

Letters and their combinations representing English monophthongs [æ], [e] and [ə:] in writing

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the study of the problem of graphic spelling of monophthongs [æ], [e] and [ə:] in educational activities of pedagogical workers in English classes at educational institutions in the Russian Federation. The authors identify the main ways of graphic spelling of the phonemes, namely letters and combinations of letters used in the formation of the sounds in question. The study aims to define and describe the ways of graphic spelling of English sounds [æ], [e] and [ə:].

Keywords: educational activities, English, graphic spelling, monophthongs [æ], [e] and [ə:], pedagogical worker.

First classes of English as a foreign language at the overwhelming majority of educational institutions in the Russian Federation make pedagogical workers solve a lot of vital issues while training their students within the main language aspects that are Auding/Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (such aspects as Interpretation and Translation are being omitted

here since they are in the domain of a limited number of specialized Russian universities; for this reason, transliteration, being a way of rendering lexical units in writing, is not the subject of our research). Writing universally seems to be the most complicated aspect in its mastering due to the fact that it is directly connected with Grammar, Lexicology, Phonetics, Punctuation, Spelling and Stylistics. One complexity of writing is “Phonetics [12] vs Spelling” problem. In short, we mean a case when one letter or a group of letters contained in various lexical units [1] has several ways to be pronounced, e.g.:

- vowel letter *a* in the following lexical units: *plaque* [a:], *cradle* [eɪ], *adorn* [ə], *gall* [o:], *acrid* [æ], *Bologna* [jə], *vintage* [ɪ], *garish* [εə], *swab* [ɔ];
- consonant letter *s*: *episode* [s], *fusion* [ʒ], *controversial* [ʃ], *liaison* [z], *Asia* [ʃ] or [ʒ], *CIS* [es] [5], [8];
- double *oo*: *blood* [ʌ], *took* [ʊ], *tattoo* [u:], *door* [o:], *brooch* [əʊ];
- a group of vowel and consonant letters *ough*: *through* [u:], *sought* [o:], *drought* [aʊ], *dough* [əʊ], *rough* [ʌf], *cough* [ɔf], *thorough* [ə];
- a combination of consonant letters *ch*: *avalanche* [ʃ], *chimney* [tʃ], *technology* [k], *Sandwich* [dʒ] [9], [10], [11].

To avoid bewildering in writing among students and to ensure that they will learn to write well is one of the primary tasks of the pedagogical workers in the initial and further stages of teaching English.

This publication is a humble attempt to unfold our experience in classifying the modes of graphical spelling of three monophthongs ([æ], [e], [ə:]) [2], [3], [4], temporarily omitting the other vowel and consonant sounds [6], [7].

The relevance of the research work arose in the light of insufficient coverage of the multiple ways of graphical spelling of vowel and consonant phonemes and their combinations in textbooks currently applied in the educational process.

Our research is based on the material of various extracts taken for our consideration from pieces of fiction, periodicals, textbooks, the Internet. We also dealt with corporate letters, movie subtitles, pieces of advertising; off-line and on-line dictionaries; reference books to contemporary English pronunciation [13]. We examined the parts of English speech and their transformations regarding case, degree, mood, number, tense and voice categories. It seemed natural for us to view abbreviations, acronyms, clipped words, interjections, loan words, etc, paying particular attention to such toponyms as geographic names, corporate names, days of the week, months, nationalities, people’s names, patronymics and sur-names, social networks, astronyms, types of drinks, meals and food, etc.

Paradoxically, some English consonant sounds can be rendered by vowel letters, e.g.:

- [f] can be rendered by vowel letter *u* (*lieutenant* [lef'tenənt]);
- [j] can seldom be rendered by vowel letter *e* (*Eugene* ['ju:dʒi:n], *eureka* [juə'rikə] or [jo:'rikə], *Europe* ['juərəp] or ['jo:rəp]); by vowel letter *u* (*unique* [ju:'ni:k], *use* [ju:z], *usual* ['ju:ʒəl] or ['ju:ʒl]); by vowel letter *y* (*yacht* [jo:t], *year* [jə] or [jə:], *youth* [ju:θ]);
- [w] can sometimes be rendered by vowel letter *o* (*one* [wʌn], *once* [wʌns], *oneself* [wʌn'self]); by vowel letter *u* (*cuisine* [kwɪ'zi:n], *persuade* [pə'sweɪd], *quake* [kweɪk]).

We can observe a reverse process, when consonant letters render vowel sounds if they are pronounced under their names in the English Alphabet, e.g. letter *Pp* in *PPP* (that stands for *Power Point Presentation*) ['pi:'pi:'pi:]. To be more exact, consonant letters can render one (letter *Rr*), two (letters *Bb*, *Cc*, *Dd*, *Ff*, *Gg*, *Hh*, *Jj*, *Kk*, *Ll*, *Mm*, *Nn*, *Pp*, *Ss*, *Tt*, *Vv*, *Zz*, the latter in American variant of English), three (letters *Qq*, *Xx*, *Zz*) and six sounds (letter *Ww*):

- letter *Rr* rendered by one sound [a:];
- letter *Bb* rendered by two sounds [bi:];
- letter *Qq* rendered by three sounds [kju:];
- letter *Ww* rendered by six sounds [dʌblju:].

Letters rendered by two (*Bb* [bi:], *Hh* [eɪtʃ], *Nn* [en]), three (*Qq* [kju:], *Xx* [eks], *Zz* [zed]) and six sounds (*Ww* [dʌblju:]) involve both consonant and vowel sounds. This postulate says that if we pronounce the consonant letters in definite positions (in abbreviations and compound words, for instance), we have to use both consonant and vowel sounds to utter them, e.g. abbreviation *CIF* [si:'aɪ'ef] and compound word *X-ray* ['eksreɪ]:

- *CIF* is composed of letter *C* – [si:] rendered by two sounds, consonant [s] and vowel [i:], letter *I* [aɪ] rendered by one vowel sound [aɪ], letter *F* rendered by two sounds, vowel [e] and consonant [f];
- *X-ray* is composed of letter *X* [eks] and word *ray*.

Thus, a notable feature of this article is its inclusion of examples where consonant letters can take part in rendering vowel sounds.

In the pages that follow are to be found specimen letters and letter combinations depicting English monophthongs [æ], [e] and [ə:].

Vowel sound [æ] can be represented by letters *a* (*acrid* ['ækrid]), *i* (*meringue* [mə'ræŋ]), by groups of letters *ai* (*plait* [plæt]), *ua* (*guarantee* [gæ'rən'ti:]), and by a combination of the apostrophe and vowel letter *a'a* (*ma'am* [mæm]).

Sound [æ] can be put in the opening (*act* [ækt]), central (*pad* [pæd]) and ending (*Nah* or *Nahh* [næ]) position of lexical units. One does not meet it in the neutral position. Monophthong [æ] is represented by two letters (*a*, *i*), two groups of vowel letters (*ai*, *ua*) and a combination of a vowel letter and the apostrophe (*a'a*).

Vowel sound [e] can be represented by letters *a* (*ate* [et] or [et]), *e* (*peril* ['perəl]), *u* (*bury* ['berɪ]), *f* (*FOB* [efəv'bi:]), *l* (*LTD* [elti:'di:]), *m* (*BMW* [bi:em'dAblju:]), *n* (*NGO* [endʒi:'əv:]), *s* (*SOS* [esəv'es]), *x* (*x-ray* ['eksreɪ]), *z* (*ZT* [zed'ti:]), by French letter *é* (*apéritif* [ə'perati:f]) and by groups of letters *ai* (*said* [sed]), *ea* (*pleather* ['pleðə]), *eg* (*phlegm* [flem]), *ei* (*leisure* ['leʒə]), *eo* (*jeopardize* ['dʒepədaɪz]), *ie* (*friend* [frend]), *ue* (*baguette* [bæ'get]).

Sound [e] can be put in the opening (*embassy* ['embəsi]) and central (*twenty* ['twenti]) position of words. One does not meet it in the neutral and ending position of lexical units. Monophthong [e] is represented by four vowel letters (*a, e, u, é*), seven consonant letters (*f, l, m, n, s, x, z*) and seven groups of letters (*ai, ea, eg, ei, eo, ie, ue*). In six cases, this phoneme is made in graphic spelling by groups of vowel letters (*ai, ea, ei, eo, ie, ue*) and in one case by a group of vowel and consonant letters (*eg*).

Table 1. Ways of Graphical Spelling of Monophthongs [æ], [e] and [ə:]

Spelling	Monophthongs							
	[æ]	Example	[e]	Example	[ə:]	Example		
Vowel Letter	a	distract	a	ate	-	-		
	i	meringue	e	peril				
			u	bury				
			é	apéritif				
Vowel Letters	ai	plaid	ai	said	ieu	milieu		
	ua	guarantee	ea	jealous				
			ei	leisure				
			eo	leopard				
			ie	lieutenant				
ue	guess							
Vowel and Consonant Letters	-	-	eg	phlegm	ear	search		
					eor	George		
					er	percent		
					ere	were		
					err	inferred		
					eur	amateur		
					ir	stir		
					olo	colonel		
					or	world		
Consonant Letter	-	-	f	FBI	-	-		
							l	LLC
							m	pm
							n	NBC
							s	NBS
							x	XL
							z	Z-axis
Combination of the	a'a	ma'am	-	-	-	-		

Apostrophe and Vowel Letter						
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Vowel sound [ə:] can be represented by groups of letters *ieu* (*milieu* ['miljə:]), *ear* (*pearl* [pə:l]), *eor* (*George* [dʒə:dʒ]), *er* (*tertiary* ['tə:fəri]), *ere* (*were* [wə:]), *err* (*inferred* [in'fə:d]), *eur* (*amateur* ['æmətə:] or ['æmətə]), *ir* (*dirge* [də:dʒ]), *olo* (*colonel* ['kə:nəl]), *or* (*attorney* [ə'tə:ni]), *our* (*courtesy* ['kə:təsi]), *ur* (*nocturnal* [nɔk'tə:nəl]).

Sound [ə:] can be put in the neutral (*Er* [ə:]), opening (*earnest* ['ə:nɪst]), central (*hurt* ['hɜ:t]) and ending (*infer* [in'fə:]) position of lexical units. Monophthong [ə:] is represented by 12 groups of letters (*ear, eor, er, ere, erre, eur, ieu, ir, olo, or, our, ur*). In one case, this phoneme is made in graphic spelling by a group of vowel letters (*ieu*) and in 11 cases by groups of vowel and consonant letters (*ear, eor, er, ere, erre, eur, ir, olo, or, our, ur*).

Table 1 above displays particular cases of sounds [æ], [e] and [ə:] represented by single letters, groups of letters and the apostrophe in English lexical units.

To sum up, we must note that the solution to the problem of graphic spelling of monophthongs is still for the most part in its infancy. No single spelling rule can guarantee uniformed pronunciation of this or that vowel phoneme, that is why the best way to specify correct pronunciation of a lexical unit remains in looking it up in off-line and on-line dictionaries. However, the ways of graphic spelling of monophthongs [æ], [e] and [ə:] in particular described by us can simplify to some extent this process in the initial and further stages of teaching English at educational institutions in the Russian Federation.

Our brief outline of the modes of graphical spelling of the three vowel sound shows that further more careful and scrupulously detailed investigation is necessary to get the objective data by which we can more fully ascertain each method to render the vowel phonemes. Nevertheless, the research allowed us to work out and prepair for publishing a guide-book containing drills to consolidate the skills of spelling and pronunciation of lexical units. The logical outcome of our work permits to state that the data of the review can be helpful in the pedagogical reality of Russian schools, colleges, universities when teaching English phonological and spelling nuances to students who master English as a foreign language. However, we cannot purport to have covered the entire range of variations of letters, groups of letters and their combinations with punctuation marks depicting monophthongs [æ], [e] and [ə:]. For this reason, we invite our fellow scholars to join us in further more thorough research of this issue.

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