



Familiarizing students with parts and types of syllable in English words

Lok Raj Sharma

Associate Professor of English, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda, Nepal

Correspondence Author: Lok Raj Sharma

Received 10 Mar 2021; Accepted 16 Apr 2021; Published 9 May 2021

Abstract

The prime objective of this article is to familiarize the intermediate level students with parts and types of a syllable in English words. Syllable is a unit of pronunciation. The segments or constituents of a syllable are onset, nucleus and coda in general. Nucleus is an obligatory constituent, whereas onset and coda are optional or peripheral constituents of a syllable. Consonant sounds or phonemes function as the onset and the coda, while a vowel phoneme functions as the nucleus or peak of the syllable. This article can be a fruitful source of information about syllable for English teachers and students who are interested in teaching and learning phonetics and phonology.

Keywords: coda, nucleus, onset, segment, syllable

1. Introduction

It is essential to familiarize the students with the syllable, because they have to learn it in their course of studies in the English subject. Syllable is related to pronunciation, and this pronunciation is related to Communication. Oral communication involves the pronunciation of segmental and supra-segmental features of language. Syllable belongs to the supra-segmental feature since it includes the pronunciation beyond a single phoneme in general. English words may have one syllable or more syllables. The words such as 'cat', 'dog', 'be', 'eat' etc. with a syllable are called the monosyllabic words. Monosyllabic words themselves function as syllables. The words with two syllables, three syllables, four syllables, five syllables, six syllables, seven syllables and eight syllables like the words 'motion', 'photograph', 'education', 'electricity', 'electromagnetic', 'superficiality' and 'hypercholesterolemic' are called disyllabic, trisyllabic, tetrasyllabic, pentasyllabic, hexasyllabic, heptasyllabic and octasyllabic words respectively. It is an essential task for us to determine the syllables in polysyllabic words for better pronunciation, because wrong determination of the number of syllables and their pronunciation can make our communication unintelligible. The article writer in this article aims at familiarize the intermediate students with the parts and types of a syllable of some monosyllabic English words.

2. Theoretical Review of Literature

Crystal (2003) ^[1] asserts that "syllable is a unit of pronunciation typically larger than a single sound and smaller than a word" (p.467). Carr (2008) ^[2] defines syllable as "a unit of phonological organization whose central component is a nucleus which is normally a vowel, and which may be preceded or followed by consonants." (p.171). Similarly, Katamba (1989) ^[3] believes that "syllable is a purely phonological unit" (p.153). Lass (2010) ^[4] assumes syllable to be "a kind of minimal phonotactics unit" (p.250). Catford (1988) ^[5]

considers syllable "a minimal pulse of initiatory activity bounded by a momentary retardation of the initiator, either self-imposed or, more usually, imposed by a consonantal type of articulatory stricture" (p.179).

Functional definition of a syllable describes a syllable as a speech unit with a vowel sound which is optionally surrounded by consonant sounds. The vowel in a syllable is nucleus and the consonants are peripheral. A syllable can be symbolically denoted as $C_{0-n} v C_{0-n}$. The commonest structure of a syllable is CVC. The first C refers to the consonant sound. It is called the onset. V stands for a vowel sound. It is called the nucleus. The last C stands for the consonant sound that is called the coda. A syllable may have only peak, may have onset and peak, may have peak and coda and may have onset, peak and coda.

Parts and types of a syllable can be displayed in the tree diagrams. While displaying a syllable in the diagram, the syllable is parted into two components onset that is written as 'On' and rhyme that is shown as 'Rh'. The rhyme is further separated into two components peak that is written as 'Pe' and coda that is written as 'Co'. Peak or nucleus that is formed with a monophthong or a diphthong is an obligatory part, whereas onset and coda that are made with a consonant or a sequence of consonants are optional parts of a syllable. Syllable is written as 'Sy'.

2.1 Parts of Syllable

There are three parts of a syllable. They are as follows:

2.1.1 Onset

The onset is a consonant or a sequence of consonants that occurs in the initial position of the syllable by preceding the syllabic segment or the peak that is a vowel. In other word, the segments / consonants preceding the peak form a phonological unit called the onset. The words 'pen', 'spin', and 'spring' are syllables in which / p /, /sp /, and /spr / are onsets.

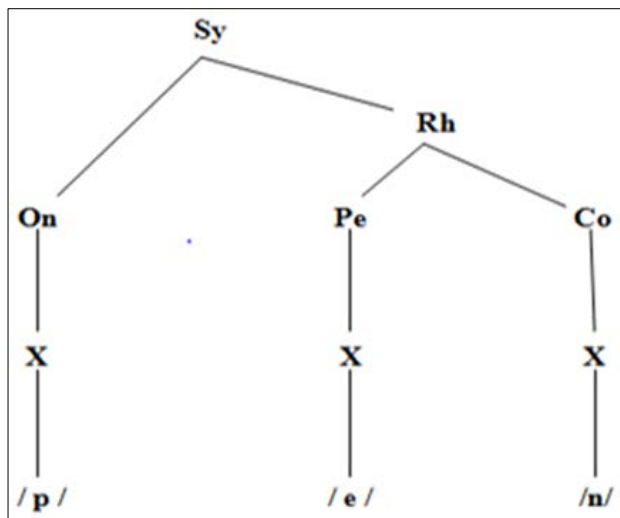


Fig 1: Onset with a consonant / p /

/ɪ/, /i:/, and /eɪ/ are peaks of the syllables.

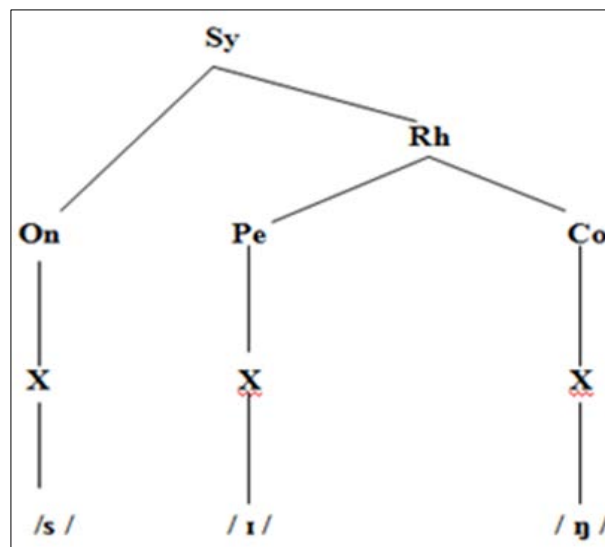


Fig 4: Peak with a short monophthong /ɪ/

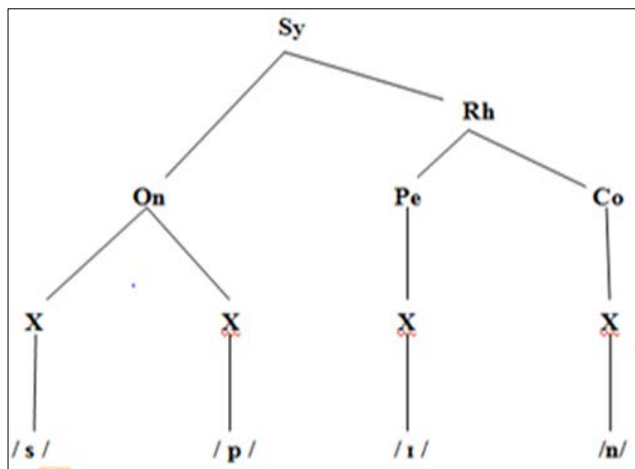


Fig 2: Onset with two consonants / sp /

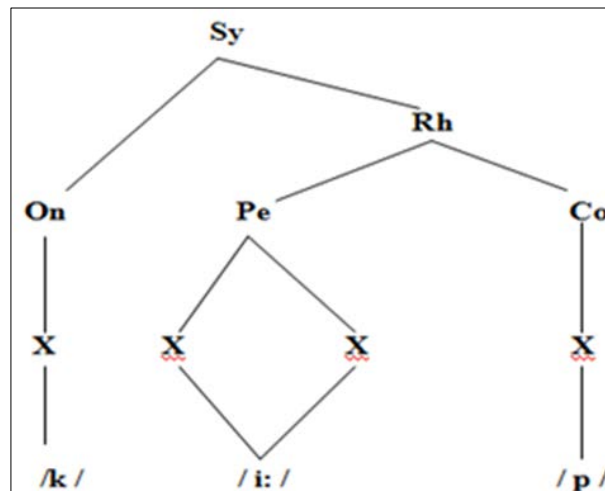


Fig 5: Peak with a long monophthong /i:/

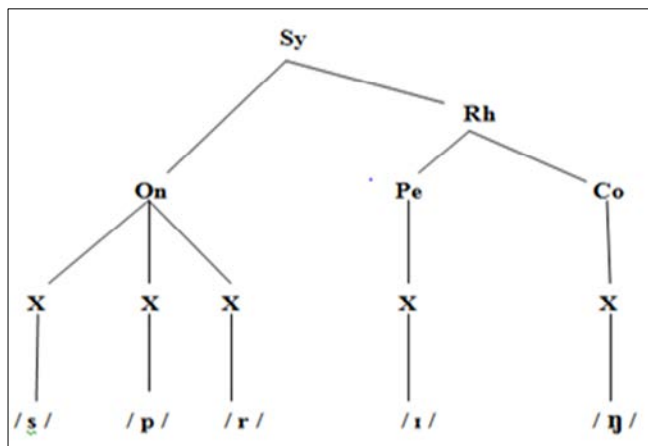


Fig 3: Onset with three consonants / spr /

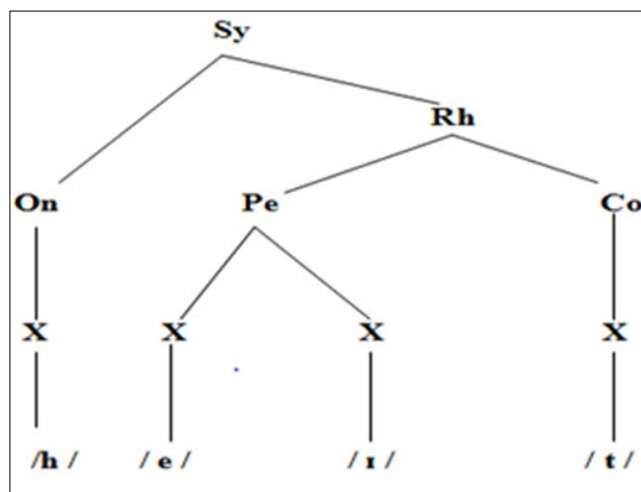


Fig 6: Peak with a diphthong /eɪ/

2.1.2 Nucleus / Peak

The peak of a syllable contains the syllabic segment or vowel that is more sonorous than marginal segments or consonants. It is an obligatory segment. A monophthong or a diphthong functions as the peak. In the syllables ‘sing’, ‘keep’ and ‘hate’,

2.1.3 Coda

The coda is a consonant or a sequence of consonants that comes after the peak. A coda may include one consonant, two consonants, three consonants or four consonants. In the syllables ‘pit’ ‘pits’, ‘helps’, and ‘prompts’, /t/, /ts/, /lps/, and /mpts/ are codas.

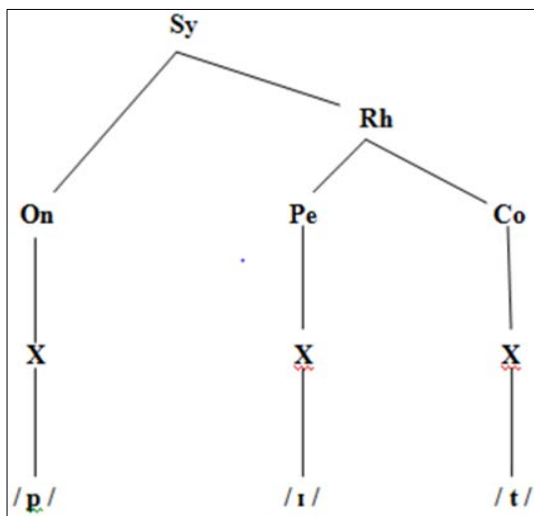


Fig 7: Coda with a consonant / t /

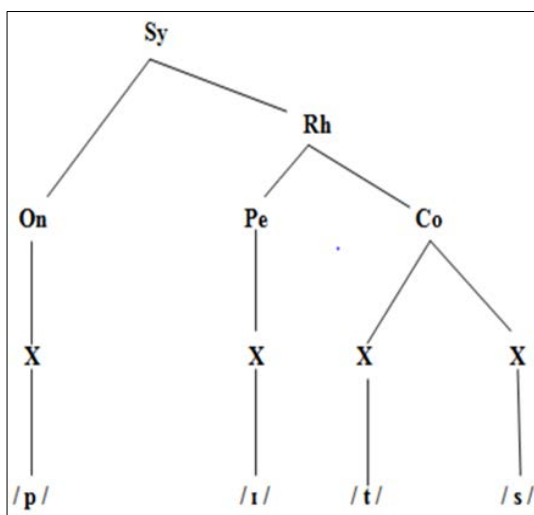


Fig 8: Coda with two consonant / ts /

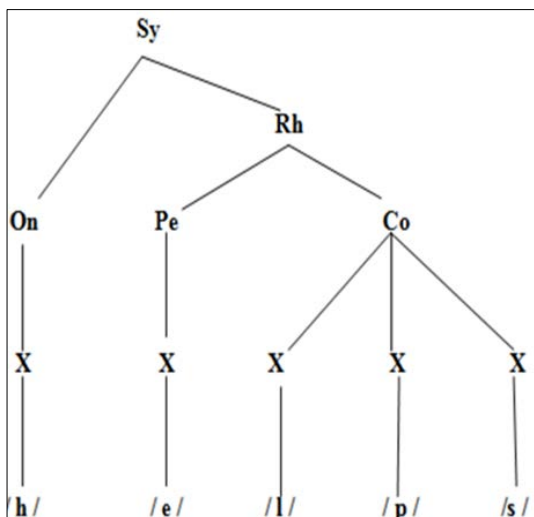


Fig 9: Coda with two consonant / lps /

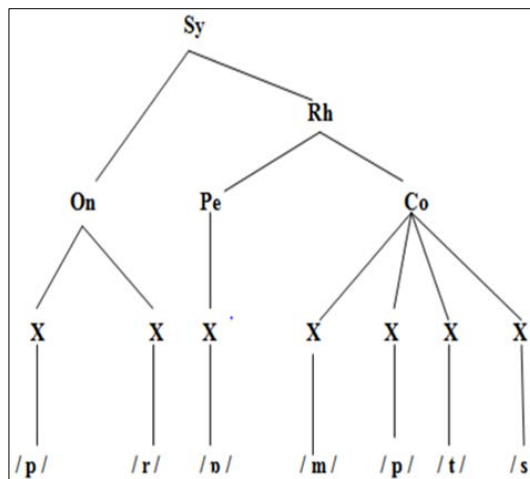


Fig 10: Coda with two consonant /mpts /

2.2 Types of Syllable

Syllable can be classified on the basis of its last segment or sound. There are two types of syllables. They are: open syllable and closed syllable.

2.2.1 Open Syllable

Hyman (1975) [6] asserts that “an open syllable ends in a vowel, while a closed syllable is checked or arrested by a consonant” (p.188). If a syllable ends in a vowel sound, it is called an open syllable, for example: go / gəʊ/, fee / fi:/ etc.

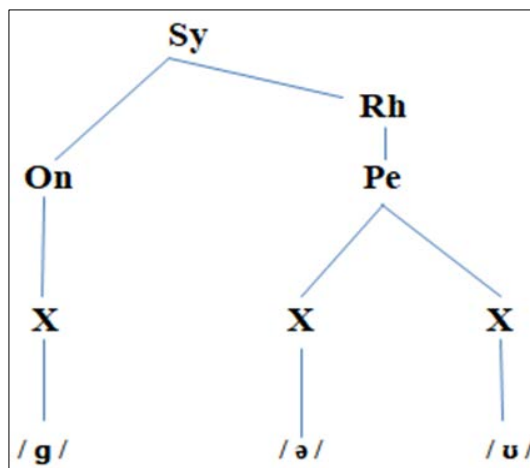


Fig 11: Open syllable ending in a diphthong / əʊ/

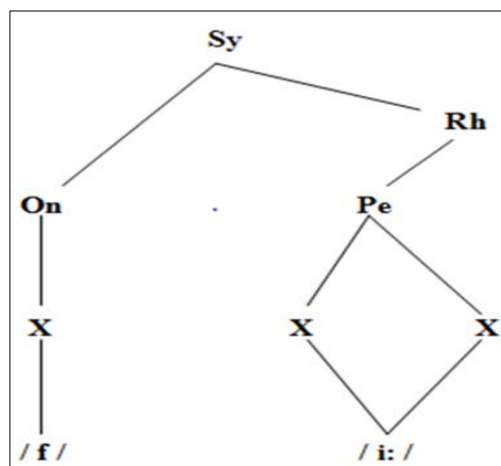


Fig 12: Open syllable ending in a vowel / i: /

2.2.2 Closed Syllable

Abercrombie (1967) ^[7] maintains that that “a syllable which is arrested by a consonant is said to be a closed syllable, and one which has no arresting consonant is said to be an open syllable” (p.41). If a syllable ends in the consonant sound(s), it is known as a closed syllable, for example: eat /i:t/, pits /pɪts/ etc. are the examples of closed syllables.

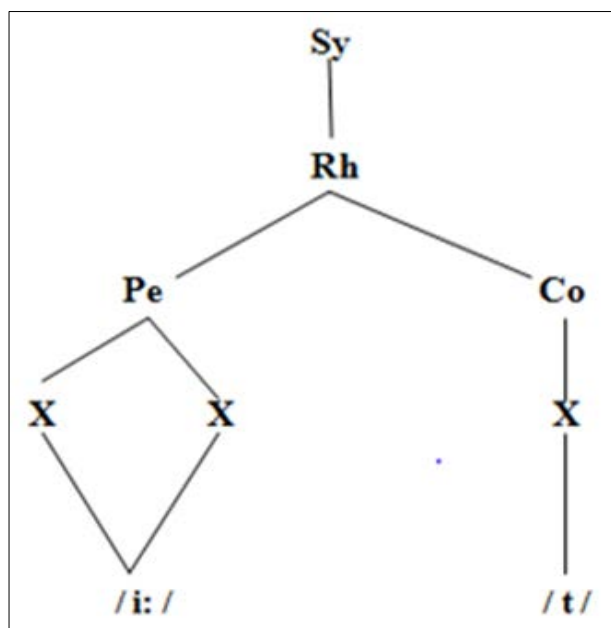


Fig 13: Closed syllable ending in a consonant / t /

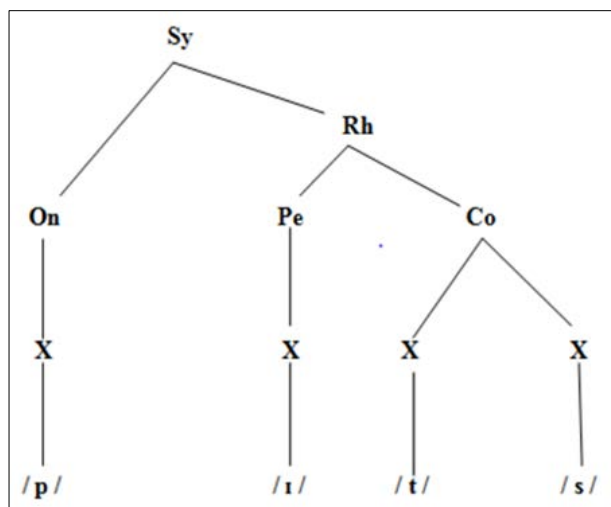


Fig 14: Closed syllable ending in two consonants / ts /

3. Discussion of the Parts and Types of Syllable

The article writer further pinpoints some monosyllabic English words to familiarize the students with the parts and types of a syllable through discussion, for example:

Cat /kæt/: This syllable consists of onset with a consonant /k /, nucleus with a monophthong /æ/ and coda with a consonant / t /. It is a closed syllable that ends in a consonant sound / t /.

Black /blæk/: This syllable consists of onset with two consonants /bl /, nucleus with a monophthong /æ/ and coda with a consonant / k /. It is a closed syllable that ends in a consonant sound / k /.

Spring /sprɪŋ /: This syllable consists of onset with three consonants /spr /, nucleus with a monophthong /ɪ/ and coda

with a consonant /ŋ / . It is a closed syllable that ends in a consonant sound / ŋ /.

Bets /bets/: This syllable consists of onset with a consonant /b /, nucleus with a monophthong /e/ and coda with two consonant / ts /. It is a closed syllable that ends in two consonant sounds / ts /.

Helps /helps/: This syllable consists of onset with a consonant /h /, nucleus with a monophthong /e/ and coda with three consonant / ps /. It is a closed syllable that ends in three consonant sounds / ps /.

Texts /teksts/: This syllable consists of onset with a consonant /t /, nucleus with a monophthong /e/ and coda with four consonant / ksts /. It is a closed syllable that ends in four consonant sounds / ksts /.

I / Eye /aɪ /: This syllable consists of nucleus with a diphthong /aɪ/. It is an open syllable that ends in a diphthong / aɪ /.

Too / tu: /: This syllable consists of onset with a consonant /t / and nucleus with a monophthong /u: /. It is an open syllable that ends in a long monophthong / u: /.

Eat / i:t/: This syllable consists of nucleus with a monophthong /i:/ and coda / t /. It is a closed syllable that ends in a consonant sound / t /.

Scrambles / skræmblz/: This syllable consists of onset with three consonants /skr /, nucleus with a monophthong /æ/ and coda with four consonants / mblz /. It is a closed syllable that ends in four consonant sounds / mblz /.

Examples mentioned above clearly indicate that onset and coda are optional segments, whereas nucleus is a mandatory segment of a syllable.

4. Conclusion

Various writers have defined syllables in different ways, but the gist of their definitions is the same. The gist is that a syllable is a unit of pronunciation having one vowel sound with or without surrounding consonants, forming the whole or a part of a word. Monosyllabic words are themselves syllables. A word may have two or more than two syllables. In this case, the syllables form a part of a word. Syllable is a unit of speech in which a vowel that forms the nucleus or peak is an obligatory constituent, whereas the consonants that function as the onset and coda are optional constituents of a syllable. A syllable may end either in the consonant(s) or in a vowel sound. The vowel sound may be a monophthong or a diphthong. Familiarizing students with syllable is essential to help them pronounce or read the words correctly.

References

1. Crystal D. *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
2. Carr P. *A glossary of phonology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2008.
3. Katamba F. *An introduction to phonology*. London: Longman, 1989.
4. Lass R. *Phonology: An introduction to basic concepts*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
5. Catford JC. *A practical introduction to phonetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
6. Hyman LM. *Phonology: Theory and analysis*. New York: Holt Rinehartand Winston, 1975.
7. Abercrombie D. *Elements of general phonetics*. Edinburgh: Oxford University Press, 1976.