

## Pronunciation

Pronunciation is the way in which a word or a language is spoken. This may refer to generally agreed-upon sequences of sounds used in speaking a given word or language in a specific dialect ("correct pronunciation") or simply the way a particular individual speaks a word or language.

### IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF PRONUNCIATION:

#### 1. Vowels

English vowels are often mistaken as simple by ESL students. Just “A, E, I, O, U.” Vowels can actually be the most complicated aspect of English pronunciation to learn and to teach.

**The English language has 44 sounds, 20 of which are vowel sounds.**

Even the *simple* vowels are anything but simple. Simple vowels are often referred to as “short” vowels. The letter “a” all by itself can be pronounced several ways. Try saying it in these English words:

- apple
- all
- father

(And, of course, the way English speakers say these words varies depending on their background and their particular accent.)

The letter “a” in these three words represents three distinct *simple* vowel sounds. Simply teaching your students that a particular letter represents a particular sound generally does not work with English, though it may with your students’ first language.

If you want to say a word that has two vowel sounds, the vowels can no longer be simple vowels. Instead, when combined they become a *diphthong*. (See the explanation of diphthongs below.) In various letter combinations, “a” becomes part of a diphthong and takes on a new sound. For example:

- maay

- mate

- wait

Or it sounds as a different diphthong such as in

- hair

- wear

and another one again in words such as

- ear

They all sound different. So how can you explain to your students how to pronounce the different vowel sounds?

Just looking at the simple vowels on the chart, their positions on the chart give clues about how they're pronounced. So if we just use the "hints":

ship    sheep    book    shoot  
left    her    teacher    door

Basically, the relevance of the rows and columns is:

- In a very generalized sense, moving from left to right on the chart the vowels are formed from the front to the back of the mouth. Forming a sound at the back of the mouth just means the raised part of the tongue is further back.
- In general, from left to right the lips will need to be increasingly more rounded.
- Moving from the top row to the bottom row of the chart, the mouth becomes more relaxed and open.

## **2. Diphthongs**

A diphthong is two vowel sounds that glide together and become like one long vowel, taking up only one syllable together. In some languages this doesn't occur, and adjacent vowels must form two syllables (often separated by a "glottal stop," which is like a catch in the throat).

Some languages only allow diphthongs in special positions such as the end of a word. It is uncommon to have as many diphthongs, or the same diphthongs, as we have in English.

Students learning English will often either:

- Shorten them (like saying “kek” for “cake”).
- Split them into two short sounds.

So if your students are having difficulties with diphthongs:

- Make sure your students are aware of which two sounds make up the diphthong. This is clear from the chart, but not always obvious from the spelling of the words.
- Help your students to blend the two sounds smoothly together, and don’t worry if the sound seems a bit long. They will only occur in stressed syllables when a lengthened vowel sound is acceptable. Make a fun activity of practicing long diphthong sounds.

### 3. Consonants

The consonants are actually quite a bit simpler than the vowels. There are generally six types of consonants:

- **Plosives** (sometimes called “stops”) are formed when the air is stopped at a particular point in the mouth and then suddenly released. These are: p, b, t, d, k, g.
- **Fricatives** are made by allowing the air to pass through a narrow gap causing friction. These include: f, v, th, s, z, sh, h and the sound of “si” in “television.”
- **Affricates** are basically plosives that blend into fricatives. These are the sounds at the beginning of “**ch**ease” and “**j**oke.”
- **Nasals** are sounds that vibrate through the nasal cavity. These are “m,” “n” and the sound usually written “ng” as in “**thi**ng.”
- **Liquids** and **laterals**. These are the sounds “l” and “r.”
- **Semi-vowels**. There are two of these: “w” and “y,” as they sometimes work as vowels and sometimes as consonants.

Generally there are three main **points of articulation**, or places in your mouth where the sounds are made. These are:

- Right at the front of your mouth, using lips and/or teeth, and/or tongue. (p, b, f, v, th, m, w)
- Behind your teeth with the tip of your tongue against the ridge behind your teeth, or further back against your palate. (t, d, s, z, sh, n, l, r)
- In the back of your mouth near your throat. (k, g, ng, h)

#### 4. Voicing

Some sounds are made using our voices, and some are not. Vowels are always voiced, but not all consonants are. To tell which is which, simply place your fingers gently on your voice-box as you speak and feel the vibrations there.

- These consonants are **voiced**: b, d, g, z, m, n, ng, l, r, w, y, “-si-” (television), “j” (joke). There is also a voiced “th” (**th**is).
- These are **voiceless**, or **unvoiced**: p, t, s, k, h, th, sh, “ch” (**ch**ease).

Students who have a problem with the unvoiced “th” will also struggle with the voiced version. Try saying these words:

- “bathth” and “batthe”: The “th” in the first word is unvoiced, in the second one it is voiced.
- “clothth” and “cloththes.”
- “**th**e,” “**th**en” and “**th**at”: The “th” is voiced at the beginning of these common words, but in “**th**anks,” “**th**eory” and “**th**ick” the sound is unvoiced.

There is no easy rule about when to voice the sound, it is simply a case of becoming familiar with the words. But the first step is to make sure that your students can make both sounds accurately.

Consonants are affected by the sounds around them, because there are some situations where it is uncomfortable or very difficult to pronounce an unvoiced consonant next to a voiced consonant or surrounded by vowels.

For example, the simple past tense verb ending is “-ed,” but when spoken it doesn’t always have the voiced “d” sound. If the verb ends in an unvoiced consonant (e.g. “wash,” “pick”), the “-ed” sounds like “-t” (although it is still written the same). Just try saying “washed” or “picked” to hear that “-t” sound I’m talking about.

This aspect of pronunciation is generally practiced as part of a grammar lesson, but it helps to make students aware of the general principle.

It is also nice to discuss how many English dialects or accents tend to use voiced consonants where others would use unvoiced. For example, some might pronounce “better” as “bedder.”

## 5. Aspiration

Some plosive consonants (e.g. “p”) are **aspirated**.

That means that there is a little puff of air after the sound.

To test this, you can ask students to hold a sheet of paper up in front of their mouths while they say words with plosive consonants such as “**p**aper.” They should notice that the first “p” has a puff of air, but the second one does not.

In English the aspiration is not significant. There are no minimal pairs where it makes a difference in meaning, and we tend to aspirate at the beginning of words but not in the middle or end. If we are making a point or trying to accentuate something we may add aspiration, without affecting the meaning. However, in other languages the aspiration may be more relevant.

If students say a word such as “paper” without the expected aspiration, it *can* sound like they are instead using the voiced consonant “b.” It can sound a little confusing, so it is worth explaining aspiration to your students and practicing it with them.

## 6. Unreleased Consonants

The consonants at the end of words are often not “**released**.”

For example, if you say the word “stop,” you close your lips on the final “p” and keep them closed—unless you are very excited, in which case the final sound might burst forth along with saliva and exasperation.

Some Asian languages have a very strong CVCV (consonant, vowel) pattern, and for native speakers of those languages this is a problem. They tend to add extra vowels rather than allow a word to end in a consonant, especially an unreleased one. Thus “Get up!” comes out as “Geta upa!” These students need to be taught to relax and let the consonants stay unreleased.

In other languages (e.g. Malaysian), when the final consonant is a plosive it is only present in the written form, neither sounded nor released. These students need to be encouraged to make the effort to actually form the final consonant and make some sound from it.

## 7. The Sounds Between Words

When the final consonant is **unreleased**, it generally reappears at the start of the next word...if that next word starts with a vowel.

Thus, in naturally-spoken English, the words all run into one another. They may form a continuous stream right up until the end of the phrase, clause or even sentence. While this makes listening (and understanding) difficult for language learners, it is also important for second language learners to learn to speak this way too. Students need to move from speaking word by word to speaking in whole chunks of language. That is how fluency is attained!

Teach pronunciation of words in context. Once they can pronounce a particular word, practice saying it next to other words. So now that expression “Geta upa!” should become “Getup!”

Practice dictation. Speak your mind, say one complete thought (e.g. clause or phrase) at a natural pace, all in one go, and let students try breaking it down into words. Get them to do the same in pairs.

## 8. Syllable Stress

Incorrect stress is not only uncomfortable, but it changes the meaning of words.

In some languages, syllable stress is almost irrelevant to meaning. However, in English, changing the stress can change the meaning of a word and the grammatical structure of a whole sentence. For example:

- **desert, desert, dessert:** These are three different words, with the same consonants and vowels, but the stress changes the meaning.
- **permit, permit:** These two words are clearly related in meaning. However, the first one is a noun (a piece of paper) and the second one is a verb (the action of allowing something). There are many other words like this.

While native speakers of English can generally understand a word even when the stress is misplaced, it can be very uncomfortable or confusing to listen to.

With long words in English which have added prefixes and suffixes, the stress often changes from the base word. This can also change the vowel sounds as they move from stressed to unstressed syllables. For example:

- **photo, photographer, photography, photographic.**

\*Note: Notice how the “o” sound changes quality (from a diphthong as in “show” to a simple vowel sound as in “on”) depending on whether or not it is in the stressed syllable.

This can be very confusing for language learners, and distressing when they are faced with reading aloud a text which contains a number of long multi-syllable words.

There are some rules (although they naturally also have exceptions) which you can teach your students to practice and increase their confidence in saying long words. For example:

- Stress falls on the third-last syllable in words ending in a consonant plus “y” (but not “-ly”).
- Stress falls on the third-last syllable in words ending in “-ize.”
- Stress falls on the third-last syllable in words ending in “-ate.”
- Stress falls on the syllable just before “-ic” or “-tion”/“-sion”/“-cion”/“-xion”

Although learning these rules may not help students at the moment when they are about to say a word, if they are preparing themselves to read something aloud they can practice new words until they are familiar with them.

## 9. Sentence Stress

English is generally considered to be a **stress-timed** language. While for linguistic purists this is not hard and fast, it does demonstrate an important difference in English compared to other languages which are **syllable-timed**.

What it means is that **the number of important words** in a sentence will determine how long it takes to say the sentence, rather than the overall number of words. The little, unimportant words are mumbled through quickly in between the important words.

So, for example, the following sentences all have the same important words (in capital letters), and adding in the other words/syllables does not make the sentence any longer when spoken:

- SAM LIVES in a NICE, OLD HOUSE.
- SAM LIVES in a LOVELY, OLD HOUSE.
- SAM’s been LIVING in a deLIGHTful, OLD HOUSE.
- SAM’ll be LIVING in a deLIGHTful, VicTORian cotTAGE.

In each of these sentences there are five stressed syllables, and so they essentially take the same time to say. Try clicking your fingers to the beat as you say the stressed syllables.

Secondly, in English, the deeper meaning behind a statement is in the *stress*. Exactly the same sentence can hold a different meaning depending on how it is stressed. Take this sentence for example:

- HAVE you seen my new red car? (*Really? Have you actually seen it?*)
- Have YOU seen my new red car? (*Because everyone else has seen it.*)
- Have you SEEN my new red car? (*You've heard about it, but have you seen it?*)
- Have you seen MY new red car? (*There are lots of cars out there, this one is mine.*)
- Have you seen my NEW red car? (*Yes, I had one before, this is my new one.*)
- Have you seen my new RED car? (*I have several new cars, this is my red one!*)
- Have you seen my new red CAR? (*It matches my other red toys.*)

Students can have great fun dramatizing these sentences.

Ask your students to try stressing the right syllables in these sentences to get the correct meaning:

- David stole the money, not Mike. (*Stress "David" and "not."*)
- David stole the money. He didn't have permission to take it. (*Stress "stole."*)
- I haven't seen the film, but David has. (*Stress "I" and "David."*)
- David stole the money. He didn't touch the jewelry. (*Stress "money."*)
- Mike's birthday is on the 28th, not the 24th. (*Stress "8th."*)

## **10. Intonation**

Even students who achieve a high level of accuracy in their general pronunciation of sounds and words can still struggle with **intonation**.

Although not a **tonal** language (like Chinese, for example), English has a particularly musical intonation, going generally higher and lower than others.



Listening to a native English speaker trying to speak another language and using English intonation can send speakers of that language into fits of laughter. So when they try to use English intonation, they actually feel a little embarrassed and often end up sounding rather flat!

The theory of English intonation is complicated, and not really necessary to learn to develop good intonation skills. It's better to use **immersion** and get students to listen to and copy as much natural

an utterance, so this is where the drama happens. When focusing on the intonation for a particular sentence, always start at the back end. For example:

The sentence is: "Making my own pancakes every day is such a chore!"

Try saying it with attitude!

In this case the peak syllable is "chore," so the pitch here should be high. Also "such" should be high, as well as maybe "own" and "every."

Now to practice:

- "...chore!"
- "... such a chore!"
- "... every day is such a chore!"
- "... my own pancakes every day is such a chore!"
- "Making my own pancakes every day is such a chore!"