SOME ASPECTS OF ENGLISH-ROMANIAN CONTRASTIVE STUDIES

Cristina-Gabriela MARIN
University of Craiova

Abstract: *The field of English-Romanian contrastive studies, represented by a number of major works published in Romania, materialises the importance of such observations-mainly from the point of view of practise- as well as the way those remarks included interrelate with the experience gathered by teachers of English at various levels. The representativity and usefulness of such works, both theoretical and normative as well as methodological, is actually confronted with, and ultimately validated by, didactic activity itself; the theoretical generalisations made will serve as valuable guidelines for the teachers.*

In view of the fact that in Romania most teachers still prefer- by the way of tradition- using the British variant of English, the bulk of the studies in the field were oriented towards that variant.

Key words: *field, analysis, aspect.*

Among the difficulties related to the acquisition of a foreign language, those resulting from the interference at work at various levels between any two languages in contact are certainly the most important. Contrastive analysis aims to find common elements – going as far as postulating items meant to construe linguistic universals- and no less making out a body of instances, which could be used for teaching purposes, in which the characteristic features of the two languages stand out as hindrances to correctly acquiring foreign language.

In analysing English vowels, contrastive studies present as major difficulties for Romanians-besides the acoustic features resulting from different formats- length and tenseness which are non-distinctive in Romanian. The data extracted from practical experience indicated the phenomenon of negative interference to be responsible for the erroneous perception or reproduction of vowels, moreover, the English vowels being perfectly uttered after practising with minimal pairs and decomposing the sound in order to acquire the essentials of its articulation while other neighbouring phonemes will be incorrectly produced because they are approximated as one single Romanian phoneme (eg: English /u/ and /u:/ approximated as Romanian /u/).

Unlike that, the numbers of /i/, /i:/ pair are hardly discriminated by the beginners. English vowel/i/ is almost universally mispronounced, being mistaken for either English /i:/ or English /e/- or else, approximated by Romanian /i/.

The description of the vowels is not very precise, as there is no contact between an articulator and a definite part of the speech tract; that is why "the same" vowels are not the same in different languages (compare English /i:/ and Romanian /i/- so much that the need was felt for a model aiming at an accurate description of vowels. It could provide a better assessment of the (relative) value of vowels specific to any natural language. Keeping in mind that for the purposes of phonetics the tongue is divided into three main parts: front, centre and back, the English vowels will be classified according to which of these parts is involved in their articulation. So, one distinguishes between *front vowels:* /i;/,/i/, /e/,/ æ/.*central vowels* :/ə/, /ə:/, /Λ/ and *back vowels:* /a:/,/ɐ/, /ɔ/, /u/, /u:/.

BDD-A5710 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:38 UTC)

English Front Vowels

/i:/: *front, close, tense, unrounded*
Spelling:
-ee see, cheese, fifteen
-e be, scene, these
-ea sea, team, please
-ie piece, thief, belief
-ei,ey: seize, receive, key
-i police, unique, machine
-ae aesthetics, nebulae, aeon
Note also /i:/ in quay /ki:/, people /pi:pl/

The length of this vowel is different in different phonetics contexts. It is the longest in word-final position: eg: me /mi:/ see/si:/, be /bi:/. It is relatively shorter after voiced consonants: beam /bi:m/, mean/mi:n/, seed /si:d/.It is the shortest before voiceless consonants: sheep /ʃi:p/, beat /bi:t/, seat /si:t/ -the explanation being as follows: voiceless consonants require more energy for their formation as they are strongly articulated.

Comparison with Romanian: English /i:/ should present no difficulty to the Romanian learners, although many do not give it, its required length. English /i:/ and Romanian /i/ are almost equally close but the Romanian vowel, though it may happen to be longer or shorter depending on the context in which it occurs. For example, the sound is rather long in the plural of the nouns "copil" and "fiu" (copi*i* , fi*i*). In stressed syllables when followed by a voiced consonant- "vine", "milă" but it remains shorter, lax and less close (The Romanian vowels have been placed in D.Jones' vowel scale by prof. M. Bogdan in "Vocalismul englez si problemele lui la romani", Studia Universitatis "Babes-Bolyai" Series, IV, fasc.2, Cluj, 1960).

/i/ *front retracted, close, lax,short, unrounded*
Spelling:
-i sit, inn, ability
-y treaty, synthetic, myth
-e example, target, reveal
ie lilies, bodies, daddies
-a sausage, wreckage, private
Note also /i/ in: Monda**y,** b**u**sy, mone**y,** br**ee**ches
The sound occurs in all three basic positions in the word or utterance: initially – (inner /'inə/), medially-(begin /bi:gin/ and finally (coffee/'kafi/). The vowel is longer before lenis consonants (bid/bid/ and shorter before fortis consonants (bit /bit/).

Comparison with Romanian: English /i/ is not matched by anything similar in Romanian and is difficult to acquire. Very often the sound is perceived as /e/ by the Romanian learners of English and pronounced like Romanian /i/.Its length is always more reduced that the length of the Romanian vowel /i/.
/e/:*front, mid-open, lax, short, unrounded*
Spelling:

BDD-A5710 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:38 UTC)

-e bet, entry, went
-ea head, pleasure, death
eo jeopardi, lerpard, Geoffrey
-a any, many, Thames
ai/ay said, again, says
ei leisure, Leicester,
Note also /e/ in; fri**e**nd, b**usy,** b**u**ry, threepence /'Ɵrepəns/.

Comparison with Romanian: It has long been believed that English /e/ is a more open than Romanian /e/; this, however has not been corroborates by the results of instrumental analysis. The comparison of the acoustic features of the Romanian and the English front vowels, has proved that English /e/ is a closer vowel than Romanian /e/.
/æ/: front, open, lax, short, unrounded
Spelling:
-a mad, apple, , hand
-ai plait, plaid Plaistov.

This vowel is a short one, it knows variations in length depending on its position in the syllable or the word. This /æ/ is short when it is followed by a fortis consonant or by another syllable (e.g: ass, sat, travel) and it is longer when it is followed by a lenis consonant (e.g: sad, land). Its length in front of lenis consonants tends to become a distinctive feature in the position /e/-/ æ/, the difference between bed /ded/ and /bad/ is not only quantitative but also qualitative. It is very important to maintain a proper qualitative relationship between the two vowels, since they function as different phonemes thus differentiating words otherwise alike: cattle /kætl/ kettle/ketl/ lass /læs/, less/les/.

Comparison with Romanian: English /æ/ just like /i/ is not matched by anything similar in literary Romanian, though a vowel rather close to English /æ/ appears in the speech of many people in Transylvania" mere" /mære/

English Back Vowels

/u:/ *back, close, tense, long, rounded*
Spelling:
-uu flu, rude, brute
-ue clue, blue, flue
-ui juice, fruit, recruit
-o lose, tomb, who
-oo loop, boot, taboo
-ou coup, group, soup
-oe canoe, shoe
-eu feud, rheumatism, neuter
-ew few, mew, blew
-eau beauty, beautiful
Position: /u:/occurs in all three basic positions: initially (although its frequency is rather low in this position) ooze /u:z/, medially root/ru:t/ and finally true /tru:/.

BDD-A5710 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:38 UTC)

Variants: The length of /u:/ depends on its position in the word. It is fully long in final position, before silence, and before lenis consonants (e.g: who /hu:/, rude /ru:d/ and reduced before a fortis consonant (e.g: root /ru:t/).

Comparison with Romanian
Romanian /u/ is a very good starting point in acquiring English/u:/, although Romanian /u/ is shorter, strongly rounded and more retracted. Care should be taken that in articulation of the English sound, this is given the proper length and the lips are protruded.

/u/ :*back, advanced, close, lax, short, rounded*
Spelling:
-u bush ,butcher, cushion
-o wolf, woman
-oo wool, foot
-ou could, would, bouquet
Note also /u/ in: worsted/ 'wustid/, or Boleyn /'bulin/.
Position /u/ does not occur in word initial position, it occurs finally only in the weak (unstressed) form of TO (e.g: to ask /tu a:sk/ or in utterance in final position (The place he 's going to). Its distribution is restricted to the medial position (e.g: good /gud/).

Comparison with Romanian:
Romanian /u/ is a close, rounded vowel, and as mentioned previously, the lips are not only rounded, but also protruded. In initial position and sometimes after a consonant or a consonant sequence Romanian /u/ can be preceded by a short semivowel: e.g: unt /wunt/. Romanian /u/ is more rounded, closer and more retracted than English /u/.The Romanian learner will have to practise a considerably more open sound (which is situated close to Romanian /o/ than to Romanian /u/ and use little lip rounding in order to produce an acceptable English /u/; the use of the labio-velar semivowel/w/ in front of /u/ should definitely be avoided.

/ ɔ/**:** *back, mid-open, tense, long, rounded*
Spelling:
-a all, water, caller, salt
-au author, audience, cause
-aw saw, paw, lawn
-al talk, stalk, walk
-ar swarm, quart, ward
-oa(r) board, hoard, broad
-or(e) born, corn, more, sore
-oor floor, door
-ough sought, wrought, ought
-our pour, court, four

Position:

/ɔ/ occurs in initial position in the word or syllable: e.g: always /ɔ;lweiz/ , in medial position (e.g: sauce /sɔ:s/ and in final position saw /sɔ:/.

Comparison with Romanian

BDD-A5710 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:38 UTC)

English /ɔ/ poses fewer problems to the Romanian learners if they take care to pronounce it long enough, without diphtonizing it and without protruding the lips, which might result in the articulation of /w/ preceding/ɔ /.Romanian /o/ is articulated with the back of the tongue raised to a medium position, between the half close and half-open positions, while the lips are rounded and protruded. In many parts of the country, as a consequence of lip rounding /o/ is preceded by /w/ particularly when initial but also after a consonant e.g: om /w om/, tot /twot/.
An instrumental analysis of the pronunciation of the English back Vowels by Romanian students of English revealed that the difficulty encountered in the acquisition of English /ɔ/ concerns its degree of openness.(DASCĂLU, 1971: 113-125).

/ɐ/: *back, open, lax, short, slightly rounded*
Spelling:
-o on, spot, collar, gone, shone
-ou cough, trough, Gloucester
-a want, wash, quantity, what
-au sausage, cauliflower, laurel, Austria

Position: The vowel occurs in initial position (e.g: olive /ɐliv/ and medial position (e.g: swan /swɐŋ/. It does not occur in final position.

Comparison with Romanian
There is no similar sound in literary Romanian. An open, somewhat longer variety of /o/ is used in some regions in Transylvania, instead of the standard Roman diphthong /wa/ or when /o/ is followed by /w/ (e.g: doua /'d ɐ we/.

Therefore, the correct assimilation of the articulatory position of the English sound /ɐ/ presents certain difficulties for the Romanian learners of English.
/a:/*back, open, tense, long, unrounded*
Spelling:
-a staff, pass, plant, tomato
-al half, balm, psalm
-ar car, part, garden
-er clerk, sergeant
-ear heart, hearth
Variants: Vowel /a:/ is the most open of the back vowels .Like any other long, tense vowel of English /a:/ can be used in any position: initial position art/a:t/, medial position alarm /a:larm/, final position car /ca:/.

Comparison with Romanian
English /a:/ is as open as Romanian /a/ but it is longer and more tense than Romanian /a/; Romanian /a/ is a central vowel, while English /a:/ is articulated more to the back.

English Central Vowels
/ʌ/:*central, open, lax, short, unrounded*
Spelling:

BDD-A5710 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:38 UTC)

-u sun, under, hungry
-o tongue, among
-ou southern, cousin, tough
-oo blood, flood
Position :
/Λ/ occurs in initial position in the word (e.g: understand /Λndə'stænd/ and in medial position (e.g: monkey /'mΛnki/, it does not occur in final position.

Comparison with Romanian:
Romanian /a/ is similar to English short /Λ/ but the English sound is closer than the Romanian one, which was also revealed by an acoustic study of these vowel sounds.
/ə:/*central, mid-open, tense, long, unrounded*
Spelling:
-ir, yr third, girl, twirl, myrrh, myrtle
-er mercy, her, pert
-ear learn, heard, earth
-ur hurt, fur, burn
-or word, worm, attorney
-our courtesy, journey, journal
-eur amateur, chauffer, connoisseur
Central vowels are characterized by a neutral quality as compared to the other vowels (front and back) of the English language. English phoneticians describe the vowel /ə:/ as " the interminate sound often used for hesitation in English". The shape assumed by the lips is very important in the production of /ə:/ they must be spread. Special attention should be drawn to the combination /w/ +/ə:/ because /w/ requires the lips rounded and pushed forward while for /ə:/ the lips are spread.

Comparison with Romanian:
Romanian /ə/ is slightly more open than English /ə:/ and articulated more to the front of the latter.
/ə/: *central, mid-open, lax, short, unrounded*
Spelling:
/ə/ may be spelled with any other vowel letters since it may represent the reduced or obscured form of any vowel or diphthong in an unstressed position. Most of the suffixes which are unstressed contain /ə/.
-a announce, account, parole
-e master, gentlemen, audience
-i/on/al possible, mutation, official
-o, r London, doctor, tailor
-u suppose, tureen,
-er writer, teacher, drawer
-our parlour, neighbour, labour
/ə/ occurs in three basic positions in the word or utterance: initial (e.g: aloud /ə'laud/, medial famous /'feiməȝ/ and final under/Λndər/.

Comparison with Romanian:
The quality of English /ə/ often coincides with that of English /ə:/ and is, for the practical purposes of teaching quasi-identical with Romanian /ə/. However,

BDD-A5710 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:38 UTC)

Romanian /e/ is slightly closer than English /ə/ and is articulated more to the front than the latter.

As concluding remarks I can say that the most striking point of distinction in the phonological systems of English and Romanian is VOWEL LENGTH. In present day English vowel phonemes can be distinguished by length. The Romanian vowel phonemes are indifferent in point of duration, but they can be lengthened for the sake of emphasis. Generalising, it was demonstrated that there most important source of errors in acquiring English vowels is the relatively narrow space in which their articulation is "jammed". All the methods used in order to acquire them correctly take as a starting point the necessity for the student to become aware of these (imperceptible, by Romanian standards) differences, subsequently developing the ability to refine their actualisation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chiţoran, D., Petri, L., *Workbook in English Phonetics and Phonology*, Ed. Didactica si Pedagogica, Bucuresti, 1977

Manea, C., *A Handbook of English Phonetics and Phonology*, Ed. Romania de Maine, Bucuresti, 1999

Mihail, B., *Fonetica limbii engleze*, Ed. Stiintifica, 1969

Pârlog, H., *English Phonetics and Phonology*, BIC, ALL, 1997.

BDD-A5710 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:38 UTC)