

Q: Write a note on the classification of the English vowel phonemes.

Vowels can be defined as speech sounds produced without obstruction or audible friction of the lung air passing through the oral passage. The tongue and the lips can produce various resonating chambers by assuming different shapes. Vowels, thus, result from various resonating cavities formed by these articulators.

Vowel sounds are classified into certain sets basing on the following main factors.

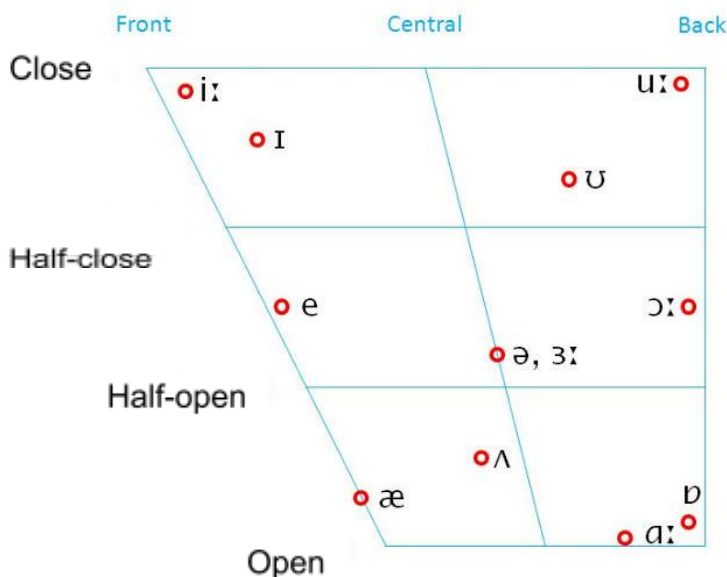
i. The Shape of the Lips:

The lips can assume **spread**, **neutral** or **rounded** positions. Those vowels in the production of which the lips assume a rounded shape are called **rounded** vowels. The vowels in 'do', 'shoe', and 'fruit' are, for example, rounded vowels. The vowels produced with a spread or neutral shape of the lips are called **unrounded** vowels. The vowels in 'tree', 'egg', 'friend', 'come' are examples of unrounded vowels.

ii. The Raising of the Tongue:

The tongue can assume different shapes because of its flexibility. Every change in its shape results in a different vowel sound. Such changes are determined by two factors: (a) **the part of the tongue that is raised**, and (b) **how high it is raised**. The parts of the tongue which produce the vowels are called **the front**, **the back**, and **the central**. These are imaginary divisions of the tongue. These parts again can be raised or lowered to produce certain sound effects. The raising or lowering, however, remains restricted to a certain degree. The highest point to which the tongue can be raised is called **the close position**. The lowest point to which it can be brought down is called an open position.

Two more intermediate imaginary positions are also demarcated to describe the raising of the tongue. They are the **half-close** and the **half-open** positions. These divisions and heights can be shown with the help of the following diagram.



All the English vowels are voiced, meaning that the vocal cords vibrate to produce them. Altogether there are twenty vowels in English. Twelve of these are monophthongs and the remaining eight are diphthongs. Of the twelve monophthongs, seven are short vowels and five are long vowels. The monophthongs are also called pure vowels since they do not

change in their quality. Vowels which involve a gliding movement from one quality to another are called diphthongs. The glide, however, takes place within the same syllable.