

IS IT KIWI ENGLISH THEY ARE LEARNING?

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on research undertaken with a group of elementary ESOL students at Hutt Valley Polytechnic. The group consisted of 16 immigrants: one Samoan, one Thai, one Assyrian, one Indian (a Gujarati speaker), three Cambodians, three Vietnamese and six Chinese speakers. The research aims included identifying the effect, if any, which NZ phoneme pronunciation has on the learning of those phonemes in New Zealand.

The research involved recording the students' pronunciation on two occasions 18 weeks apart -- the length of one course. Students were shown a series of pictures and asked to say one word for each picture. Which word they said was not important, although the pictures were selected with the aim of covering all English phonemes. There was no prompting or pre-teaching and, if students could not think of a word for the picture, I pointed to the next picture.

Each student was recorded, and the recordings were transcribed using a narrow phonetic transcription to note the students' pronunciation as accurately as possible. This was later converted into error tables using a phonemic transcription.

From this data it was possible to draw a number of conclusions about these students. They generally controlled about 75% of the 44 English phonemes, and there was a measurable improvement in their pronunciation in 18 weeks: overall, 2% fewer initial phoneme errors, 4% medial, and 5% fewer final errors. It was noticeable that all students, including those from Southeast Asia, were articulating final stops but failing to release them. The significant conclusion for this report is that there is most confusion for these students in their pronunciation of the vowels which most clearly distinguish New Zealand speech.

DESCRIPTION OF NEW ZEALAND PRONUNCIATION

While the NZ accent is not uniform, there are certain features which set it apart from other accents. These are described in terms of variation from RP vowels by O'Connor (1973), Gordon and Deverson (1985) and Holmes and Bell (1990). The variations are shown in Table 1. The pronunciation shown here is "general" rather than "broad" (vowel positions after Carr, 1993).

Table 1: A Comparison of RP and NZ VowelsSimple Vowels

<u>Word</u>	<u>RP</u>	<u>NZ</u>
hat	hæt	hɛt
get	gɛt	get
sit	sɪt	sət
farm	fɑ:m	fɛ:m
boot	bu:t	bɜ:t
Ellen	'ɛlən	'ælən

Diphthongs

<u>Word</u>	<u>RP</u>	<u>NZ</u>
take	teɪk	tɛɪk
fine	fɑɪn	fɔɪn
rose	rəʊz	rɛʊz
grown	grəʊn	grɛʊən
house	haʊs	hɛəs
where	weə	weə

Key to Non-RP symbols

[ɨ] is a high central-back vowel; in Scottish "guid"

[ɐ] is a low mid vowel, similar to schwa but more open

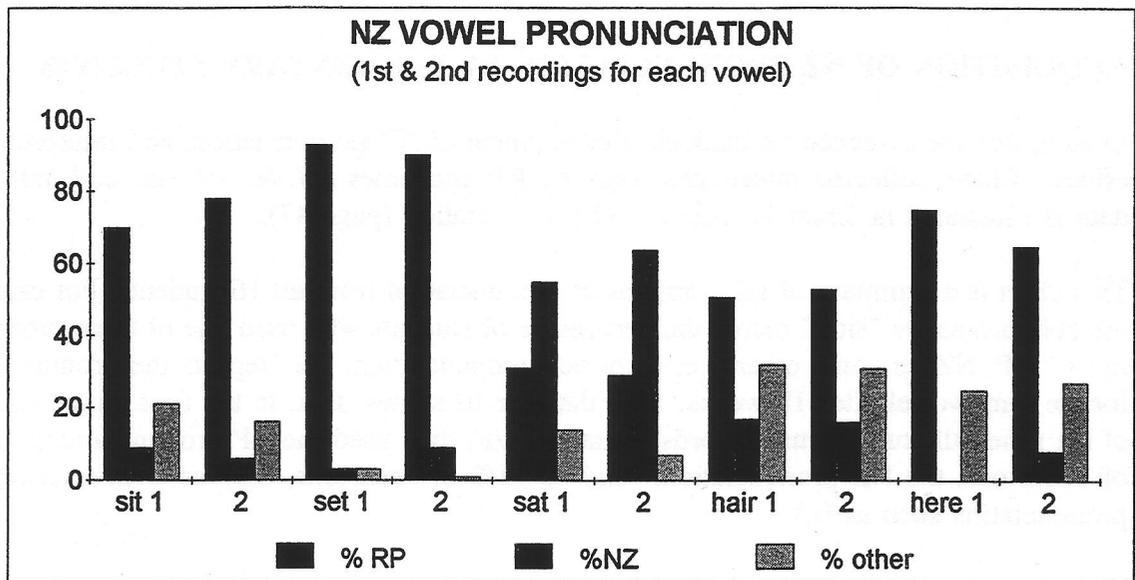
[e] is a high-mid front vowel, as in French *été*.

Note that, throughout this article, symbols between slashes, eg. /æ/, represent phonemes, regardless of accent; while symbols between square brackets, eg. [æ], are phonetic and indicate the actual pronunciation.

Some of the differences noted above are more noticeable than others. Those in *farm*, *boot*, *take*, *fine*, *rose* and *house* create less comment because they do not impact on other RP phonemes - that is, they may sound different, but they do not impede understanding. The change in *grown* is more noticeable because of the extra syllable, but it adds a distinction which does not occur in RP.

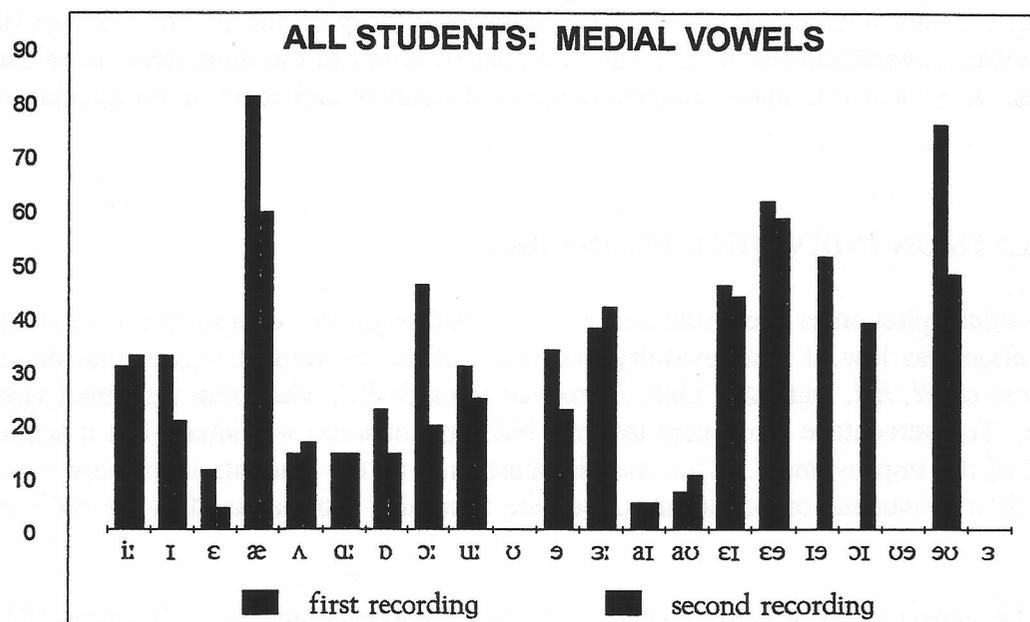
On the other hand, the alteration in the vowels of *hat*, *get* and *sit* may cause problems for newly-arrived (and even long-term resident) speakers of other dialects, because each vowel can be confused with another RP vowel. Students who have learnt a little English overseas are likely to have difficulty understanding words containing these vowels.

CHART 1



PERCENTAGE OF OCCASIONS WHERE VOWELS ARE PRONOUNCED AS NZ, RP OR INCORRECTLY.

CHART 2



COMPARISON OF FIRST AND SECOND RECORDINGS 18 WEEKS APART
(Empty bars indicate insufficient data.)

The merging of the vowels in *here* and *there* is causing problems even amongst older speakers of NZ English, because it is a newer phenomenon, and results in confusion between words like *fare* and *fear*, *really* and *rarely*. The vowel [æ] appears only before /l/, as in both *Ellen* and *Allen*. It is an allophone of /e/, and causes further confusion for immigrants.

ACQUISITION OF NZ PRONUNCIATION BY ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

In assessing the evidence for students' development of NZ pronunciation, and interpreting its effects, I have collected information only on RP phonemes /æ/, /e/, /ɪ/, /ɪə/ and /eə/. The data is illustrated in Chart 1: NZ Vowel Pronunciation (page 47).

This chart is a summary of all examples of pronunciation from all 16 students. For example, the columns above "sit 1" record the percentage of students who used one of three pronunciations: RP, NZ, or some other (i.e. incorrect) pronunciation. "2" reports the pronunciations for the same vowel after 18 weeks. The data for /ɪ/ shows that, in the first recording, 70% of the times all students used words containing /ɪ/, they used the RP pronunciation; on 9% of occasions, the NZ pronunciation; and on 21% of occasions, they used an unacceptable pronunciation such as [i:].

This chart should be compared with Chart 2: All Students - Medial Vowels (page 47), which illustrates the total number of errors made by all students when pronouncing medial vowels. Note that both RP and NZ pronunciations were regarded as acceptable, but if a student used the NZ pronunciation [e] for /æ/, then [e] could not also be an acceptable pronunciation for /e/, since New Zealanders do not merge these vowels. In other words, students could use the RP or the NZ vowel system, but not both. Merging of /ɪə/ and /eə/ was accepted.

This chart shows that 75% of all pronunciations of /əʊ/ were unacceptable in the first recording, but only 47% in the second. The traditional "ship or sheep" error is significant, but it is clearly overshadowed by the huge number of errors in the *dote*, *deer*, *dare* and *sat* phonemes. It is clear that many students lacked a distinctive and accurate pronunciation for /æ/.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL PHONEMES

The individual phonemes are discussed below. Although the overall percentage of NZ pronunciation was low, it is noteworthy that much of the movement was in that direction. This is true of /e/, /æ/, and /ɪə/. Only /ɪ/ moved towards RP, while /eə/ remained virtually the same. The percentage movement towards NZ pronunciation was small, but it accounted for most of the improvement. This may indicate that, as the students learn new words or improve their pronunciation of old ones, they are becoming more attuned to the NZ version.

/ɪ/ The tendency here was to move towards the RP phoneme and away from the NZ one. The incidence of [ə] was very low in both sessions; about half of the students did not use it at all; and no student used it for more than half of their realisations. There may be a connection between this and ESOL students' general difficulty with English /ə/.

/ɛ/ The accuracy for this phoneme was extremely high and it was almost always pronounced in the RP way. Unacceptable versions were negligible, and there was a significant movement towards [ɪ] in the second recording.

/æ/ This is the only one of the five phonemes which was usually given a NZ pronunciation. However, since there was no corresponding movement of /ɛ/ (see above), this may simply reflect the difficulty all these students had in pronouncing /æ/. Many of them in fact pronounced a vowel in between [ɛ] and [æ] for both phonemes.

/eə/ This phoneme was pronounced poorly. Half of the realisations were RP pronunciations, under one fifth of them were NZ ones, and a full third were incorrect. The vowels classified as "NZ" ones here may have been no more than good attempts by students who were uncertain about how to pronounce the phoneme. There was little improvement by the second session.

/ɪə/ At 75% this phoneme had the same overall accuracy rate as most students have for all their phonemes. However, there was no improvement in the second session; in fact, there was a shift towards /eə/, which may have been the result of some NZ influence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING PRONUNCIATION IN NZ

One difficulty faced by the ESOL teacher within New Zealand is the paucity of New Zealand-made resources. The small size of the country has made production of such materials not economically worthwhile, as is shown by the failure of the *New Zealand English Journal*. Teachers must often make use of resources from other countries, such as *Tree or Three*, with tapes giving models of a form of RP that is not well received by New Zealanders; or *Framework*, with models of Australian English. The tutors at Hutt Valley Polytechnic speak with a variety of dialects: NZ, southern and northern British, Sri Lankan. The variation in NZ speech is also significant. Because ESOL tutors are university trained, there is a tendency for them to speak "educated" NZ English (cf. Gordon and Deverson, 1985, p. 63 ff.), which is different from that spoken by many people outside the classroom, and certainly by many of the New Zealanders the students are likely to be working with.

However, there are several "levelling" processes at work. Firstly, in a communicative classroom, the students communicate amongst themselves more often than with the tutor. They are therefore providing models for one another. Tutors often produce resources themselves, so NZ voices can be heard. It is also hoped that students will gain confidence to use English outside the classroom, and so hear it used by native speakers.

Before teachers decide whether information obtained from the research reported above has any relevance to their programme, some decision must be made on the status of the New Zealand accent. Gordon and Deverson (1985) and Holmes and Bell (1990) comment on the antagonism within New Zealand by many people to NZ pronunciation. Despite Honey's (1991) suggestion that RP is perceived as "affected" by speakers of NZ English, the recent research studies by Bayard (1995) show clearly that RP retains its position as a symbolic expression of power and social status within the NZ speech community.

The ESOL teaching philosophy of Hutt Valley Polytechnic, and many other ESOL classrooms, is to provide the English that is requested and needed by the learners. Their

purpose in learning English is normally to gain employment, or to communicate successfully with local English speakers. Their language, social and employment needs are individual: some do not have high expectations, while others write that they wish "to speak like an educated person" (as a Serbo-Croatian student put it).

From the above data, it is evident that these students have been learning RP vowels, whether prior to studying at the Polytechnic, in their daily lives or in the courses themselves. Should a greater effort be made to teach NZ pronunciation? The assumption made by tutors in all cases is that we are preparing students for life in New Zealand. It therefore makes no more sense to train students in RP than it would to use American or South African English. On the other hand, NESB people are not expected to pronounce English perfectly or to have a NZ accent. Learning time must be used wisely to improve all areas of the language according to their needs.

Teaching Particular Vowel Phonemes

The aim for most students in pronunciation is to be intelligible. They can be understood whether they are using a set of vowels approximating RP or a set used in New Zealand. A problem does arise, however, when they are using a combination of both. For some vowels, this is what these students are doing. Tutors should give priority to the /æ/ - /ɛ/ distinction, and suitable pronunciations of /eə/ and /ɪə/.

The key for any command of a set of phonemes is to hear and use a set of distinctions - not necessarily a set of native-speaker equivalents. We can understand people who speak different accents because they (usually) make as many phonemic distinctions as we do, and we can perceive the regular differences. It is when those distinctions are lost that speech becomes hard to follow.

There is no escaping the variation students will confront outside the classroom and even within it. Any student who communicates with a variety of people will hear various accents, and few teachers can consistently teach any accent other than their own. Students should therefore be taught that they must, for example, produce four different front vowels. It does not matter whether they are /i:/, /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, or /i:/, /ə/, /e/, /ɛ/, or some other group, provided that they are distinct. One thing I have noted is that it is easier for learners to distinguish between the phonemes /ɪ/ and /i:/ if they pronounce /ɪ/ in the NZ way as [ə] rather than [ɪ]. When emphasising /ɪ/, therefore, I override my own southern British pronunciation and teach the NZ vowel.

In the selection of resources, teachers should introduce examples of NZ native speech as early as possible, via tape, video or live presentation. Teachers can find colleagues, friends or relatives willing to make brief recordings of passages and dialogues. There is a wide variety of pronunciation heard in New Zealand, and it does not equip students well if they are hearing only carefully rehearsed examples of educated speech inside the classroom and colloquial working class, Maori and broad NZ accents outside it. A Russian student, fluent in English, once told me he had gone to arrange for his electricity supply and was asked if he wanted the "pair" on. He assumed they meant both gas and electricity, and it took some time to work out that they were referring to the *power*. This is the living language which our students must be equipped to use and understand.

GLOSSARY

- phone:* a sound which the human voice can produce.
- phoneme:* a group of phones which are considered and treated by native speakers as the same. Changing a phoneme in a word makes it a different word, but changing to a different allophone may just make it sound strange.
- allophone:* one of a group of phones which belong to one phoneme.
- phonetic:* dealing with phones, not phonemes.
- merge:* to give two phonemes the same pronunciation.
- RP:* Received Pronunciation, the southern British "BBC" accent looked up to as a standard for pronunciation in Britain and, frequently, in its former colonies.
- Varieties of NZ English:
- broad:* the NZ accent most distinct from RP.
 - general:* the "standard" NZ accent; considered more "cultivated" than the broad one, and used by more educated speakers.

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