

## MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE IN THE PROCESS OF ENGLISH DIPHTHONGS' STUDY

***Fuciji Marianna Borisovna***

*Senior lecturer, MA*

*"B.P.Hasdeu" State University from Cahul, Republic of Moldova,*

***Babâră Evgenia Dmitrievna***

*Associated Professor*

*"Ion Creanga" Pedagogical State University from Chisinau, Republic of Moldova*

When teaching and learning foreign languages mother tongue interference presents some difficulties in the pronunciation and transliteration. The influence of mother tongue in oral discourse has been a topic of research and discussion by linguists for decades and currently this topic remains still actual. The article under discussion deals with the problem of Romanian language interference in the study of English diphthongs. The main goal of the present article is to reveal the importance of contrastive study applicable during EFL classroom and highlight some techniques that might be helpful to avoid mother tongue influence in the study of English diphthongs. The list of web resources displayed in the study might serve as interesting didactic tool applicable to the study of English diphthongs during EFL on different levels.

*Key words:* mother tongue influence, English orthography, EFL classroom, classification of English and Romanian diphthongs, contrastive study.

According to psycholinguistics transfer theory, when learning a target language, one's mother tongue can inevitably have a certain influence on it. This kind of influence is called "transfer". "Transfer" may be either positive or negative. Much of the early research of the 1970's was guided by the conception of a "language acquisition device" which facilitates the process of "creative construction" in the mind of the learner. The behaviorist ideas state that second language learning is a process of habit –formation in which the major obstacle to learning is interference from the mother tongue [Davies, Elder 2006, 515].

Thus English learners who are already literate in their first language may experience learning problems due to interference from the writing system of their first language. The system may be completely different from English (i.e., non-alphabetic) or it may involve a different alphabet (e.g., Cyrillic). It may even be a Roman alphabet with different sound-letter correspondences (e.g., Spanish versus English). Each situation brings special challenges in teaching reading, writing, spelling, and pronunciation. It has long been established that English spelling has an indirect and somewhat complex relationship with pronunciation. Carol Chomsky (1970) points out, English spelling frequently correlates with lexical representation, a level of linguistic processing that is beneath the surface and that is related to pronunciation by regular morphological processes- some of which are fairly complex [Celce- Murcia 2010, 419].

English orthography, although fairly systematic in its own right, is simply too abstract to be phonetically (or phonemically) optimal, for it lacks the principle of one-to- one symbol-sound correspondence. It is our experience that a separate phonemic alphabet is a useful tool not only for teaching pronunciation but also for creating some psychological distance between the sound system and the writing system. Such a separation helps both in teaching pronunciation and in presenting the correspondences between the English writing system and the English sound system. It is also useful for presenting some of the

conventions of English spelling, which has many rules that are based in part on sounds [Celce- Murcia 2010 p.420].

The phonetic nature of English diphthongs (their articulatory and acoustic nature) their phonologic classification and interpretation was discussed by different scholars worldwide. The opinions of scientists differ regarding the problem of correspondence between the phonetic and phonologic nature of diphthongs. For English and other Germanic languages (German, Dutch, Danish, Icelandic) and Romance languages (Romanian, Italian, Portuguese) are specific compound vowel sounds which are called diphthongs. According to J.D.O'Conner a diphthong is a glide from one vowel to another, and the whole glide acts like one of the long simple vowels. While "pure" vowels, or monophthongs, are said to have one target tongue position, diphthongs have two target tongue positions. *Diphthongs* are represented by two symbols, for example English "same" as [seim], where the two vowel symbols are intended to represent approximately the beginning and ending tongue positions [J.D.O'Conner 1980, 84].

Romanian scholar Daniela Doboş considers that the pronunciation of English diphthongs should not present too many problems for speakers of Romanian, a language which abounds in vowel sequences within the same syllable, although English has more diphthongs than Romanian. There is nevertheless an important difference between the diphthongs of the two languages concerning their respective degrees of prominence and length. English diphthongs are said to be falling, since the first element is always more prominent than the second, which is only suggested. With Romanian diphthongs this distinction of prominence and length is far less marked, almost inexistent. Hence it is important to take note of this major distinction. All English diphthongs, being practically equivalent to pure long vowels, are fully long in word-final position and when followed by a voiced consonant, and shorter when followed by voiceless consonants. Diphthongs are represented phonetically by a sequence of two symbols: the first shows the position of the speech organs at the beginning of the diphthong, and the second the point toward which the tongue moves, but that point is not necessarily reached in English [Doboş 2001, 65–66].

Moldovan scholar Nicanor Babâră claims that the phonologic system of English language includes 8(9,12,18) diphthongs. For the learners of English it is recommended to know the basic 8 English diphthongs [eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, ɪə, eə, və, əv, əv], the other diphthongs are being characterized as variations of these 8 compound sounds [Babâră 1992, 28–46]. Thus Gerald Kelly groups the 8 diphthongs of English language in the following way [Kelly 2000, 34]:

a) **Centring diphthongs** which end with a glide towards central vowel [ə]. The examples are as follows:

1. clearing [ɪə].
2. sure [və].
3. there [eə];

b) **Closing diphthongs** which end with a glide towards [ɪ] or towards [ʊ]. The glide is towards a higher position in the mouth. Examples:

4. they [eɪ].
5. boy [ɔɪ].

6. might [aɪ].

7. go [əʊ].

8. now [aʊ].

The table elaborated by Ted Power helps to present the English diphthongs phonetically [Ted Power 1979, 456]

[eɪ] [aɪ] [ɔɪ]	<i>your tongue moves to:</i>	[ɪ]
[ɪə] [eə] [ʊə]	<i>your tongue moves to:</i>	[ə]
[əʊ] [aʊ]	<i>your tongue moves to:</i>	[ʊ]

If students can read these phonemic symbols they can know how the word is said even without having to hear it. When both teacher and students know the symbols it is easier to explain what mistakes have occurred and why it has happened; we can also use symbols for pronunciation tasks and games.

Romanian diphthongs are unusual in that their non-syllabic element is treated as a mid glide. The presence of an initial mid glide as part of the diphthongs has triggered long debates among Romanian linguists concerning the status of glides in the language. According to Chițoran Romanian has two diphthongs [ea] and [oa]. As a result of their origin (diphthongization of mid vowels under stress), they appear normally in stressed syllables and make morphological alternations with the mid vowels [e] and [o]. In addition to these, the semivowels [j] and [w] can be combined (either before, after, or both) with most vowels. One view considers that only [ea] and [oa] can follow an obstruent-liquid cluster such as in *broască* ('frog') and *dreagă* ('to mend') can form real diphthongs while the rest are merely vowel-glide sequences [ Chițoran 2002, 204–213 ].

To display the variety of Romanian diphthongs Moldavian scholar George Gogin provides the following classification [ Gogin 2004, 193]:

	<b>Descendent diphthongs</b>	<b>Ascendant diphthongs</b>
1.	(iï)	(ïi)
2.	(ie)	(ei)
3.	(ia)	(ai)
4.	(iu)	(ui)
5.	(io)	(oi)
6.	(uî)	(îu)
7.	(uă)	(ău)
8.	(ua)	(au)
9.	(uu)	(uu)
10.	(uo)	(ou)
11.	(eu)	-
12.	(ea)	-
13.	(eo)	-
14.	(ao)	-
15.	-	(îï)
16.	-	(ai)
17.	-	(iu)

Dr. Rodney Ball, Professor at the University of Southampton, who has carried out a lot of research related to contrastive study of English, German, French and Spanish Phonetics considers that those who study English as a foreign language have a difficulty while learning to imitate the exact starting and finishing points of English diphthongs. It's all the more difficult as quite slight variations in the precise tongue movement for some of the English diphthongs can change their nature greatly [<http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/mb/296>]. Romanian speaking students often find difficulties by pronunciation of English diphthongs, it refers to the incorrect articulation of some elements which make up a diphthong, the usage of incorrect accent and intensity. Also students should keep in mind that the two vowel sounds making up a diphthong must be pronounced as one sound.

To become aware of the differences between the English and Romanian diphthongs Daniela Doboş in her *Handbook of English Phonetics and Phonology* applies to the elements of comparative method and recommends the following [Doboş 2001, 66- 75]:

a) to compare the English diphthong [eɪ] and the corresponding Romanian one and to compare short words that are similar in the two languages, for ex. English *may* [meɪ]- Rom. *mei* and English *bay* [beɪ]- Rom. *bei*;

\*spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [eɪ]:

*came daisy weigh break*  
*prey café brae May*

b) the corresponding diphthongs [aɪ] in English and Romanian present many similarities; note should be made of the differences in the respective degrees of prominence and length of the final elements. It is useful to compare, for instance, English *die* [daɪ]- Rom. *dai*, English *sty* [staɪ]- Rom. *stai*, English *my* [maɪ] – Rom. *mai*;

\*spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [aɪ]:

*time idle night type pie bye*  
*buy Diana anxiety stein eye isle*  
*Iceland either height*

c) the English diphthong [ɔɪ] presents a number of similarities with Romanian [oi], but the first element is lower and longer in English than in Romanian. It is necessary to compare, for instance, English *toy* [tɔɪ] -Rom. *toi*, English *boy* [bɔɪ] – Rom. *boi*, English *soy* [sɔɪ] – Rom. *soi*;

\* spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [ɔɪ] :

*Oil employs royal boycott noise;*

d) the corresponding diphthongs [əʊ] in English and Romanian are quite similar. It is useful to compare English *as in so* [səʊ]- Rom. *rau*, English *toe* [təʊ]- Rom. *tau* ;

\* spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [əʊ]:

*no home only know*  
*soul cocoa throat dough*  
*poultry owe toe noble*  
*don't gaucherie*

e) the English diphthong [aʊ] should not present difficulties for Romanians since the corresponding Romanian diphthong is sufficiently similar. It should be pointed out that the

first element should be more prominent for English/ au/. We can compare: English now [naʊ] – Rom. n-au, English *sow* [saʊ] – Rom. *sau*, English *cow* [kaʊ] – Rom. *c-au*.

\* spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [aʊ] :

*out house town ounce*

*Faust flower thousand glaucoma*

*bough our*

f) for the English diphthong [ɪə] there is no corresponding diphthong in Romanian, not even as a sequence of sounds. Speakers of Romanian should therefore start from [ɪ] and then glide toward [ə], which should be rendered more clearly than the second element of the preceding English diphthongs. Any tendencies of palatalizing or lengthening the first element should be avoided.

g) \*spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [ɪə]

*Deer ear Theological engineer*

*alien beard theory pierce*

*museum tier idea frontier*

*serial mere era hideous*

h) the English diphthong [eə] is another sound that has no equivalent in Romanian. To pronounce it correctly, Romanians should start from the sound positioned between [e] and [æ] and then glide toward [ə];

\* spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [eə]:

*dare tear eyre spare*

*prayer their mary Sarah*

*faeroe ere affair millionaire*

*doctrine pair software mayor*

i) the diphthong [ʊə] may prove difficult for Romanians, since Romanian has no equivalent diphthong, but only a sequence of vowels with a similar sound [ʊ + ə]. To render the English diphthong correctly, Romanians should pronounce its second element shorter and somewhat opener than the first, more toward Romanian [a]. This sound never occurs in word initial position, unlike the other diphthongs which have unrestricted distribution. A variant of this diphthong is [oə]. Some phoneticians say both these sounds are slowly disappearing, being increasingly monophthongized to [o:];

\* spelling possibilities for the English diphthong [ʊə]

*sure endure curious duration*

*jewellery doer bureaucracy ingenuity*

*lure Europe Muriel fluency*

Romanian speaking students often find difficulties by pronunciation of English diphthongs, it refers to the incorrect articulation of some elements which make up a diphthong, the usage of incorrect accent and intensity. Also students should keep in mind that the two vowel sounds making up a diphthong must be pronounced as one sound. Gerald Kelly suggests that for all diphthongs, one of the best techniques is to get students to make and hold the first element, then slowly move to the second. Finish off by making the sound at a "normal" speed. Some other suggestions for learners of English could be offered [Kelly 2000, 39]: **ɪə** – make the sound while tugging your year

**ʊə** – hold the first sound, and move to the second.

**eə** -liken this to the word air; point to your hair. Say *over, there, or on the chair*.

All will give good examples of the sound, which you can then isolate.

**eɪ** – pretend not to hear someone, and say *eh?*

**ɔɪ** -words work best here: *toy, boy, enjoy*

**aɪ** -make the sound and point to your eye.

**əʊ** -*oh, hello*, said slowly, and exaggerated a little, works well.

**aʊ** – the '*shut your finger in the door*' sound. Pretending to do this and making the sound while pulling a '*pained*' expression works rather well!

To avoid mistakes in spelling of English diphthongs the teacher should use diagrams with a graphic representation of spelling of the diphthongs under discussion. The diagrams could be hanged on the walls of the classroom and thus serve as visual aids during the lesson.

With the help of modern technology EFL teachers may use a wide range of internet resources to provide interactivity and motivation in EFL class-room. The table below displays various websites that could be of great help during the study of English diphthongs [[www.williston.k12.sc.us/kees/KEES%20Curriculum/.../OUTLINE-DIPHTHONGS.doc](http://www.williston.k12.sc.us/kees/KEES%20Curriculum/.../OUTLINE-DIPHTHONGS.doc)]:

<b>Diphthongs</b>
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://rbeaudoin333.homestead.com/diphthong_1.html">http://rbeaudoin333.homestead.com/diphthong_1.html</a> (links to computer activities and worksheets that focus on the diphthongs ou, long oo, short oo, mixed oi and oy, mixed au and aw, ow, ew, and mixed diphthongs)</li> </ul>
<p>Websites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.sadlier-oxford.com/phonics/grade2_3/diphthongs/diphthongs2.htm">http://www.sadlier-oxford.com/phonics/grade2_3/diphthongs/diphthongs2.htm</a> (quick self-checking computer activity to review various diphthongs)</li> <li>• <a href="http://www.softschools.com/language_arts/phonics/games/ou_ow_sounds.jsp">http://www.softschools.com/language_arts/phonics/games/ou_ow_sounds.jsp</a> (quick self-checking computer activity using ou, and ow)</li> </ul>
<p>SMART Lessons and PowerPoints</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diphthongs Powerpoint (oy &amp; oi)</li> </ul>
<p>Videos</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What Is It? (oy, oi)</i> (United Streaming video segment: 2 minutes)</li> <li>• <i>What Is It? (oy, oi)</i> (United Streaming video segment: 2 minutes)</li> <li>• <i>Diphthongs Part 1</i> (United Streaming video segment: 5 minutes)</li> <li>• <i>Diphthongs Part 2</i> (United Streaming video segment: 5 minutes)</li> </ul>
<p>Songs and Poems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Song: <i>The Diphthong Song</i> (United Streaming: 2 ½ minutes)</li> <li>• Poem: <i>Merry-Go-Round</i> (ou, ow)</li> <li>• Poem: <i>Lost and Found</i> (ou, ow)</li> <li>• Poem: <i>Joyce's Garden</i> (oi, oy)</li> </ul>
<p>Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Divide a poster in 1/4. In each corner, write ow, oy, ou, and oi. Give students a variety of words, and have them sort the words by diphthong.</li> <li>• <a href="http://spcialea.about.com/library/Spelling/diphthongs.pdf">http://spcialea.about.com/library/Spelling/diphthongs.pdf</a> (diphthong word cards, which list several examples of vowel diphthongs including au and aw)</li> </ul>

- [http://www.fcrr.org/SCASearch/PDFs/2-3P\\_024.pdf](http://www.fcrr.org/SCASearch/PDFs/2-3P_024.pdf) (small group game boards & word cards for playing Diphthong-O, a version of Bingo)
- Need to look up & scan <http://www.readinga-z.com/book.php?id=370> (Reading A-Z Lesson #63 "Toys for Boys"/ comes with the story, and a variety of oi/ oy materials) [A password is required; see Crissie to access these for you.]

To avoid mistakes in pronunciation and spelling of English diphthongs students need a lot of training. The phonetic training of diphthongs should include the following steps:

a) with the help of computer or specialized videos to draw students' attention on the specificity of the articulation of English diphthongs;

b) to display the words from mother tongue in which the diphthongs under study have a correspondence with the diphthongs of English and diphthongs which phonetically don't exist in English.

c) to display Romanian words which phonetically coincide and contain the diphthongs under comparison.

d) to display English words containing the diphthong under discussion in different positions of the word, which from phonetic point of view couldn't be found in Romanian / as mother tongue/;

e) to use sentences and phrases in English containing the words with diphthongs;

f) to use poems, proverbs, tongue twisters and songs in English with a high frequency of words containing diphthongs;

g) to use texts in English which contain many words with the diphthongs under discussion.

In conclusion it should be mentioned that the contrastive analysis (comparison of phonological systems of the target language and mother tongue) while studying a foreign language is able to predict many of a learner's errors in spelling and articulation of sounds. Thus the role of foreign language teacher and the application of his knowledge and creativity while teaching EFL and namely English Phonetics is of great importance in this case.

*Key words:* influence of native language, comparative method, characteristic features of English diphthongs, characteristic features of Romanian diphthongs.

В данной статье описывается проблема влияния родного языка при изучении иностранного языка. Целью данной статьи является раскрыть важность сравнительного метода при изучении фонетики английского языка, а именно английских дифтонгов. Описываемые тактики, применяемые в рамках сопоставительного метода, значительно препятствуют влиянию румынского языка при изучении английских дифтонгов, а также уменьшают количество ошибок при их произношении и письменной фиксации.

*Ключевые слова:* влияние родного языка, сопоставительный метод, характерные черты английских дифтонгов, характерные черты румынских дифтонгов.

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2. *Ball Rodney*. *Introduction to Phonetics for Students of English, French, German and Spanish*, 2006 //downloadable at< <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/mb/296/>>

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**Additional web resources:**

12. Outline diphthongs // downloadable at [www.williston.k12.sc.us/kees/KEES%20Curriculum/.../outline-diphthongs.doc](http://www.williston.k12.sc.us/kees/KEES%20Curriculum/.../outline-diphthongs.doc).