

# Pronunciation Errors in a Reading Task for Students of English

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## 1 Introduction

In the course of conducting oral exams in English phonetics I often come across errors which strike me as interesting from the point of view of their 'diagnosis'. At one point, for example, I realized that a number of students mispronounce the word *rhetoric* more or less identically, i.e. as /re'θɔ:rik/. While the position of the stress and the pronunciation of the vowels can be explained by influence of the Slovene vowel system (see, for example Sustarsic, 1999) and the Slovene equivalent *retorika*, it is less clear why the <t>, regularly pronounced as /t/ in both languages, is replaced with /θ/, which does not exist in Slovene, and is also always represented in English by <th>. My assumption is that one sees the word *rhetoric* as if it was actually *\*rethoric*, but is it possible that so many students of English (who make the same mistake when the task is to transcribe rather than read aloud) are dyslexic?

It is questions of this kind that make pronunciation exams interesting and because of which we might reconsider our teaching of English pronunciation.

The aim of this paper is to present the most common and some more 'challenging' errors which I identified in one particular part of the English Phonetics exam, i.e. unprepared reading aloud of a text. I have written about other modes of assessment of pronunciation errors (e.g. errors in English transcriptions, based on speech and writing) elsewhere (Sustarsic, 1997), and there are other tasks in written and oral exams in English phonetics (such as reading transcribed texts, reading texts with intonation marks, etc.) that would also deserve a detailed analysis in the future.

The errors discussed here were all identified in only one of the texts I use, i.e. an excerpt from the book *Lost in Music* (Smith, 1996).

## 2 The Selected Text and the Most Frequent Errors Observed

The selected text is given below. I have underlined the 20 words which were most often mispronounced by randomly selected 100 students, and I provide the most common mispronunciation(s) in Table 1. The students all read the text individually and without the presence of any other students.

*Text: Pink Floyd (extract)*

*It could all have gone wrong at this early stage. I could have ended up a Pink Floyd enthusiast. It happened to a lot of people I knew and they weren't necessarily to blame. I understand because I came damn close. But I got away with it.*

*I was dimly aware that Pink Floyd had been another kind of group altogether back in the 1960s; that there had been a figure in the band called Syd Barrett who was clearly some kind of off-the-cuff genius and who wrote trippy, psychedelic and yet strangely insightful little pop songs. Unfortunately, drugs or success or the uncontrollable loopings of his own imagination, or some volatile combination of the three, had driven him mad and he'd gone to live with his mum in Cambridge. But I'd missed all that, and since then Pink Floyd had turned into sulky, earnest, self-conscious, pompous rock stars, prone to large-scale, surreal public events, like floating a giant inflatable pig above Battersea Power Station. You could see why they went down well with sixth-*

formers. Leaving aside the publicity stunts with air-filled animals, you're looking at a fairly accurate personality profile for me and most of my closest friends, circa 1978.

*Pink Floyd played progressive rock. (And continue to play it, despite a serious rending of the group's social fabric which has led Roger Waters to stomp off on his own. Waters was, some would argue, the band's lynchpin - though don't get into this with serious Floyd fans unless you've got at least a week to spare.) This is to say, they are not renowned for snappy, chart-busting singles, but are instead spoken of, in reverent tones, as an albums band, a distinction which, during the seventies, one rather generously bestowed on any group that couldn't come up with a decent chorus. Most progressive rock bands contain a classically trained keyboard player who will explain during interviews that the organ figure in 'Asylum Of The Sane' is, in fact, based on a piece by Bach. You don't call them songs, you call them 'tracks', and a track isn't really pulling its weight if it comes in under seven minutes. Progressive rock is pop with big ideas.*

WORD	MISPRONUNCIATION	PERCENT.
1 Cambridge	/æ/ instead of /ɛ/	77
2 Asylum	stress position, vowels	66
3 the (uncontrollable)	/f/ before a vowel	32
4 inflatable	/f/ instead of /ɛ/	32
5 volatile	stress, vowels	31
6 chorus	pronun. of <ch>	31
7 bestowed	/aʊ/ instead of /əʊ/, stress	27
8 Battersea	stress, /-ˈri:sə/ etc.	27
9 psychedelic	stress, <ps><ch> problems	23
10 renowned	/əʊ/ instead of /aʊ/	21
11 enthusiast	/t/ instead of /θ/	18
12 lynchpin	pronun. of <ch>, /-tʃɪp/	17
13 circa	/ts/, /i/ instead of /s/, /ɛ/	16
14 closest	/f/ instead of /ɛ/	15
15 reverent	stress, /-ɛɛɛ/	13
16 pompous	/ɛ/ instead of /ɛ/	11
17 three	/f/ instead of /ɛ/	9
18 surreal	stress on prefix	9
19 accurate	/et/ instead of /ə/	8
20 argue	replaced with 'agree'	8

Table 1. Top 20 pronunciation errors.

### 3 Analysis of Selected Errors

I disregard here completely the most typical errors of Slovene students (and more generally of Slovene speakers) of (Standard British) English, i.e. those concerning vowel neutralizations, in particular those of *beat/bit*, *bet/bat*, *Bart/but* and *pool/pull*. I also ignore allophonic realizations, such as aspiration, glottalization, devoicing of sonorants and obstruents in various positions, etc. These issues have been dealt with in other papers on English-Slovene contrastive analysis (some of these are in Sustarsic, 2005).

When we take a closer look at Table 1, we first find that the most problematic word is the very common name *Cambridge*. Considering the spelling of the word, however, as well as the Slovene pronunciation, students cannot be expected to know that the stressed syllable should have a diphthong. Similarly, if students are not familiar with the pronunciation of words like *bestowed* and *renowned*, they can only try to guess the right

diphthong. On the other hand, the percentage of mispronunciations of *inflatable* is surprising, since the spelling <t> (versus <tt>) indicates pronunciation with a diphthong.

The prevailing type of error (7 out of 20 words), however, concerns a different kind of 'wrong choice', that is one concerning the position of stress. Once this has not been identified correctly (as in *asylum*, *volatile*, *reverent* etc.), also the pronunciation will almost necessarily be wrong, with strong vowels instead of weak ones and vice versa.

About one third of the students failed to apply the rule of *the + vowel* (/ðɪ/) for *the uncontrollable*, though for some reason most of them did follow the rule when they got down to *the organ*.

As for the different pronunciations of a particular spelling, the most problematic seems to be <ch>; a number of students are completely at a loss with regard to the pronunciation of words like *lynchpin*, *chorus*, *psychedelic*, *Bach*. Incidentally, some less advanced students (from another department) simply stop reading when they reach an item like *lynchpin* and look at the examiner with a most desperate expression on their face.

The very usual replacement of /θ/ with /t/ occurs twice as often in *enthusiast* compared to the word *three*, possibly because students may be aware of the minimal pair *three/tree*.

Next, there seems to be a tendency to replace an unknown word with a known one, or a less familiar with a more common one, e.g. *argue/agree*, as well as *rending/reading*, and *earnest/nearest*, not given above because they are not among the 'top 20' errors.

A similar strategy seems to be to make a long or difficult word easier to pronounce by simply making it shorter and simpler, and thus e.g. *reverent* becomes \**re'vent*, and *chorus* something like *course*.

Some mispronunciations are very specific and more difficult to interpret. One of these is pronouncing (by 4 students) the year *1978* as *1987*. This could certainly be also a native speaker's error, but it is probably not as common as in the case of Slovene speakers, because in Slovene numbers are read from right to left, e.g. seventy-eight as 'eight and seventy'.

Finally, and here we come back to the word *rhetoric*, there is the problem of mixing up the order of letters in a word (or sentence). I have recently become particularly careful in trying to identify mispronunciations of this kind and to find explanations why they occur. In most cases (as in *Battersea* and *lynchpin* above) the resulting re-ordering of the letters makes no sense, of course. However, if students were given more time, they would probably be able to work out the structure of such (usually compound) words in which I have noticed this (*Batter-sea*, *lynch-pin*) and pronounce them correctly.

It is interesting to note that the word *rhetoric* is by no means an isolated example of using a dental fricative instead of a plosive, although of course a typical error of non-native speakers of English would be the opposite (as explained above). In this particular text I noticed the same kind of 'lispings' pronunciation (but not as frequently) in *altogether* and *weight*, and I have heard this with other words in other texts or in students' speech, with even a sequence of two /θ/ sounds in phrases like *the tip /θ/ of the tongue /θ/*, when students talk about articulatory phonetics.

This shows, of course, that we may need to look at a whole sequence of words in order to understand why such mispronunciations occur. One of the most interesting examples

of the sort is pronunciation (by one of my best students) of - *serious Floyd fans* as *furios Floyd fans*, where (in addition to somehow mixing up the vowels) there is quite obviously a 'shifting' of /f/ in the words *Floyd* and *fans*. Similarly, another student changed *the organ figure* to *the orphan figure*.

#### 4 Conclusion

When reading aloud without any previous preparation (which may be a bit unfair on the part of the examiner), students strive to read the text quickly and fluently, which almost necessarily leads to misreading (in particular long and new words), as well as leaving out (in particular short grammatical) words.

However, the most common pronunciation errors do not seem to result from lack of preparation but from making wrong guesses about spelling versus pronunciation when students are confronted with 'unfamiliar' words (i.e. unfamiliar from the point of view of their pronunciation, not necessarily from the semantic point of view).

#### References

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