

A Pedagogic-Phonetic Critique of the BBC's Internet-Based L2 teaching of English Vowels

Amir H.Y. Salama¹

¹ Department of English, College of Science & Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University in Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Amir H.Y. Salama, Department of English, College of Science & Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University in Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia.

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Abstract

The present study proposes a pedagogic-phonetic critique of the BBC's Internet-based L2 teaching of English vowels as a "pedagogic recontextualizing field (PRF)" (Bernstein, 1990). This PRF seems to purvey the learning input of English vocalic pronunciations in a way that manifests a set of pedagogic practices; such practices, despite being sensitive to text-based theories of phonetic description, are literally dismissive of essential pronunciation aspects that relate to lip position as well as vocalic duration and complexity. The research data is drawn from the BBC's online video materials archived for the public use of L2 teachers and learners of English. Following Bernstein's pedagogic-linguistic approach (Bernstein, 1971, 1975, 1990, 1996), the study has reached the main finding – alongside some pedagogic recommendations – that the BBC's Internet-based L2 teaching of English vowels constitutes a partial PRF on the grounds that this type of L2 teaching offers only a limited pedagogic space for the recontextualization of "visible" pedagogic practices, and that there remain some phonetically significant aspects which are missing from the BBC's PRF. Therefore, these aspects need to be incorporated into the pedagogic space available to the L2 learner or acquirer of English on the BBC learning website.

Keywords: BBC-English pronunciation, L2 learning and teaching, pedagogic recontextualizing field (PRF), segmental phonetics, vowels

1. Introduction

The L2 teaching and learning of English phonetics has always been a problem area in all various pedagogic contexts, wherein the label "mispronunciation" has almost invariably been employed by pedagogues of all sorts in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms, mainly for diagnostic purposes. Emphatically, Roach (1983/2009) maintains that "pronunciation teaching has not always been popular with teachers and language-teaching theorists" (Roach, 2009, p. 5). Perhaps this is the case since the term "pronunciation" is not as equally well-recognized in the area of L2 teaching as the broader term "speaking"; indeed, pronunciation is deemed by far the most important sub-skill of speaking (Fraser, 2000). However, pronunciation is more related (than speaking) to the science of phonetics. This aspect can be observed in the classic definition of phonetics offered by the well-known British phonetician Daniel Jones: "Phonetics is the science of pronunciation, the science which investigates the mode of formation of speech sounds and their distribution in connected speech" (Jones, 1922, p. 1). Not surprisingly, then, phonetics has generally been recognized as being "a means to an end" (Jones, 1937, cited in Laver, 1994, p. xxv). On a pedagogical level, such a practical premise can be traced to the commonly held view that the teacher of foreign/second languages, including the L2 teacher of English, "must be able to diagnose the pronunciation errors made by students, and to devise means of correcting them" (Catford, 2001, p. 1). Again, on the same pedagogical level, traditional bottom-up approaches, such as the mastering-one-sound-at-a-time approach, have been superseded by more top-down approaches whereby "the sound system is addressed as it naturally occurs – in the stream of speech" (Goodwin, 2014, p. 136).

With this pedagogically diagnostic interest in the L2 teaching and learning of English phonetics, contrastive studies began to emerge in a way that focuses on the errors made by ESL/EFL students.¹ Indeed, these errors in L2 learning have been typically conceived of as being L1 habits that unfavourably interfere with the process of acquiring L2 habits at the different linguistic levels of phonetics, phonology, morphology, lexicology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (e.g., Beardsmore, 1982; Faerch & Kasper, 1983, 1986; Beebe, 1988; Bialystok, 1990; Dordick, 1996; Gass & Selinker, 2008). Among all the different types of L2 linguistic errors, those related to segmental phonetics can be described as being segmental errors; or, in Odlin's (1989) terms, "errors involving vowels and consonants" (p. 114). For example, drawing on a contrastive-analytic approach, Yarmohammadi (1995, p. 123) proposed a method of comparing the phonetics of English and Persian through a number of steps: (a) comparing the two phonemic inventories and detecting the phonemes that do not match in the two languages; (b) matching those corresponding phonemes in the two languages, with a view to "verifying their phonetic substances"; (c) contrasting the "allophonic variants" of each corresponding phoneme; (d) comparing the distribution of the individual phonemes in different positions (i.e., initial, medial and final).

Hassan (2014) investigated the English-pronunciation problems encountered by learners whose first language (L1) is Sudanese Spoken Arabic. The study concluded that a number of factors have militated against securing the pronunciation competence of the Sudanese

students of English; namely, interference, sound-system differences in the two languages, and the non-phonemic nature of English spelling system. Also, surveying the Polish context of research about the FL teaching and learning of English pronunciation, Pawlak et al. (2015, p. 5) charted a number of studies with different research foci: (1) defining which pronunciation features to be “prioritized” in the L2 teaching of English phonetics (Waniek-Klimczak, 2002); (2) using “evaluation procedures” in the L2 teaching of English pronunciation (Szpyra-Kozłowska et al., 2004); (3) utilizing some various L2 “teaching resources” of English pronunciation (Wrembel, 2005); (4) deciding on the “effectiveness of pronunciation instructional techniques” of the FL teaching of English pronunciation (Szpyra-Kozłowska & Stasiak, 2006); (5) investigating “the role of corrective feedback” on the same type of teaching (Pawlak, 2004, 2013).

Further, in a seminal study on the L2 teaching of English phonetics, Scheuer (2015, p. 140) examined the FL teaching priorities of English pronunciation in terms of three criteria and considerations: First, “[f]oreign accent criterion,” where the achievement level is “measured against native speaker norms,” i.e., the successful learner is the one who would “sound as native as possible to the (usually native) listener”; second, “[i]ntelligibility criterion,” where accomplished learning would be productive of “L2 English speech that is comprehensible to the (not necessarily native) interlocutor”; third, “[a]esthetic/attitudinal considerations,” which specify certain “pronunciation errors” as being potentially “irritating to the listener.”

As noted from the studies surveyed above, for the sake of diagnosing, and thus providing remedy for, the pronunciation errors of ESL/EFL students, the sound system of L2 English has been contrasted against the sound systems associated with the mother tongues of foreign learners. But, even though the contrastive-analytic methods of L2 learning of English phonetics have proved consistently useful in the realm of teaching and learning pronunciation, they seem to be shying away from investigating the pedagogic practices involved in the L2 teaching of English phonetics itself. Thus, scarcely if ever would such studies reveal, or at least suggest, the pedagogic practice that may facilitate the contrastive aspects needed for diagnosing the pronunciation problems per se. This should remain invariably problematic, particularly if we pay heed to Long’s (1990) “maturational constraints” on SL phonology; these constraints perceptually manifest themselves with the observation that L2 learning of pronunciation after 2 “appears to make it impossible for many learners [...] to achieve native-like competence in phonology” (Long, 1990, p. 274). This suggests, according to Long (1990), the presence of a sensitive period for learning pronunciation, as well as other language sub-/skills.

The present study seeks to offer insights into the pedagogic practice of L2 teaching of English phonetics with an intensive focus on the segmental aspects of the sound system of English vowels; and, for the sake of maintaining a teaching model, the BBC learning website has been adopted with a view to analysing the pedagogic practice of the Internet-based L2 teaching of English vowels worldwide. Notably, the pronunciation type associated with this pedagogic practice is commonly known and felt to be traditional RP (Received Pronunciation) and present-day BBC-English pronunciation (see subsection 4.1 below).

Admittedly, it may be a daunting task to analyse the segmental phonetics of BBC-English pronunciation without having a methodology with both pedagogic and linguistic dimensions. This is precisely the case with Basil Bernstein’s (1971, 1975, 1990, 1996) pedagogic-linguistic approach, which adduces evidence in support of teaching practices as pedagogic recontextualization fields (PRFs) (see section 3). Indeed, attempting a thorough investigation of the L2 teaching of English segmental pronunciation, the present approach departs from the so-called intuitive-imitative approach and gravitates towards the analytic-linguistic approach, which necessitates the presence of detailed information on pronunciation, e.g., phonemic descriptions, phonetic transcriptions, and vocal charts or illustrations. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) contrast the analytic-linguistic approach with the intuitive-imitative approach on the grounds that the latter depends merely on the sound and rhythmic imitation of L2 pronunciation without all the meticulous analytic-linguistic details considered in the former approach. Practically, Bernstein’s pedagogic-linguistic approach furnishes the present study with the terminology (see section 3) that may well accommodate the analytic-linguistic details required for describing and critiquing the target research data.

Building on Bernstein’s approach (section 3), the present study proposes the following research hypothesis: The BBC learning website can constitute a sort of pedagogic recontextualizing field (PRF) through which the L2 teaching of segmental phonetics is subject to the partial transformation of linguistic knowledge into the practical skill of pronouncing vowels. In order to (dis)prove the foregoing hypothesis, there needs to be a sufficient answer to the following overarching research question: In what way does the BBC learning website constitute a full-scale PRF through which the theoretical knowledge of English segmental phonetics has been transformed into an actual practice of the L2 teaching of vowels? Two sub-questions arise out of this overarching question. First, what are the visible pedagogies of the L2 teaching of English vowels on the BBC learning website? Second, to what extent are these visible pedagogies technically efficient and sufficient for the L2 teaching of English vowels?

The remainder of this study unfolds in six sections. Section 2 reviews the literature relevant to the study of EFL segmental phonetics with a focus on vowels. Section 3 introduces the study’s theoretical framework as predicated on Bernstein’s pedagogic-linguistic approach, which revolves around the notion of “pedagogic recontextualizing fields” (PRFs) as well as the two concepts of “visible pedagogy” and “invisible pedagogy.” Section 4 is an outline of the present research methodology in terms of the data targeted for analysis, besides the procedure followed towards the fulfillment of this analysis. Section 5 offers an analysis of research data. The last section (section 6) introduces the main findings and pedagogic recommendations coming out of research data analysis.

2. Literature Review

As discussed earlier, Jones’ definition of phonetics (see section 1) accentuates pronunciation as the ultimate goal of teaching phonetics. At

a lesser abstract level, however, phonetics is defined as dealing with “speech sounds themselves, how they are made (articulatory phonetics), how they are perceived (auditory phonetics) and the physics involved (acoustic phonetics)” (Davenport & Hannahs, 1998, p. 3). Indeed, Ogden (2009) points out that the linguistic phonetic study of a language involves the examination of speech sounds in relation to meaning: “how words are shaped, how they are put together, how similar (but different) strings of sounds can be distinguished [...], how particular shades of meaning are conveyed, and how the details of speech relate systematically to its inherently social context” (p. 2).

Clark and Yallop (1995) opt to qualify articulation – the first phonetic way of studying speech sounds – as being “segmental”; they refer to the whole process as “segmental articulation,” which, according to them, can be taken as a baseline for differentiating between vowels and consonants:

Vowels and vowel-like sounds are made by varying the geometry of the pharyngeal and mouth cavities, but without any major obstruction or impediment to airflow. Consonantal sounds, on the other hand, are generally made by exploiting the articulatory capabilities of the tongue, teeth and lips in such a way that airflow through the mouth cavity is radically constricted or even temporarily blocked. (Clark & Yallop, 1995, p. 13)

Following the tradition of Celce-Murcia et al. (1996), the above distinction between vowels and consonants needs to be seen within the broader pedagogical ESL/EFL purview of teaching pronunciation. The authors have furnished such an ESL/EFL purview with fresh insights as to how sound systems significantly intersect with other language skills such as listening. Further, they have offered a comprehensive framework for the development of pronunciation teaching techniques.

Also, it should be noted that Clark & Yallop’s (1995) above-formulated distinction between vowels and consonants operates at the level of sound production rather than distribution, that is, at the phonetic rather than phonological level (Laver, 2001, pp. 157-158). This may explain why in a pedagogical context the term “segmental phonetics” is technically favoured as it closely bears on pronunciation learning: “If they study pronunciation at all, learners of English usually concentrate on the segmental phonetics – the ‘sounds’ of the language (known technically as the segments)” (Wells, 2006, p. 1). To Wells (2006), segmental phonetics is relevant to “English language teaching (ELT),” for it is the pedagogical device through which L2 learners of English can “recognize and reproduce the consonant sounds and vowel sounds of English and the differences between them” (p. 1).

Other studies, however, adopted a pedagogically sceptical stance towards teaching learners of English meticulous details on segmental phonetics. For instance, Tergujeff (2015, p. 109) reported Seidlhofer and Dalton-Puffer (1995, p. 144) as arguing that teaching segmentals should not be dismissed, but “fixation on detail may be counterproductive.” Further, as Tergujeff (2015) proceeds, pronunciation teaching is supposed to shift from “mechanical training through guided practice to tasks that require more spontaneous production of speech” (Morley, 1991, p. 109, cited in Tergujeff, 2015, p. 109). Likewise, some more research has had misgivings about teaching segmental pronunciation aside from what is technically known as “Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI).” Lambacher (1999) argued that it should be only through CAI that “electronic visual feedback (EVF)” could practically assist in the demonstration of “the exact sound features that learners produce and thereby drawing attention to changes that they need to make” (p. 138).

Further, Al Abdely and Thai (2016) examined the acquisition of L2 phonology of English vowels on the part of Iraqi EFL learners. The two authors found that the target learners encountered varying degree of difficulty in their perception of English vowels, particularly with performing the two vocalic categories of /ɒ/ and /æ/; the two vowels have proved to be challenging for most of the study subjects irrespective of their proficiency level in English. Li and Jia (2018), adopting a typological perspective, investigated the convergence and divergence on the acquisition of English vowels by means of focusing on the acoustic features of the monophthongs of EFL learners from non-Mandarin areas, including Tianjin (TJ) and Zibo (ZB) dialectal areas. The study has reached the following results: “for ZB learners, /i/ and /a/ are more affected by Mandarin; /u/ is more similar to dialect; while for TJ learners, /a/ and /i/ are closer to dialect, and /u/ is more affected by Mandarin” (p. 106). Recently, Behr (2022) examined the pronunciation of eight English diphthongs by a group of Thai EFL learners using the speech analysis program known as PRAAT. Results demonstrated that vocalic duration was significantly longer following PRAAT training. According to this study, despite the author’s observation that learners suffered struggle with the diphthongs /eɪ/, /əʊ/, and /eə/, the post-training results for /eɪ/ exhibited values substantially greater than those for /əʊ/ and /eə/.

All in all, then, previous research on segmental phonetics seems to be directed towards the pronunciation of vowels as individual segments irrespective of the target language or accent given in some pedagogical field. As a result, the present study attends to the given pedagogical field – wherein segmental phonetics is accorded ample space – of the BBC-learning-English official website; it purveys the online pedagogical materials of what may be described as the BBC-English vowels, and eventually adopts what can be described as “BBC-English pronunciation” (see subsection 4.1 below).

Now, it is time to explain the theoretical framework adopted in the present study, where the notion of “pedagogic recontextualizing fields” (PRFs) is highlighted.

3. Theoretical Framework: Pedagogic Recontextualization Fields (PRFs)

Bernstein defines pedagogy as being “what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge” (1971/2003, p. 156). But he further stipulates that pedagogy should “emphasize ways of knowing rather than states of knowledge” (Bernstein, 1975/2003, p. 74). Obviously, both assumptions index the practical, rather than theoretical, dimension of knowledge as an act of communication. Thus, placed in the realm of pedagogy, linguistics may take up a practical form; and this would, in turn, accommodate several *ways of knowing* phonetics/phonology,

morphology, syntax, and semantics. Interestingly, this highlights the how-to-know aspect of the learning input. At this point, for the identification of ways of knowing, Bernstein (1990, pp. 70-71) draws a crucial distinction between “visible” and “invisible” pedagogies, where the former are concerned with “performance” as being the “external product” of the learner and the latter (invisible pedagogies) utilize those pedagogic practices which are “known only to the transmitter,” but unknown to the “acquirer.” Bernstein (1990, p. 71) explains the rationale for invisible pedagogy as a whole: “the acquirer appears to fill the pedagogic space rather than the transmitter.” As such, eventually, whereas the focus of visible pedagogies is “an external gradable text,” invisible pedagogies focus upon “the procedures/competences which all acquirers bring to the pedagogic context” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 71).

At some later significant stage of his sociology of education, Bernstein (1996) seems to have had a broader conception of pedagogy as a fully-fledged communicative practice. He has been occupied with what he terms the “pedagogic device”; a concept that has had a long pedigree in modern linguistics, where Chomsky (1957) first introduced his well-known concept of “language acquisition device” or LAD; the concept “encodes the major principles of a language and its grammatical structures into the child’s brain” (Wen, 2013, p. 151). This reflects the standing distinction between Chomsky’s “LAD” and Bernstein’s concept of “pedagogic device”: whilst the former’s LAD is part of *i*-language and the competence-specific nature of language acquisition, the latter’s device pertains to external language development and raises the following performance-bound question: “[A]re there any general principles underlying the transformation of knowledge into pedagogic communication ...?” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 39). Indeed, Bernstein’s foregoing question embodies what he succinctly describes as the “pedagogizing of knowledge” – including linguistic knowledge – and “what makes pedagogic communication possible” (Bernstein, 1996, 39).

Towards answering the above question, Bernstein has proposed three rules of the pedagogic device: distributive, recontextualizing, and evaluative. Since the focus of present research is recontextualizing rules, only brief definitions of the other two types (distributive and evaluative) are presented, and then later the type of recontextualizing rules is discussed in detail. First, distributive rules “mark and distribute who may transmit what to whom and under what conditions, and they attempt to set the outer limits of legitimate discourse” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 46). Second, evaluative rules “constitute any pedagogic practice,” in a way that produces “a ruler for consciousness”; and there is one purpose of these rules: “to transmit criteria” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 43). With respect to recontextualizing rules, these are argued to “constitute specific pedagogic discourses” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 46).

The term “pedagogic discourse” in Bernstein’s approach is so complex that it warrants elaboration:

Pedagogic discourse embeds rules which create skills of one kind or another and rules regulating their relationship to each other [...]. We shall call the discourse which creates specialized skills and their relationship to each other *instructional discourse*, and the moral discourse which creates order, relations and identity *regulative discourse*. (Bernstein, 1996, p. 46, italics in original)

Bernstein presents the two types of discourse (instructional and regulative) in an interestingly diagrammatic way:

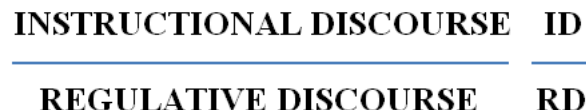


Figure 1. Instructional and regulative discourses in pedagogic discourse (Source: Bernstein, 1996, p. 46)

Indeed, Bernstein (1996, p. 47) argues that it is the regulative discourse that affords the rules of the internal order of instructional discourse itself; thus, it is the regulative discourse that dominates the pedagogic field.

Further, Bernstein (1996) makes clear that pedagogic discourse is underlain by the well-defined principle of “the circulation and reordering of discourses” (p. 47). The principle operates in such a way that as the discourse shifts from its “original site” to a new position, a “transformation” occurs. As such, as Bernstein contends, as the discourse moves, “it is not the same discourse any longer [...] it is transformed from an actual discourse ... to an imaginary discourse”; with this in mind, Bernstein significantly concludes that “*pedagogic discourse is a recontextualizing principle*” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 47, italics in original).

The recontextualizing principle defining pedagogic discourse strongly evokes Bernstein’s key concept of “pedagogic recontextualizing fields” or PRFs. “Pedagogic recontextualizing fields,” Bernstein (1990) argues, “are concerned with the principles and practices regulating the circulation of theories and texts, from the context of their production or existence to their reproduction” (p. 198). Indeed, in a later development of the theory of PRFs, Bernstein (1996, p. 49) points out that the recontextualizing principle of the field “not only recontextualizes the what of pedagogic discourse” (i.e., “its content”), but it also “recontextualizes the how” (i.e., “the theory of instruction”).

Thus, arguably, any form of knowledge or science is liable to be a form of PRF, wherein the actual discourse on theory can pedagogically be transformed into an imaginary discourse that is addressed to some imaginary audience of learners or acquirers of some skills. In what follows, I present the BBC learning website as a pedagogic field of the Internet-based L2 teaching of English vowels as well as the methodological procedure corresponding to Bernstein’s approach of PRFs.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data

The data analysed in the present study is a set of educational audio-visual materials (videos) which are archived online for pedagogical utility on the BBC learning English website.ⁱⁱ The website has been established since 1943. The videos are dedicated to the L2 teaching and learning of the pronunciation of BBC English vowels online. Interestingly, each video is practically focused on a specific articulatory – and sometimes auditory – aspect of pronunciation in relation to vowels in a way that facilitates the pedagogic practice of these sounds. The number of the videos totals 44, with 20 videos on vowels. The videos' teaching materials of vowels and consonants are performed by one and the same L2 English instructor, who seems to occupy the whole pedagogic field on the BBC learning website when it comes to the L2 teaching of English vowels as sound segments. Indeed, the BBC's instructor's teaching behaviour constitutes the fulcrum of the pedagogic-phonetic analysis touted in the present study. The question now is what kind of English the instructor uses as a form of L2 teaching. Or, in other words, what kind of data is being utilized on the BBC's learning website?

In fact, the breathtakingly rapid spread of English teaching has led Brumfit (2001) to the position that “the English language no longer belongs numerically to speakers of English as a mother tongue, or first language” (p. 116). With this position, the term “international English” began to emerge as a type of English that “can be used both in a local sense between speakers of diverse cultures and languages within one country and in a global sense between speakers from different countries” (McKay, 2002, p. 132). Indeed, here, I strictly follow Kachru (2009) who does not take on board the term “international English” as it is “misleading”; it tends simplistically to signal “an *international* English in terms of acceptance, proficiency, functions, norms, pragmatic utility, and creativity” (Kachru, 2009, p. 449, italics in original). Probably more plausible is the assumption that English can easily be recognized and described in concrete terms only if it is characterized in terms of one language variety; or, perhaps, in relation to one specific accent in case the pronunciation aspect is in focus – which is the case in the present study. Thus, at this point, rather than attempting to pin down the loose term of “international English,” one finds it appropriate to elaborate on a well-defined accent of English such as “Received Pronunciation,” which may be a useful starting point for the coming discussion.

The much-cited prestige accent of Received Pronunciation, or as is famously abbreviated RP, is typically associated with “educated Southern British English” (Gimson, 1962/1989, p. 85). Crystal (2003) gives a lucid account of the history of RP, whose ancestral form was “well-established over 400 years ago as the accent of the court and the upper classes” (p. 365); and during the 19th century, according to him, RP became “the accent of public schools” (e.g., Eton and Harrow), then crucially it was recognized as “the main sign that a speaker had received a good education” (Crystal, 2003, p. 365). Indeed, the historical association between RP and the BBC is argued to have extended over the time period starting “from the 1920s to at least the 1960s,” with the fact that throughout this time period “many people from non-standard accent backgrounds were influenced in the direction of RP by the model presented by BBC radio” (Honey, 1991, p. 33).

This historical background may offer a good explanation as to why on a pedagogical level the BBC pronunciation is often suggested as a substitute for traditional RP: “If you are a learner of English you are recommended to concentrate on BBC pronunciation initially” (Roach, 2009, p.4). Roach (2009) explains that the foregoing recommendation does not mean or even imply any inherently special privileges accorded to the BBC pronunciation as an accent of English; rather, it is so being due to some practical considerations:

There is no implication that other accents are inferior or less pleasant-sounding; the reason is simply that BBC is the accent that has usually been chosen by British teachers to teach to foreign learners, it is the accent that has been most fully described, and it has been used as the basis for textbooks and pronunciation dictionaries. (Roach, 2009, p. 4)

In a similar vein, in the editors' 17th-edition introduction to Daniel Jones' *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary* (Roach et al., 2006), the term “BBC English” is preferably used, being “the pronunciation of professional speakers employed by the BBC as newsreaders and announcers on BBC1 and BBC2 television, the World Service and BBC Radio 3 and 4” (p. v). As such, one may advisedly combine these two similar terms (“BBC pronunciation” and “BBC English”) in a way that gives rise to the term BBC-English Pronunciation in the present context of research.

Of course, the above-stated considerations may be counterclaimed by even those British-accent-oriented theorists and pedagogues who insist that other technical labels be more realistic nowadays. One example is the term “non-regional pronunciation” (NRP), introduced by Collins and Mees (2013), who consider it in the following light:

Rather than dealing with what is now regarded by many of the younger generation as a quaint minority accent [RP], we shall instead endeavour to describe a more encompassing neutral type of modern British English but one which nevertheless lacks obvious local accent features. To refer to this variety we shall employ the term non-regional pronunciation (abbreviated to NRP). (Collins & Mees, 2013, p. 4, emphasis in original)

Another example is “General British” (GB) which is literally described by Cruttenden (2014) as being both “the successor to RP” and “less homogenous” in a way that demonstrates “much more variation” (Cruttenden, 2014, p. 6).

At any rate, irrespective of the different terminological substitutions for traditional RP, the fact remains that “no accent is a homogenous invariant monolith” (Wells, 1982, p. 279). Indeed, the present study finds the amalgam term *BBC-English pronunciation* more apposite to the research data targeted for the current pedagogic-phonetic analysis in relation to the BBC's Internet-based L2 teaching of English

vowels; this type of L2 teaching is argued here to be part and parcel of the BBC's pedagogic recontextualizing field (PRF), which is the central notion of the theoretical framework explained in section 3.

4.2 Procedure

The current methodological procedure is guided by Bernstein's pedagogic-linguistic approach (see section 3). The procedure sets out from the pedagogic space of the BBC learning website as a recontextualizing field wherein the L2 teaching of English vowels takes up a visible form in the videos taught on the website. The operationalization of the procedure is threefold: (a) pedagogic observation of data, (b) linguistic-phonetic description, and (c) critical evaluation of the reproduced input of teaching. The three stages can be explained in a way that correlates with the overall pedagogic-linguistic approach followed in the present study. First, the data on the BBC learning website is presented as screenshots that are taken at some pedagogically visible moment which reveals the recontextualization of a particular detail from the theoretical field of English segmental phonetics. Second, such a theoretical detail is linguistically discussed in relation to the BBC's instructor's pedagogic behaviour, whose reproduction is significant to the L2 learner's performance of the relevant sounds (vowels) in their phonetic contexts. Third, a critical analysis of the reproduced phonetic detail is offered with a special focus on the significant missing, or rather invisible, form of pedagogy on the BBC learning website.

5. Analysis: BBC-English Vowels as PRF

To begin with, The BBC's tutorial videos on vowels practically bring together four of the text-based phonetic criteria set for describing the English vowels: (a) "tongue shape," more specifically, the "tongue height" element of tongue shape; (b) "lip position"; (c) "duration"; and (d) "complexity" (Collins & Mees, 2008, pp. 58-67). First, the classic notion of "tongue height" distinguishes four classes (Jones, 1922, p. 17): (i) "close vowels," those in which "the tongue is as high as possible," (ii) "open-vowels," those in which "the tongue is as low as possible," (iii) "half-close," and (iv) "half-open"; the last two classes are "intermediate positions" of the tongue. Indeed, in addition to the element of "tongue height," the first criterion of tongue shape is argued to subsume another element of "anteriority" (Ball & Rahilly, 1999, p. 93): It indicates "frontness-backness," with the threefold tongue-based division into "front," "central," and "back" vowels.

Second, in terms of lip position, there are three possibilities, where the lips may be held in different positions: (i) "natural or neutral," (ii) "spread," or (iii) "more or less round" (Jones, 1922, p. 19). The three different positions have specific descriptions in the pronunciation of English vowels: (i) rounded where "the corners of the lips are brought towards each other and the lips pushed forwards," (ii) spread with "the corners of the lips moved away from each other," and (iii) neutral where "the lips are not noticeably rounded or spread" (Roach, 2009, p. 13). The third criterion of vowel duration amounts to "the linguistic significance" considering "the relative length of sounds," which relates to "phonemic contrast of longer versus shorter duration in vowel sounds" (Collins & Mees, 2008, p. 67). Last, the criterion of vocalic complexity sets apart pure or simple short and long vowels from what is technically known as diphthongs and triphthongs. Diphthongs occur when "two vowels are so placed and so pronounced that there is no diminution of sonority between them (i.e. that they do not form more than one syllable)" (Jones, 1922, p. 22). Triphthongs, on the other hand, occur when "in a group of three consecutive vowels which are not separated by any diminution in the force of the breath, the second is more sonorant than either of the others" (Jones, 1922, p. 23).

In the coming subsections, each of the above phonetic criteria is applied to the BBC's video screenshots which are pedagogically taken to present examples of vowel sounds.

5.1 Tongue Height

Virtually all the BBC's videos on vowels demonstrate the tongue-shape aspect of height. When it comes to the other aspect of tongue shape, anteriority, there is no medium of demonstrating which part of the tongue is raised highest in the instructor's vocal tract during vocalic articulation. For example, the video screenshot appearing in Figure 2 below obviously exhibits the phonemic contrast between the sounds /e/ and /ɪ:ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 2. BBC-English vocalic distinction between /e/ and /ɪ/

Here, the screenshot features the visual contrast between the two short vowels /e/ and /ɪ/ in terms of tongue height; the tongue-shape aspect of anteriority is framed out from the video since the two sounds are front vowels. As such, understandably, the anteriority contrast (e.g., front versus back) is not part of the pedagogic technique adopted by the BBC’s instructor in the assigned teaching situation.

It is rather the contrastive aspect of tongue height that seems to be at play here. Indeed, in terms of the vertical distance between the surface of the tongue and the hard palate, Gimson (1989) explains that whereas the short vowel /ɪ/ is pronounced with the front part of the tongue raised “just above the half-close position” (p. 103), /e/ has the front of the tongue “raised between half-open and half-close positions” (p. 106). Obviously, in Figure 2, such a knowledge aspect of phonetics is pedagogically transformed into the visual medium of the video screenshot above; thus, the present screenshot can be said to be a field for the recontextualization of tongue height as a pedagogic practice, or as a kind of “visible pedagogy,” i.e., an aspect that has to do with the learner’s (manifest) performance.

5.2 Lip Position

The different lip positions in the course of pronouncing English vowels are pedagogically demonstrated on the BBC’s videos. A typical example is presented in Figure 3 below:

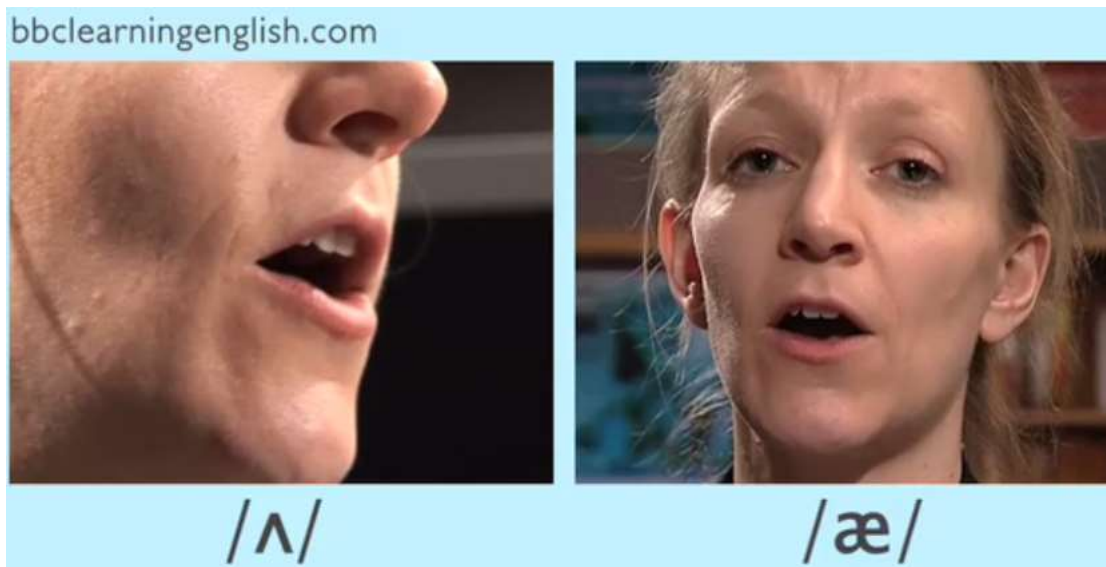


Figure 3. BBC-English vocalic distinction between /ʌ/ and /æ/

As shown in Figure 3 above, the instructor seems to be interested in contrasting the two short – technically known as ‘lax’ – vowels /ʌ/ and /æ/ in a way that concentrates on the lip position of each in relation to the other. Indeed, the world’s languages have a tendency

towards connecting “the phonetic Backness and Rounding”: “Front vowels are usually unrounded and back vowels are usually rounded” (Ladefoged & Maddieson, 1996, p. 292). Based on the foregoing assumption, /æ/ is a low front vowel and tends to be unrounded; and being mid-central, /ʌ/ is likely to be a neutral vowel, i.e., it is neither rounded nor unrounded. Thus, the above screenshot can be said to pedagogically recontextualize the contrastive phonetic element of lip position between the two lax vowels.

In Figure 4 below, the screenshot on the pronunciation of the sound /ɒ/ substantiates the same phonetic assumption:

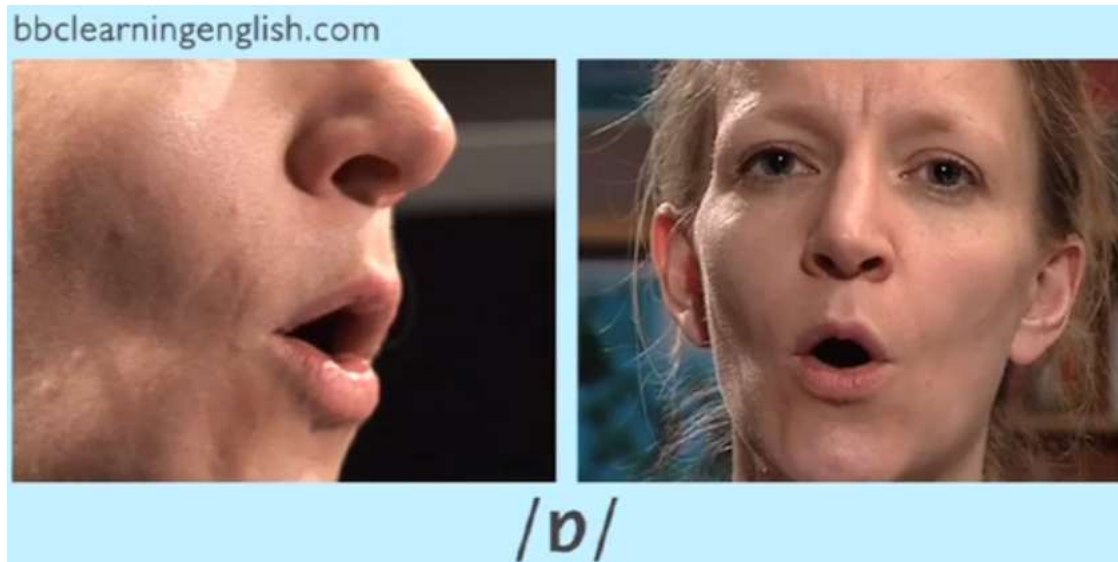


Figure 4. BBC-English pronunciation of /ɒ/

With the screenshot above, lip-rounding is the salient observed pedagogic behaviour of the instructor; this may suggest that the phonetic backness of the vowel /ɒ/ is indicated by the lip shape. Perhaps almost the same pedagogic behaviour is extended even more noticeably with the demonstration of the long version of this back vowel, known as /ɔ:/, demonstrated in Figure 5.



Figure 5. BBC-English pronunciation of the long vowel /ɔ:/

As shown above, the back long vowel /ɔ:/ is presented by the instructor as having a strong lip-rounding. Thus, at this point it can be said that lip-rounding is more pedagogically demonstrable than tongue-backness, and thus lip position should be the pronunciation aspect recontextualized in the form of visible pedagogy in the present teaching situation. Indeed, the type of lip position indicated here tends to draw on the pedagogic practice of what Hewings (2004) describes as “lip reading,” through which the learner can readily “focus on the visible features of sound production to be able to discriminate between the sounds” (p. 68).

However, it is rather unfortunate that such a practice of “lip reading” seems to be pedagogically marginalized on the BBC learning website;

this can be ascribed to the fact that the phonetic process of typically correlating back vowels with rounded lips and front vowels with unrounded lips is unjustifiably missing from the BBC's pedagogic field; it is not recontextualized as systematically as it should be on the website's tutorial videos. Indeed, utilizing such a contrastive aspect of lip position between the back and front vowels of BBC-English pronunciation would in all probability provide such more pedagogic space for the L2 learner or acquirer as to manage their lip aperture in a way that gets the learner to mimic and read the BBC's instructor's lips when pronouncing a back vowel like /ɑ:/ versus the front vowel /æ/, regardless of the articulatory phonetic feature of vocalic length or duration (see "duration" in the coming subsection).

5.3 Duration

Apropos vocalic duration, the BBC's tutorial videos utilize the contrastive phonetic aspect of short versus long vowels:

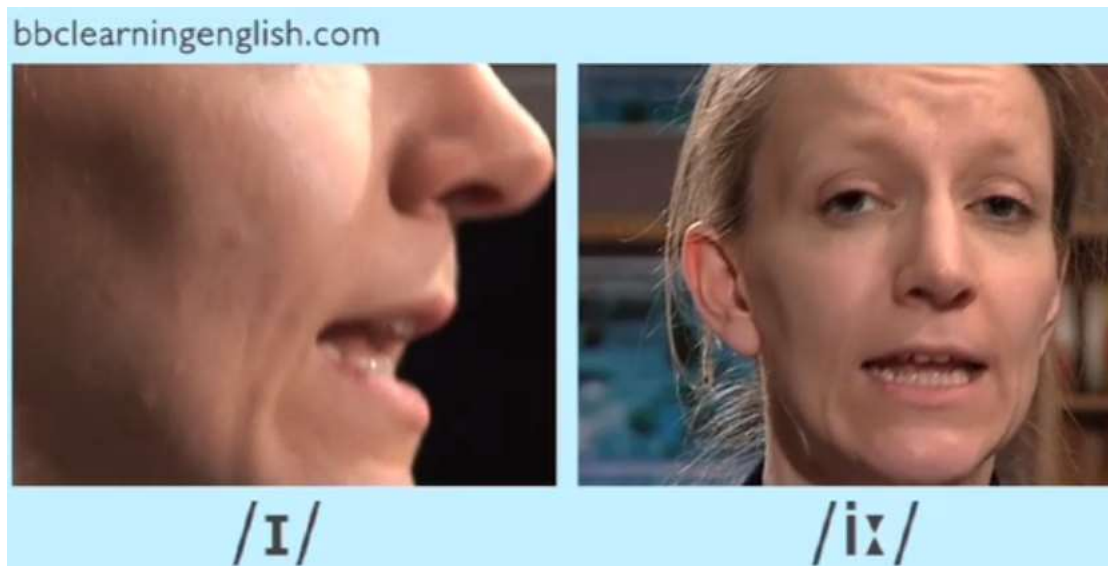


Figure 6. BBC-English contrastive aspect of duration between /ɪ/ and /i:/

The above screenshot in Figure 6 accentuates the phonetic contrast of vowel length with /ɪ/ as being clearly shorter in duration than /i:/; for instance, even though the example vowels of "feet and fit" are in a way "similar in quality," it is the first which is "typically longer than the second" (Kreidler, 2004, p. 48). Thus, the phonetically technical aspect of quality is pedagogically subverted in the present teaching situation; rather, it is the duration aspect that can be *aurally* demonstrated as a form of visible pedagogy with manifestations in the actual teaching situations. But, as a matter of fact, the visibility of the above-discussed duration of /ɪ/ versus /i:/ is certainly pedagogized mainly through the auditory, rather than visual, medium of communication. Indeed, here, pedagogic visibility ought to be interpreted as a broad term of communication that certainly transcends the sensory experience of the learner as a mere viewer or listener, but rather as being an actively multifunctional recipient of the learning input. Thus, it can be said that in the above screenshot, the BBC's instructor is keen on the L2 learner's perception through the sensory medium of the ears, and the instructor does leave some pedagogic space of silence for learners to mimic the same duration aspect in their L2 reproduction of the two vowels, /ɪ/ and /i:/.

However, perhaps problematically, the videos' exemplification of short and long vowels seems to be oblivious to what Collins and Mees (2008) term "pre-fortis clipping," where "vowels are shortened before fortis [voiceless] consonants, but have full length in all other contexts" (p. 53). This is readily demonstrable by means of those example words with short and long vowels in the screenshots in Figures 7 and 8. From these screenshots, it can be observed that the short vowel /æ/ is presented within almost the same phonetic context where fortis consonants immediately follow in a way that shortens the duration of /æ/. Indeed, all through the video on /æ/ there are no examples with full-length /æ/, followed by lenis (voiced) consonants.



Figure 7. BBC-English exemplification of the short vowel /æ/ with a following fortis /k/



Figure 8. BBC-English exemplification of the short vowel /æ/ with a following fortis /p/

Almost the same problem holds true in the case of long vowels appearing in the examples cited in the screenshots in Figures 9 and 10. Whilst the exemplification of /u:/ in Figure 10 has full-length duration, being an open vowel in a monosyllabic structure, the case fails to exhibit the contrastive aspect of pre-lenis vocalic articulation as opposed to that of pre-fortis articulation – the latter is applicable due to the presence of the voiceless fricative /s/ immediately following /u:/ in Figure 9. Such a contrastive aspect has been conspicuously missing from virtually all the BBC's tutorial videos on vowels.



Figure 9. BBC-English exemplification of the long vowel /u:/ with a following fortis /s/



Figure 10. BBC-English exemplification of /u:/ as an open vowel

Indeed, juxtaposing contrastive examples of vowel duration is pedagogically effective in the L2 learning process of mastering the allophonic variants of pure vowels (i.e., short and long vowels) in terms of their relative length. Strikingly, Brown (1990) argues that, in modern English, before voiced consonants the short vowel /æ/ is “often diphthongized [gliding] as in [bæəd], bad” (Brown, 1990, p. 36). This would entail a great deal of training in vocalic articulation, which demands that there should be sufficient pedagogic space for contrasting these different realizations of one and the same vowel sound depending on the assigned phonetic context. Even more complications may arise with the practice of complex vowels or diphthongs, as proposed in the coming subsection.

5.4 Vocalic Complexity

Complexity of English vowels has strongly featured in the BBC’s videos on the L2 teaching of English vowels, where there is a systematic shift from the pure or simple vowels (short and long) towards the complex vowels, technically labelled diphthongs (see section 5). Gimson (1989) has a predilection for utilizing the complex term “diphthongal vowel glides,” whereby a vocalic structure emerges with “a 1st element (the starting point) and a 2nd element (the point in the direction of which the glide is made)” (pp. 127-128). The RP diphthongs, Gimson argues, have as 1st element sounds “[i, e, a, ə, ʊ]” and as 2nd element “[ɪ, ʊ, ə]” (1989, p. 128). This vocalic structure results in the classification of diphthongs into centring [ɪə, eə, ʊə] and closing [eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, əʊ, aʊ] (Roach, 2009, p. 17).

Irrespective of their different types, the diphthongs presented on the BBC’s videos seem to be sharing one and the same pedagogic

technique. As is clear from the three screenshots in Figures 11, 12 and 13, the instructor employs index finger to point the learners towards the shape of her lips. Of course this is further anchored by the verbal instruction afforded to the learners to visually concentrate on the exact position of the instructor’s lips. This suggests how the pronunciation of diphthongs has a special lip position. “If there is an obvious change in tongue or lip shape,” Collins and Mees (2008) write, “we term the vowel a diphthong” (p. 65). Thus, with the instructor’s indexical gesture, the video screenshots at stake demonstrate diphthongal lip-shape as a form of visible pedagogy, which might have been recontextualized from Collins and Mees (or any suchlike text-based authorities) in the pedagogic field of teaching the pronunciation of English diphthongs on the BBC. But, on the same videos, there is no pedagogic reference – be it gestural or verbal – to the other aspect of diphthongal tongue-shape; this aspect seems to be excluded from the recontextualizing pedagogic field of the BBC’s teaching of diphthongs.

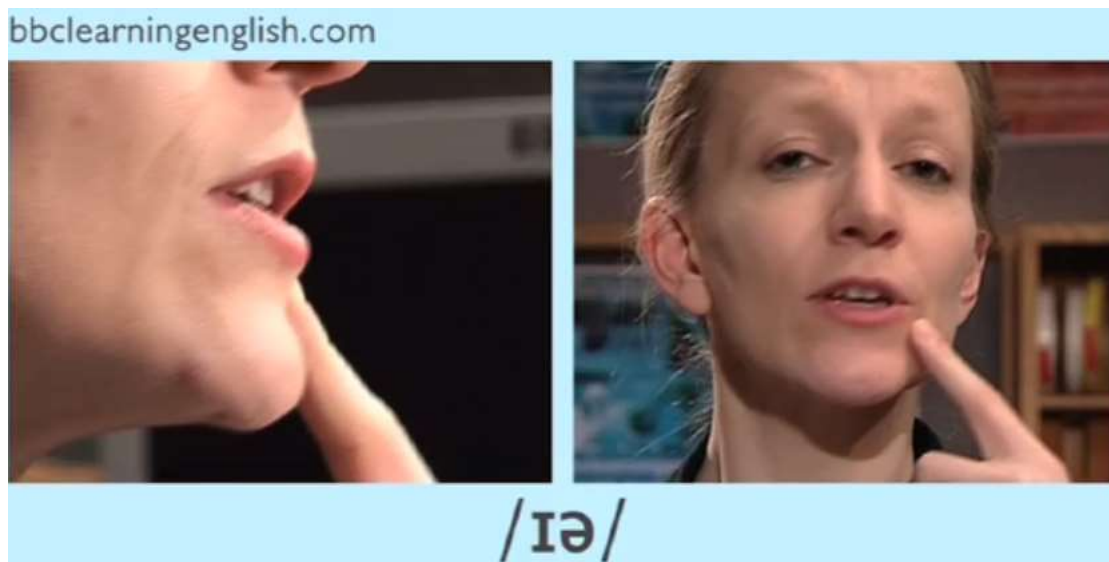


Figure 11. BBC-English pronunciation of /ɪə/



Figure 12. BBC-English pronunciation of /aɪ/

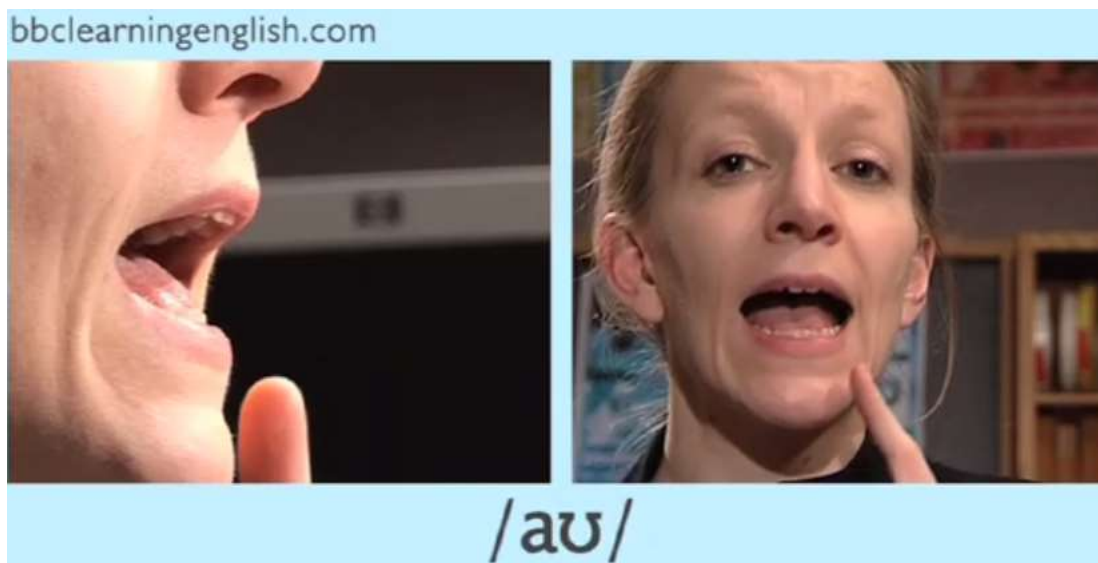


Figure 13. BBC-English pronunciation of /aʊ/

There is yet another pedagogic strategy employed by the BBC’s instructor in teaching English diphthongs as shown in the screenshots in Figures 14 and 15. Obviously, the screenshots exhibit explicit pedagogic references to the vocalic contrast holding between diphthongs and monophthongs (the latter being short and long vowels); the contrastive aspect rests with the presence and absence of “a glide within one syllable” (Gimson, 1989, p. 127). This aspect is strongly felt and observed when it comes to the pronunciation of the sequences of vocalic elements (from 1st element to 2nd element), yet the same aspect fails to be vocalized in the production of monophthongs. As such, at this point, the BBC’s recontextualizing pedagogic field allows experimentation with gliding versus non-gliding vowels. Again, here, it is the auditory, and not visual, medium of communication that is pedagogically operationalized towards the L2 learner’s mimicry of gliding versus non-gliding vowels on the BBC learning website.



Figure 14. BBC-English contrastive pronunciation of /eə/ and /æ/



Figure 15. BBC-English contrastive pronunciation of /əʊ/ and /ɔ:/

It should be noted, however, that the BBC's pedagogic field disallows experimenting with triphthongal glides such as /eɪə/ and /əʊə/. Indeed, contrasting diphthongs with triphthongs can be said to be pedagogically imperative and productive. This is so, mainly because in the case of monosyllabic vocalic sequences what Laver (1994) describes as "the audible change of vowel quality" is not the same: Whereas in diphthongs the "audible change of quality" consistently progresses towards "a single target," in the case of triphthongs the "audible change in the medial phase moves first towards one target and then undergoes an audible change of target in mid-course" (Laver, 1994, p. 146). Perhaps, should such a different change of vocalic trajectory in diphthongs and triphthongs be recontextualized across the BBC's pedagogic field, it would be easier for L2 learners to develop tongues – with new habit formations – that are sensitive to the different degrees of complexity holding between the two classes of vocalic sequences within monosyllables.

6. Conclusion: Findings and Pedagogic Recommendations

Now, it has become clear that the BBC learning website can stand as a PRF par excellence, particularly insofar as the L2 teaching of English vowels is concerned. The website manifests what Bernstein (1990) has described as the recontextualization of invisible pedagogies into visible ones. In the present context of research, English segmental phonetics stands in for the invisible form of pedagogy, which is known only to the (expert) transmitter; and the actual performance on the website is the visible form, which is known to the L2 learner or acquirer of English. As such, as Bernstein explains, there seems to be an academic discourse on English segmental phonetics which regulates the instructional discourse produced by the BBC's instructor. At this point, then, one may be in a position to draw on Bernstein's (1996) diagrammatical representation (see section 3) of the two types of academic discourse, instructional and regulative, in order to project them onto the BBC-learning-website discourse on English vowels:

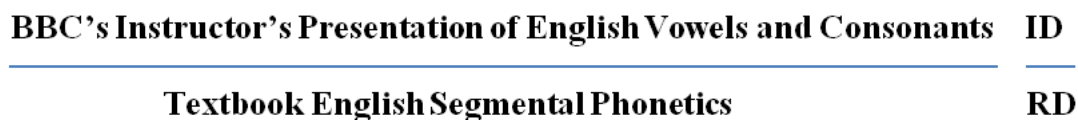


Figure 16. Instructional and regulative discourses on BBC Learning Website

In Figure 16, there is a rough approximation of Bernstein's (1996) diagrammatic representation of the notion of "academic discourse" as composed of the two types of ID (instructional discourse) and RD (regulative discourse). Here, the diagram above presents the BBC's instructor's L2 teaching of English vowels as being the instructional type of discourse (ID), which can be interpreted as the "visible pedagogy" known to the learner or acquirer and which may thus be considered the performance-specific aspect of the L2 teaching of BBC-English vowels. Indeed, in this sense, ID is more or less the teaching content as presented onstage. Regulative discourse (RD), on the other hand, is presented as the theoretical knowledge on segmental phonetics that is established as textbook format offstage, and that can possibly be interpreted as the "invisible pedagogy" known only to the transmitter, or in this case, to the BBC's instructor. Continuing along the same line of Bernstein's argument, this latter form of discourse may be regarded as the competence-related aspect of knowing *about* English segmental phonetics.

It is worth observing, then, that in the present context of research conflating ID and RD highlights the significant dimension of Bernstein's

“pedagogic recontextualization,” where the surface-structure ID can be taken as the discourse pedagogically reproduced from the deep-structure RD and then recontextualized in the visible pedagogies adopted by the BBC’s instructor in the pedagogic field of the BBC learning website. Indeed, at this point, it is crucial to revisit Bernstein’s (1996) argument about “imaginary discourse” and “imaginary audience” (see section 3): The ID is the BBC’s imaginary discourse on English vowels that ideally suits some imaginary audience of learners or acquirers, regardless of the place and time in which those learners or acquirers actually exist; this form of ID is being controlled by another discourse type, which is the RD type, and it constitutes the baseline for all the pedagogic practices, techniques, preferences, etc. (embodied visually or aurally) in the ID.

Obviously, the analysis offered in the present study can be claimed to be a faithful realization of the ID-RD relationship on the BBC learning website and its teaching of English vowels; it is this relationship that identifies such a learning website as being a PRF in essence. This answers the overarching research question posed in the present study: In what way does the BBC learning website constitute a full-scale PRF through which the theoretical knowledge of English segmental phonetics has been transformed into an actual practice of the L2 teaching of vowels? As stated earlier, this overarching question is divided into two sub-questions: (1) What are the visible pedagogies of the L2 teaching of English vowels on the BBC learning website? (2) To what extent are these visible pedagogies technically efficient and sufficient for the L2 teaching of English vowels? In what follows, the answers to these two sub-questions constitute a discussion of the main finding and pedagogic recommendations reached in the present study.

Crucially, proving the research hypothesis that the BBC learning website is a partial PRF – in Bernstein’s technical sense – is considered the main finding of the present study. Indeed, addressing the first research sub-question (stated above) captures such a finding at its best, and this has been demonstrated through analysing the current research data. The analysis has operated at the level of segmental phonetics with an intensive focus on the L2 teaching of English vowels. This form of L2 teaching has come into being on the BBC learning website through the pedagogic recontextualization of certain technical aspects of pronouncing vowels; these aspects have been visibly transformed into the actual practices undertaken by the BBC’s instructor in the L2 teaching of English vowels.

At the level of English vowels, pedagogic recontextualization has taken the form of four descriptive aspects. First, the tongue-height aspect is made pedagogically visible through the contrastive aspect holding between the two short vowels /ɪ/ and /e/, where the different degrees of aperture have enabled the instructor to draw a pronunciation distinction that is both teachable and learnable. Second, the lip-position aspect has visually crystallized at the contrastive point holding between neutral vowel /ʌ/ and spread vowel /æ/. In this respect of lip position, two further examples of back vowels, /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/, have been cited as instances of lip rounding. Third, the duration aspect of English vowels has been presented with the contrastive example of /ɪ/ versus /i:/; it is an auditory – rather than visual – pedagogic practice, which operates in accordance with the L2 learner’s perception of the difference in length between short and long vowels. Fourth, the vowel-complexity element has featured in the BBC’s pedagogic field in terms of two aspects: (a) the mouth shape exhibiting the gliding shift from one vowel to the other, e.g., /ɪə, aɪ, aʊ/; (b) the contrastive aspect holding between gliding and non-gliding vowels, e.g., /eə/ versus /æ/ and /əʊ/ versus /ɔ:/.

In answering the second research sub-question (To what extent are the BBC’s Internet-based visible pedagogies technically efficient and sufficient for the L2 teaching of English vowels?), the second half of research hypothesis regarding the partial (incomplete) PRF of the BBC’s Internet-based L2 teaching of English segmental phonetics is practically proven. At this point, it is worth mentioning that, in concluding the present study, two seminal pedagogic recommendations are set out in the hope of enriching the BBC’s PRF in terms of its L2 teaching of English vowels. Taken all together, the same set of recommendations reveal in what way the BBC’s current visible pedagogies is in need of further recontextualization from the knowledge domain of English segmental phonetics.

The first recommendation is concerned with vocalic duration or length. As made clear in the data analysis, the contrastive aspect phonetically holding between pre-fortis clipping and pre-lenis full length in the production of vowels is missing from the BBC’s PRF. No pedagogically systematic exemplification has been offered in order to differentiate the phonetic effect of post-vocalic voiced and breathed consonants; for example, in the words /sæd/ versus /sæt/ and /brɔ:d/ versus brɔ:t/, a contrastive vowel length would certainly be of the essence to the L2 learner or acquirer of BBC-English pronunciation. The second recommendation appertains to the pedagogic imperative for the BBC learning website to recontextualize the contrastive aspect of the vocalic complexity holding between diphthongs and triphthongs. Indeed, whereas such a contrastive aspect is already pedagogically recontextualized in the case of gliding diphthongs and non-gliding pure vowels, there seems to be no trace of any pedagogic exemplification of the triphthongal sequences realized in words like /pleɪə/, /lɔɪəl/, /aʊə/, /məʊə/, etc.

Thus, with the foregoing discussion of the main finding and pedagogic recommendations noted in the present study, there can hardly be any doubt that the BBC as an Internet-based pedagogic recontextualizing field or PRF is subject to a twofold critique. One critical dimension bears directly on the pedagogic fact that the BBC’s instructor has been selective of certain visible pedagogies and dismissive of equally significant others; the other critical dimension is linguistic in essence, and it questions the BBC’s scope of phonetic recontextualization at the segmental level, basically for its insufficient demonstration and exemplification of crucial pronunciation aspects of vowel duration and complexity.

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ⁱ In the present study, I follow Odlin (1989) in using the term ESL (English as a Second Language) even in cases where EFL (English as a Foreign Language) seems to be more appropriate. Indeed, Odlin explains that whereas “such a terminological distinction can be crucial for those developing syllabi or preparing pedagogic materials, the distinction is less important for researchers studying cross-linguistic influence” (Odlin, 1989, p. 4, a footnote). As a consequence, I also use the terms “L2 teaching” and “L2 learning” with no heed to the classic terminological distinction between “Second Language” and “Foreign Language” in the study of curricula and teaching methods (e.g., Littlewood, 1984; Turnbull & Dailey-O’Cain, 2009).

ⁱⁱ The BBC Learning English Website has free access online at www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/. The current research data can be accessed online at BBC Learning English Website. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/pronunciation>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The present analysis systematically retains the classic typographical convention of using slashes for the phonemic transcription of sound segments and square brackets for phonetic transcription (Gimson, 1962).

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