

English Phonology

-Breaking down English speech patterns-

SDC 2025

Let's think
about English!

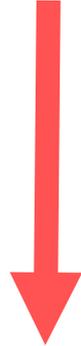
What word in English has the most meanings according to the Oxford English Dictionary?

run

Up



Down



How can you both be **up** for something and **down** for something at the same time?

Why do we say we're...

in the car

but

on the bus



Why can we say we're...

unhappy

but not

unsad

What's the difference between...

present

and

present

What's the difference between...

Noun

present

and

Verb

present

What is linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structure.

Core Areas of Analysis

Phonetics

Phonology

Morphology

Syntax

Core Areas of Analysis

- Phonetics - individual sounds
- Phonology - sounds in sequence
- Morphology - words, word structure
- Syntax - sentences,

Phonetics and **phonics** are NOT
the same thing.

Phonetics vs Phonics

Phonetics → the scientific study of all speech sounds, a research discipline

Phonics → a pedagogical method for teaching reading, an educational tool

How can knowing about
linguistics fundamentals
help you as an ALT?

How do you pronounce the
following words?



Hotto Motto
ほっともつと



Hot dog?
Hotto doggu?



Hotto Motto
ほっともつと

Hawto Mawto?
Hotto Motto?

We (over)apply our knowledge of our L1 to our target language.



English:

Subject-Verb-Object

I

ate the apple.

Japanese:

Subject-Object-Verb

(私は) りんご を 食べた。

(*watashi wa*) *ringo wo tabeta*

I

SUBJ apple OBJ ate.

By understanding **how** English and Japanese are different, we as ALTs can make better informed lessons and activities.

We can also better understand **why** students make certain mistakes more often than others.

Let's jump into English phonology!

Getting to know the sounds of English from a
linguistic perspective.

What is the English
plural?

S

cat

cats

dog

dogs

horse

horses

What's happening here?

cat

cats

dog

dogs

horse

horses

What's happening here?

cat**t** + **s**

dog**g** + **s**

horse**se** + **s**

Assimilation

cat + **s**

/s/

dog + **s**

/z/

horse + **s**

/əz/ or /ɪz/

(varies among individual speakers)

save

saved

laugh

laughed

What's happening here?

save

save**ed**

laugh

laugh**ed**

Assimilation again!

save + **ed** /d/

laugh + **ed** /t/

Assimilation

A process by which speech sound becomes similar or identical to a neighboring sound.

Assimilation is one such way that you **unconsciously** change how you pronounce words to **make it easier** for you to speak words one after the other in rapid succession.

Without assimilation, English sounds stilted, broken, and unnatural to native speakers.

What is voicing?

fat

vat

voiceless

fat

voiced

vat

Phonetic
notation

Orthographic
notation

/f/

=

f

/v/

=

v

Voicing Assimilation

have

I have to

/hæv/

/v/ → /f/ when followed by a
voiceless consonant

With that in
mind...

tan

tram

tang

tan

tang

You aren't!

What's happening here?

tan

tang

What's happening here?

tan

/tæ**n**/

tang

/tæ**ŋ**/

Place assimilation!

Native speakers of Japanese actually utilize place assimilation when pronouncing their /n/ sound, too!

ん

ん



パン

bread

/pan/

Japanese place assimilation!

パンにバターをぬる。

/pan ni/
bread.”

“[I] spread butter on

パンが食べたい。

/pan ga/

“[I] want to eat bread.”

パンも食べたい。

/pam mo/

“[I] want to eat bread,



てんぷら
tempura



ちゃんぽん
chamupon

Contextualizing sounds using the students' frame of reference

Example (modeling the **ŋ** in 'king')

Me: “Say this word.” → 三階 (third floor)

Student: “さんがい”

Me: “That sound came from here.” (I point at my throat)

“This sound is the same.” (I point at the ‘ng’ in king)

“Say this word.” → king

Main problems with this method:

- Not every sound is shared between English and Japanese
- Requires you to know a little bit about both English and Japanese phonology

Consonant and Vowel Inventories

English versus Japanese

When the language you are trying to learn has consonants and vowels that are new to you, you have to learn how to **distinguish** and **pronounce** these sounds.



For L1 Japanese speakers learning English, there are a LOT of sounds they have to learn.

To represent sounds, we use the **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)**.

What is the IPA?

The IPA is a standardized system of written symbols that represent the distinct sounds of ALL spoken languages. Each sound has a unique symbol.

For example:

/tæŋ/

/əz/

/ɪz/

Greater American English (GAE) IPA Consonant Chart

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Glottal	
Plosive	p b			t d				k g		ʔ	
Nasal		m		n				ŋ			
Tap or flap				r							
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ					h	
Affricate				ts dz	tʃ dʒ						
Approximant		w			ɹ		j	w			
Lateral approximant				l							

Place of Articulation - Where you make the sound

Manner of Articulation - How you make the sound

Place of Articulation

From front to back, lips to glottis 

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d				k g		ʔ
Nasal	m			n				ŋ		
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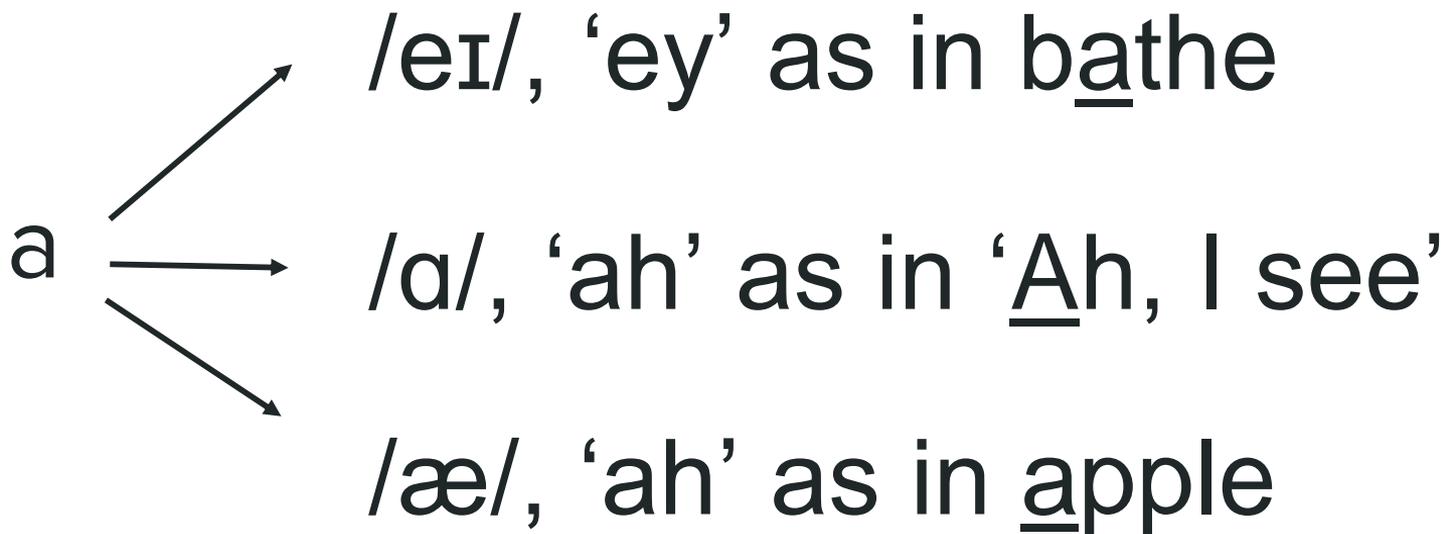
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Nasal		m		n			ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Tap or flap				ɾ							
Fricative	ɸ (β)			s z	ʃ ʒ					h	
Affricate				ts dz	tʃ dʒ						
Approximant							j				
Lateral approximant						(l)					

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Fricative	ɸ (β)	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ					h	
Affricate				ts dz	tʃ dʒ						
Approximant		ɰ		ɻ			j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		(ɭ)					

Romaji vs the Alphabet



Example: the letter F

	Japanese F	English F
Manner of Articulation	Upper and lower lips curl into a rounded shape and air is forced out (sounds like 'hoo')	Lower lip is lightly placed between teeth and air is forced out
Phonetic notation (IPA)	/ɸ/	/f/

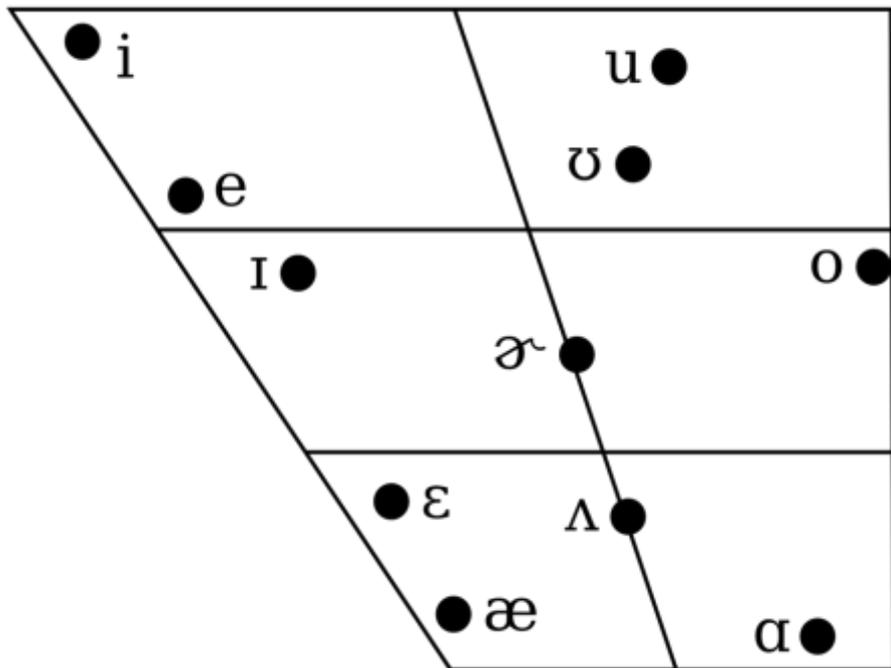
Example: the letters B and V

	Japanese 'V'	English V
Manner of Articulation	Either pronounced as a /b/ or as the voiced counterpart to the Japanese 'f.'	Lower lip is lightly placed between teeth and air is forced out with voicing
Phonetic notation (IPA)	/b/, /β/	/v/

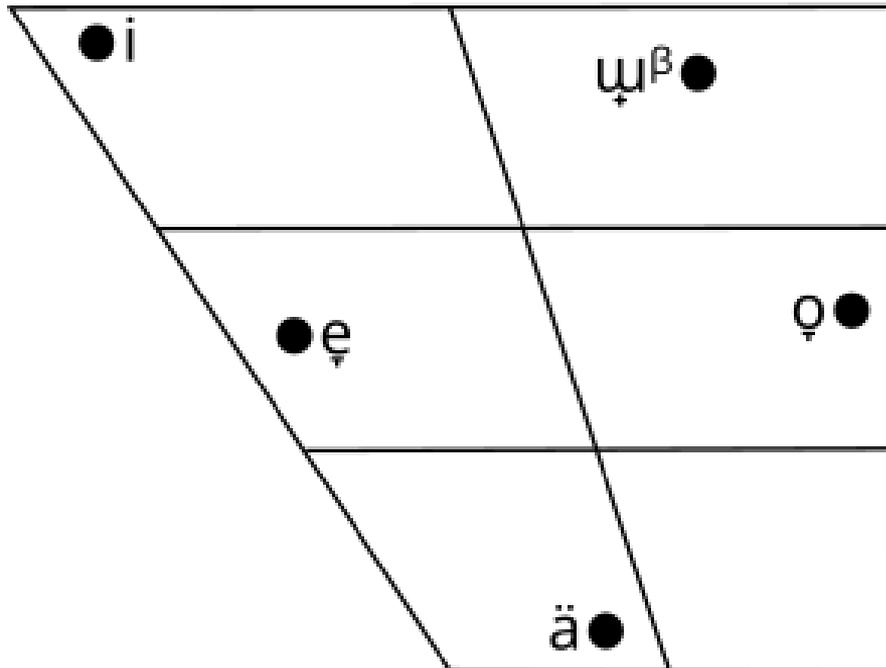
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Approximant		ɰ		ɻ			j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				ɭ		(ɭ)					

GAE Vowels



Standard Japanese Vowels

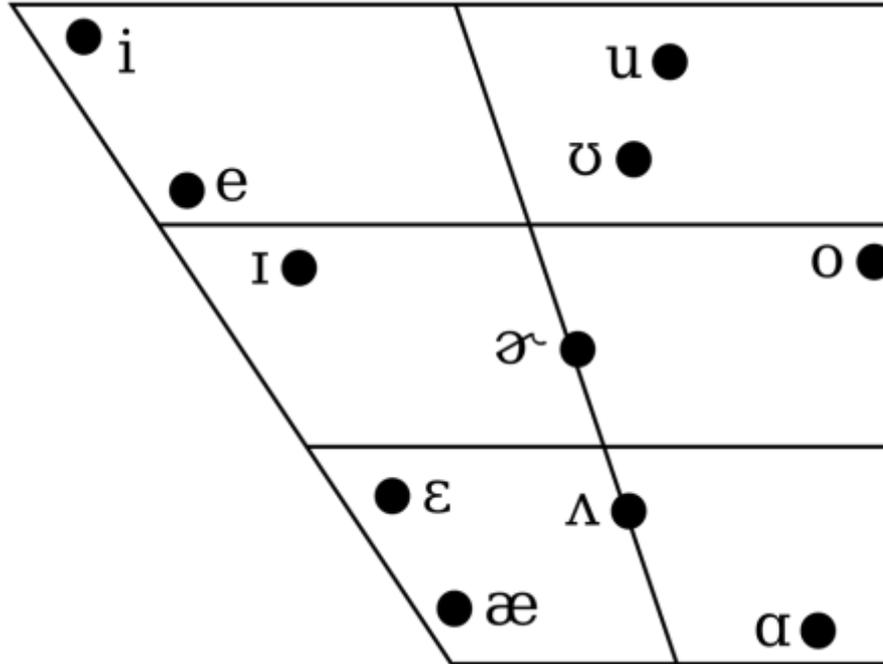


Frontedness:

front ←

How far forward or backward your tongue is in your mouth when you make the sound

→ back

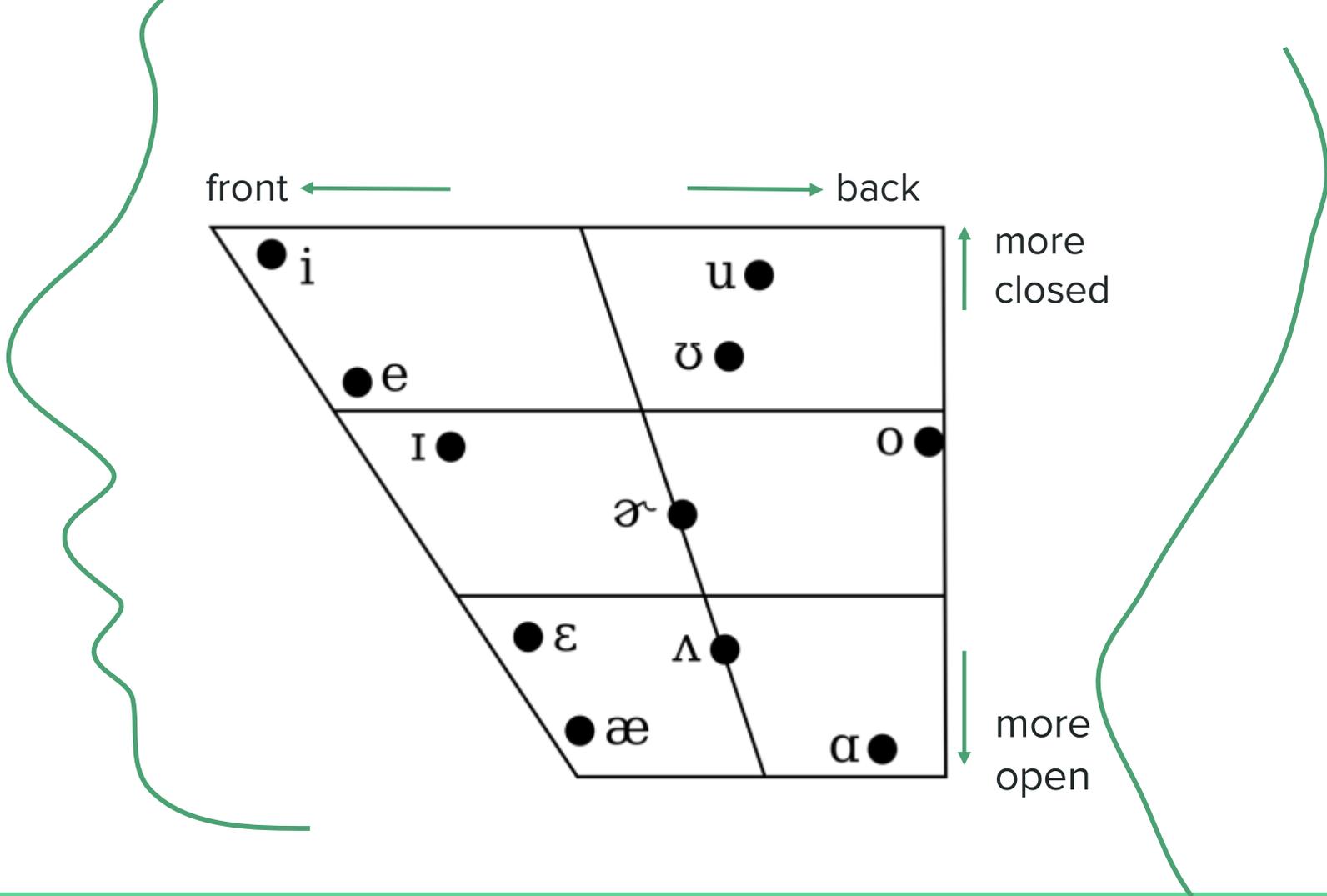


more closed

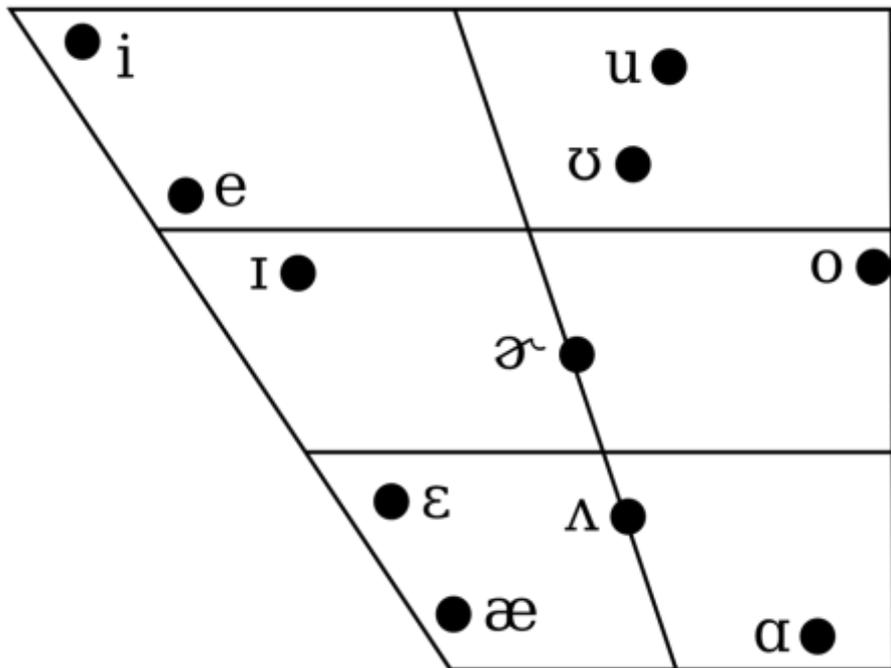
Openness:

How open your mouth is when you make the sound

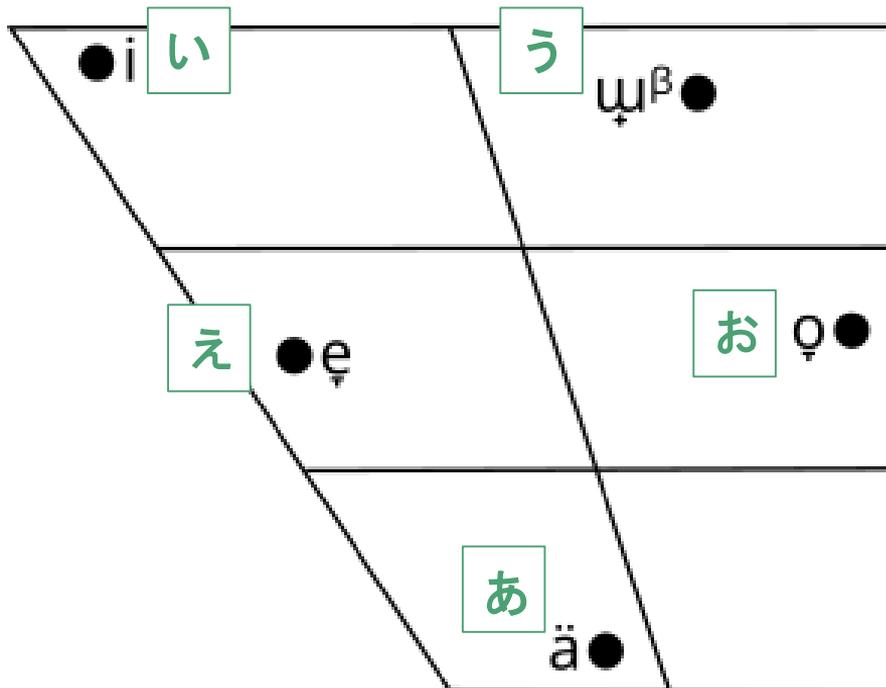
more open



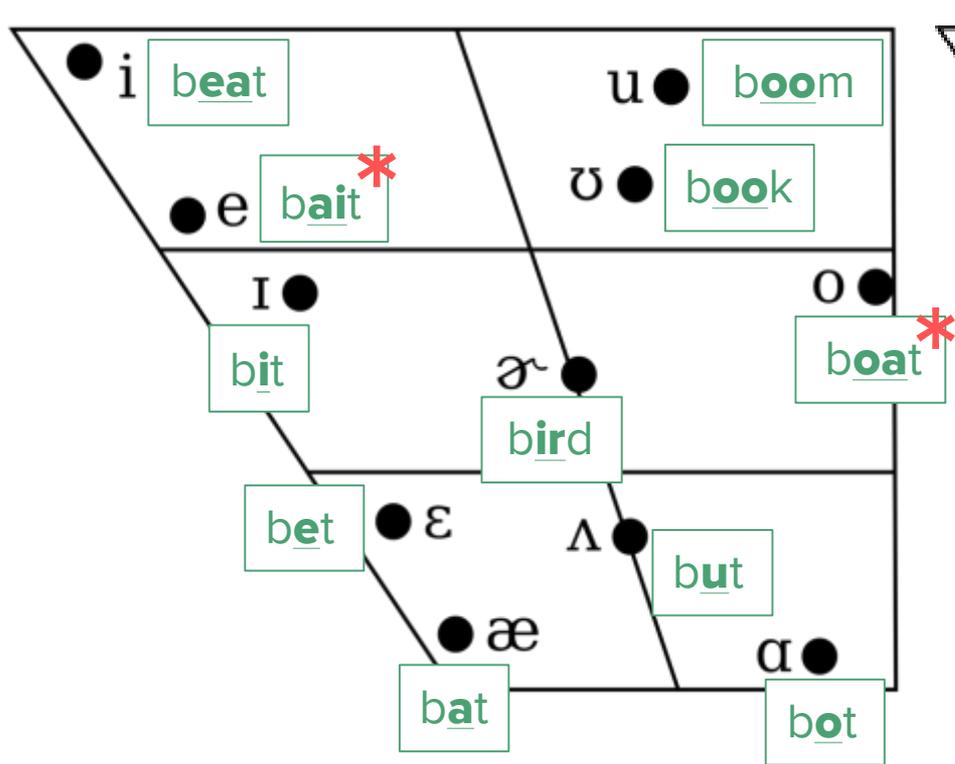
GAE Vowels



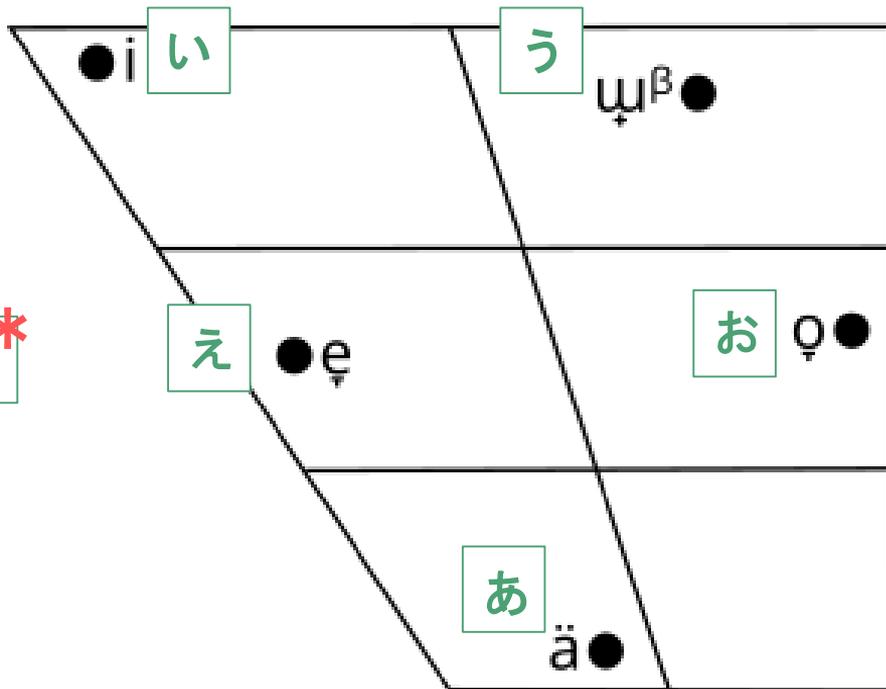
Standard Japanese Vowels



GAE Vowels



Standard Japanese Vowels



* = sounds that primarily occur as diphthongs

“Long Vowels”

In ESL phonics, English is taught as having five “long vowels,” which match their spoken letter names (with the exception of u):

- Long a → ey → /eɪ/ →
able, bait
- Long e → ee → /i:/ →
sheet, heat
- Long i → ai → /aɪ/ →
buy, dye
- Long o → oh → /oʊ/ →

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Diphthongs

In linguistics, a **diphthong** is a syllable that contains **two** distinct vowel sounds pronounced together to create a single sound.

(The single sound version of a diphthong is a monophthong)

Iə here	eɪ wait	
ʊə tourist	ɔɪ boy	əʊ show
eə hair	aɪ my	aʊ cow

Point of caution!

When teaching English vowels, calling them 'long' and 'short' can be misleading for your students, SPECIFICALLY because they are coming from a Japanese-speaking background.

The long and short of it

- ‘Long’ and ‘short’ refer to **literal** vowel length to Japanese speakers but are only used as a label for distinguishing between vowels in ESL.
- You may notice your students struggle to pronounce words correctly because they are **superimposing** Japanese vowel length rules onto English words.

Ex: sit vs **se**at, knit vs **ne**at, spun vs spoon

Learning how to
pronounce new
vowels and
consonants?

That's what
PHONICS is for!

Using linguistics to
identify phonological
and phonetic
processes in English

Case 1

definite article (the)

indefinite articles (a, an)

When do we use 'a'
and when do we
use 'an'?

The indefinite article

a

bagel

an

egg

The indefinite article

a uniform

an umbrella

The indefinite article

a uniform
[ju:]

an umbrella
[ʌ]

The indefinite article

a uniform

[ju:]

an hour

[aʊ]

an umbrella

[ʌ]

Case 2

How do you pronounce the following words? How would your students pronounce them?

Case 2

camera

family

interesting

favorite

obvious

temperature

We drop **these** sounds in connected speech!

cam**e**ra

fam**i**ly

int**e**resting

fav**o**rite

ob**b**vious

temp**e**rature

We drop **these** sounds in connected speech!

cam**e**ra

fam**i**ly

int**e**resting

fav**o**rite

ob**b**vious

temp**e**rature

This is called elision.

Elision in Japanese

Hiragana

Romaji

IP
A

です

‘desu’

/des/

した

‘shita’

/ʃta/

Case 3

t

d

What's happening here?

ton

done

What's happening here?

ton

butter ~~done~~ lotus

paddle

What's happening here?

ton [t]

butter

done [d]

lotus [r]

padd

ton [t]

butter

done [d]

lotus [r]

ら り る れ^{pa}ろ^{dd}
/ra/ /ri/ /ru/ le/re/ /ro/

When does this occur?

When /t/ or /d/ are between two vowels in one word, and the second vowel is unstressed.

butter

lotu

s

pad

Across word boundaries, it can happen between any two vowels regardless of stress, as long as the second vowel begins a word.

get over

part of*

that eye

*r =
semivowel

Case 4

t

d

What's happening here?

tend

trend

too

true

tee

tree

What's happening here?

tend

too

tee

trend

tree

tree

What's happening here?

tee

tree

dip

drip

Affrication

tee

[ti:]

dip

[dɪp]

tree

[tʃi:]

drip

[dʒɪp]

Affrication

tree

トリー
'toree'

drip

トゥリー
'turee'

ツリー
'tsuree'

ドリップ
'dorippu'

ドゥリップ
'durippu'

ジュリップ
'jurippu'

By understanding **how** English and Japanese are different, we as ALTs can make better informed lessons and activities.

We can also better understand **why** students make certain mistakes more often than others.

To summarize...

Today we covered:

- The impact of L1 overapplication on language acquisition
- The consonant and vowel inventories of Japanese and English using the International Phonetic Alphabet
- A few phonological processes: voicing assimilation, place assimilation, affrication etc

Thank you

