

Lecture 3: CLASSIFICATION OF ENGLISH VOWELS

A vowel is a voiced sound produced in the mouth with no obstruction to the air-stream. The air-stream is weak, the tongue and the vocal cords are tense.

The English vowel phonemes are divided first of all into two large groups: monophthongs and diphthongs. This division is based on the stability of articulation. A monophthong is a pure (unchanging) vowel sound. In its pronunciation the organs of speech do not perceptibly change their position throughout the duration of the vowel:

[i:], [e], [æ], [a:], [ɒ], [ɔ:], [ə], [u:], [ʌ]

A diphthong is a complex sound consisting of two vowel elements pronounced so as to form a single syllable. In the pronunciation of a diphthong the organs of speech start in the position of one vowel and glide gradually in the direction of another vowel whose full formation is generally not accomplished. The first element of an English diphthong is called the nucleus. It is strong, clear and distinct. The second element is rather weak; it is called the glide. There are eight diphthongs in English:

[ei], [ai], [oi], [ou], [au], [uə], [ie], [əɛ]

Besides these diphthongs, there are two vowels in English e [i:], u [u:] which may have diphthongal pronunciation; in the articulation of these vowels the organs of speech change their position but very slightly. They are called diphthongoids. [i], [u]

Thus, the English monophthongs may be classified according to the following principles:

1. According to the tongue position.
2. According to the length of the vowel.
3. According to the lip position.
4. According to the degree of tenseness.

According to the position of the bulk of the tongue vowels are divided into:

a) front vowels which are produced with the bulk of the tongue in the front part of the mouth while the front of the tongue is raised in the direction of the hard palate. *English front vowels – [i:], [e], [æ]*

b) front-retracted vowels which are produced with the bulk of the tongue in the front part of the mouth, but somewhat retracted.

English vowel – [ɪ]

c) central vowels in which the central part of the tongue is raised towards the juncture between the hard and the soft palate.

English vowels – [ʌ], [ə], [ə:]

d) back vowels are those which are produced with the bulk of the tongue in the back part of the mouth while the back of the tongue is raised in the direction of the soft palate.

English vowels – [a:], [o], [o:], [u:],

e) back-advanced vowels are produced with the bulk of the tongue in the back part of the mouth, but somewhat advanced.

English vowels – [u]

According to the height of the raised part of the tongue vowels are divided into the following three groups:

- a) close(high) vowels are produced when one of the parts of the tongue comes close to the roof of the mouth and the air-passage is narrowed.

English vowels – [i], [i:], [u], [u:]

- b) open (low) vowels are produced when the raised part of the tongue is very low in the mouth, the air-passage is very wide.

English vowels – [æ], [a:], [ɒ], [a(ɪ, ʊ)]

- c) mid-open(mid) vowels are produced when the raised part of the tongue is half way between its high and low positions.

English vowels – [e], [ɜ:], [ə(ʊ)]

According to the lip position vowels are classified into:

- a) rounded vowels are produced when the lips are rounded and slightly protruded.

English vowels – [o], [o:], [u], [u:]

- b) unrounded vowels are produced when the lips are spread or neutral.

English vowels – [i], [e], [i:], [ʌ], [ə:], [ə], [æ],

According to the length vowels may be long or short. The following English vowels may be described as short: [i], [e], [o], [u], [æ], [ə], [ʌ]. And the following English vowels are long: [a:], [o:], [i:], [u:]. There is no differentiation of Russian vowel phonemes according to the length.

According to the degree of tenseness vowels are divided into tense and lax. The long vowels are tense, because when they are produced the organs of speech are tense. Lax vowels are produced with less tenseness of the speech organs. All the English short vowels are lax.