

# What's in a symbol? The case of happY and thank YOU vowels and the Serbian EFL learner

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**1 Overview of English phonetics teaching in Serbia** An ongoing reform of university teaching in Serbia opened new ground to the revision of the English phonetics curriculum at the oldest English department in the region, namely the English department in Belgrade (founded in 1929). English phonetics teaching has a long tradition in Serbia, which has always been performed in the strong British vein. The first occurrence of English phonetics as an independent course in the departmental syllabus dates back to 1977 when it was taught for two semesters to second year students of English (Rasulić & Trbojević 2004: 221). In the nineties, the course was renamed to English Language I, mainly for practical reasons, and has been from then on taught to freshmen. Its official name never lived with the students, who still call it phonetics. Other departments in Serbia, in Novi Sad and Niš, for instance, still teach phonetics to second or even third year students of English language and literature. The English department in Belgrade is therefore one of the few in Serbia which still offers English Phonetics courses to freshmen.

**2 Traditional or trendy? That is the question now.** With the latest reform, English phonetics in Belgrade has undergone another highly important change. As of academic year 2006/2007, English Language I was reduced to 2 hours per week, compared to the previously taught 4 hours a week. The sole aim of this step was to pave the way to a more practical curriculum which would minimize the theory, and enable future English teachers to use their knowledge more effectively in an EFL classroom. The same modification in terms of hours of teaching will shortly affect the courses in English morphology and English syntax.

Apart from two one-semester courses, namely English Phonetics I (mostly dealing with segments - vowels, consonants and their major allophones) and English Phonetics II (which covers the basics of the English accentuation, rhythm and intonation), practical pronunciation classes are now taught under the auspices of another course, Contemporary English I.

The idea of the reform was to integrate the practical side of phonetics into a course where other elements are also taught, such as grammar and vocabulary, translation, essay writing, etc. In the first semester, individual speech sounds were in focus with the emphasis on those which often create problems to an EFL learner of the Serbian language background. Among the most problematic speech sounds are the English dental fricatives, the under-differentiation of /v/ and /w/ which often boil down to /v/, lack of aspiration in plosives, as well as a number of vowel qualities which are different from the Serbian vowels. It should be noted here that Serbian has a five-vowel system.

In restructuring the curriculum, the starting point was to carefully design a step-by-step phonetics course, which would also enable the instructor to mix the state-of-the-art of phonetic theoretical studies with the necessary modifications of the material, taught strictly for pedagogical reasons. One of such issues is a recent recognition of 'new' vowel qualities in Received Pronunciation. The happY vowel and the thank yOU vowel have, of course, been with us for a while now, but with the publication of the first edition of the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* in 1990, the teaching of these two vowel qualities seems to have become indispensable, provided that you want your students to use pronouncing dictionaries on their own (for a thorough chronological overview of the emergence of such vowels, see Windsor Lewis

1990). The trend has been catching on very rapidly and I challenge you to find one dictionary of contemporary British English which deviates from the newly established principle, which makes a difference between the vowel qualities in *happY* and *kit*, or *thank YOU* and *put*.

**3 Teaching the happY vowel and the thank yOU vowel** How do you introduce your topic to a complete novice who is still struggling with the IPA symbols and has trouble differentiating between /ɪ/ and /i:/. Many discussions have been held between the people belonging to the phonetics group at the English department in Belgrade in the past year, and it was agreed that we first introduce the happY vowel and the thank yOU vowel in the English Phonetics I course, so that the students get the necessary theoretical background. The theory would then be used to help students attain a full command of transcription skills, which further on will be activated in pronunciation exercises and drills. The happY vowel and the thank yOU vowel were taught after all other vocalic qualities of RP have been introduced and compared to the cardinal vowel qualities.

The handouts needed to be prepared for the topic, illustrated with numerous examples. One of illustrative passages where we introduced the reduced vowel qualities in *happy* and *thank you* follows:

The vowel with the highest frequency in English is the **schwa**. It has a free distribution, i.e. it occurs initially, medially and finally, e.g. *about*, *partition*, *sister*. The most important distributional characteristic of the schwa is that it can never occur in a stressed syllable.

There are two more vowels that have a similar distribution: [i] and [u]. These two vowels may occur word-finally, as in *pity*, *into*, *thank you* and sometimes medially, as in *India* and *graduation*. The first vowel is often referred to as a **happY vowel** and the second one we will call a **thank yOU vowel**.

After defining the new vowel qualities, some rules on their distribution were also offered:

The 'happY vowel' replaces traditional /i:/ in:

- unstressed, final, open syllables (an open syllable is the one which ends in a vowel), as in *happy*, *city*, *anything*. It is frequently used in weak forms of grammar words (pronouns, prepositions, articles, etc), e.g. *he*, *me*, *we'd*, *we've*, and in words whose root ends in /i/, e.g. *worried* (derived from *worry*), *Saturdays* (derived from *Saturday*), *Molly's* (derived from *Molly*);
- unstressed pre-vocalic position, as in *react*, *the end*.

### 3.1 Examining the theory

After ten weeks of teaching, the students were given a final take-home exercise, where they were asked to transcribe a short text comprising a number of words with the two weak vowels, [i] and [u]. The results were satisfactory, especially when it came to those English words which were actually mentioned in the lectures or in practical sessions. A limited number of students failed to recognize the two vowel qualities in words which had not been mentioned before. Some conclusions may be drawn from the results: although the students were able to reproduce the theory, its further implications were blocked. They failed to generalize the rule and apply it in new situations. We kept practicing transcription and with each new passage we tended to offer new examples with the happY and thank yOU vowels.

### 3.2 Examining transcription skills

Although we had some doubts about the potential problems with recognition of the two reduced vowel qualities, we decided to examine the acquisition of these two symbols as part of the final English pronunciation exam. Students were asked to transcribe a short text, using a standard set of IPA symbols for Received Pronunciation. Day in day out, we kept reminding the students in classes, that they are allowed to use glottal stops, as well as [i] and [u] in their phonemic transcriptions. For the purposes of error analysis, I randomly picked a group of 30 first-year students and analysed their problems in transcribing the happy vowel and the thank yOU vowel.

Error analysis shows that the most common mistakes include failure to use the weak form of a function word where necessary, as well as its precise phonetic form which is often conditioned by the context. The table below summarises common transcription mistakes of five function words which occurred in the transcription passage:

Orthography	Phonemic transcription	Number of errors	Errors in percentages
<i>he</i>	*/hɪ/	4	13%
<i>me</i>	*/mɪ/	5	17%
<i>to</i>	*/tʊ/	4	13%
<i>do</i>	*/dʊ/	2	6.6%
<i>anything</i>	*/enɪ-/	1	3.3%

Table 1. Error analysis: function words

What was also noticed was that some students, wishing to score better, used the weak forms of function words even though it was quite clear from the context that the strong form should be employed. The following sentence seems to have caused headaches to most students: *You were trying to do what?* As many as fourteen students (46.6%) transcribed *do* in this context as /du/, two of them even added a primary accent \*/'du/ which runs counter to the basics of transcription (never stress the schwa!). The overuse of the thank yOU vowel may be compared to the process of hypercorrection which is invariably present in the acquisition of individual speech sound of a foreign language. Hypercorrection often occurs when students have acquired a completely new concept. At that stage they overuse that element, wishing to show that they mastered it.

Only three lexical words with the happy vowel seemed to create problems to students when transcribing the passage. Two types of problems could be identified. The data is given in the table which follows:

Orthography	Phonemic transcription	Number of errors	Errors in percentages
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<i>extraordinary</i>	*/-ɪ/	1	3.3%
<i>properly</i>	*/-ɪ/	1	3.3%
<i>relieve</i>	*/ri-/	2	6.6%

Table 2. Error analysis: lexical words

Failure to spot the right vowel quality in the first two examples, *extraordinary* and *properly*, occurred only once with two different students. Such an error may also be attributed to a slip. The use of the happy vowel in *relieve* is much more interesting, as it may be compared to hypercorrection.

### 3.3. Hoping to examine the production?

Some well-established changes in English speech strike EFL learners as odd, to say the least. The existence of intrusive 'r' in British speech have been acknowledged and taught in English phonetics classrooms all around the world, but its use by non-native speakers calls for conscious effort. The intrusive 'r', as well as the happy and thank you vowels, is one of those intricacies of English speech whose application makes a non-native speaker sound more native-like. The suggestive names of the two reduced vowels, for which we have to thank Wells (1982; 2006, personal communication), will undoubtedly help them integrate better into English phonetics teaching. However, it will take a while for EFL learners to start using them in their own speech. I feel that a thorough theoretical background as well as a full mastery of transcription skills is a good start.

### References

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