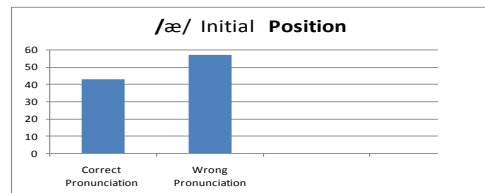
The chart shows that 71% of the students pronounced the front, short, and between half open and half close vowel/e/ accurately at the initial level. 29% of the students committed mistakes in their pronunciation. Some of students substitute /i/ sound instead of /e/ for the following words 'engine, effort etc. The following words 'end, enter, and edge' are pronounced correctly. Among 29% of students 20% were male 9% were female. The sound /e/ is not available in Tamil language.

**Chat 8. The sound / e/ medial position.**



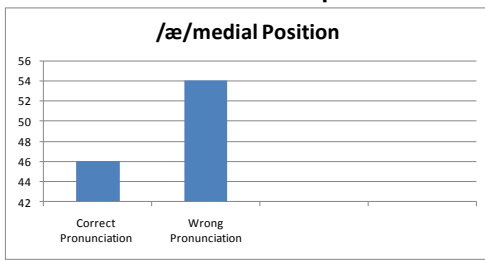
The chart reveals that 63% of the students pronounce properly when they use /e/ at the medial level of the words. The remaining 37% of the students were failed to pronounce /e/ sound at the medial level. Among 37% of the students, 20% of the students were male 17% were female. The following words 'ten, fell, men, check and beg are pronounced wrongly. According to the results, it could be said that, most of the undergraduate mispronounce the vowel sounds that do not exist in Tamil language.

**Chat 9. The sound / æ / initial position.**



As seen from the chart 43% of the undergraduate students were able to give correct pronunciation of the target sound at the initial level. The remaining 57% of the student were unable to pronounce correctly. Most of the students substitute /a:/ or /e/ and also some central vowels instead of /æ/ sound at the beginning of the word. Among 57% of the students 34% were male 23% were female. The following words 'add, act, axe and Adam' are mispronounced by the students. In As per as the results of the study is concerned, this is the most complicated sound. The reason could be that the corresponding sound is not available in Tamil language. So, they simply substitute the sound which is very much familiar to them.

**Chart 10 The sound / æ /medial position**



As seen from the chart above, only 46% of the students were able to pronounce the target sound / æ / correctly. 54% of the students were failed to utter the target sound properly. Among 54% of the students 30% were male and 24% of them were female. It could be said that the most of the students do not have mastery on different pronunciations of vowels. Most of the students do not aware of the sound / æ /. They simply substitute the following sounds / ʌ / central vowel instead of the front vowel / æ /. For example the word 'had' must be pronounced as /hæd/ but students pronounced it as /h ʌ d/. Some students substitute /e/ sound instead of / æ/ in the word cat /ket/ instead of /kæt/. Most of the students found difficulty in pronouncing the following word 'sacks, magic and fact'.

**Table 1. Overall performances of the students in percentage.**

Initial /i:/		Medial /i:/		Final /i:/		Initial /i/		Medial /i/		Final /i/		Initial /e/		Medial /e/		Initial /æ/		Medial /æ/	
correct	wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong
78	22	65	35	53	47	86	14	87	13	82	18	71	29	63	37	43	57	46	54

The above table clearly shows that the overall performances of the students in front vowel sounds in English. The data indicates that the sound /i/ is the easiest vowel among undergraduate students. This study found out that the /æ/ is the most difficult front vowel sound for Tamil students. Another problematic sound is /e/. Most of the students face struggle when they pronounce / æ/ and /e/. The similar problem was identified by Tien Dung among Vietnamese students who learn English language. He says that "Vietnamese students cannot identify the vowel /e/ and / æ/, as in 'bed' and 'bad'. The confusion between /e/ and / æ/ may be considered as the most serious problem that Vietnamese speakers encounter when they learn to speak English vowels" (99).

**Conclusion**

This study has investigated the problems in front vowels in English experienced by undergraduate students whose first language is Tamil. In other words, this study found the problematic front vowel sounds and factors that caused these problems. Further, this paper pointed out some sounds was easily pronounced by the students. The comparative study was also made by researcher to distinguish the performances of male and female students. As per data, It can be said that the female students were able perform better than that of male counterpart. This study has identified that the mother tongue interference is one of the most influential factors for not achieving the target sounds in English. The possible solution is proper training and awareness among teachers and students.

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