

8 The sounds of English

A Warm-up

- 1 Your trainer is going to give you a 'new name'. Memorize your name, but keep it secret. Your trainer will call the class register. When you hear your name, say 'Present'.
- 2 Think about these questions:
 - a What problems might learners of English have with this activity? Why?
 - b What aspect of language does the activity target?

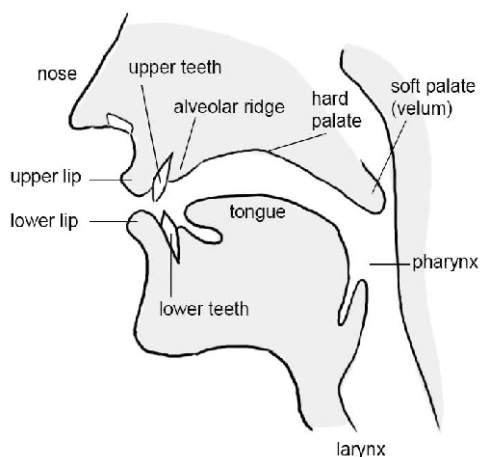
B Sounds v letters

- 1 Write down the words your trainer dictates. Then check your spelling with a partner.
- 2 Work in pairs. Discuss the meanings of these words and see if you agree on them.
- 3 Count the *letters* in each word. For example:
letter = six letters (L-E-T-T-E-R)
Count the *sounds* in each word. For example:
letter = four sounds (l - e - tt - er)
- 4 Work in pairs. Discuss what activity B3 demonstrates about the sound-spelling relationship in English.

C Consonant sounds

- 1 Consonant sounds are formed when the airflow from the lungs is obstructed by the moveable parts of the mouth, including the tongue and lips. Try pronouncing these sounds, and decide where the obstruction is occurring.

You can refer to this diagram:



2 – Language analysis and awareness

For example, the sound /b/ (as in *ban*) is articulated by obstructing the airflow at the lips.

/m/ as in *man*

/v/ as in *van*

/n/ as in *nan*

/t/ as in *tan*

/r/ as in *ran*

/k/ as in *can*

Because of the frequent mismatch between spelling and sound, it helps to use a special script (called *phonemic script*) to transcribe spoken language. Here are the 24 standard English consonant sounds in phonemic script:

CONSONANTS

voiceless	p pen /pen/	t town /taʊn/	c cat /kæt/	f fish /fɪʃ/	θ think /θɪŋk/	s say /seɪ/	ʃ she /ʃi:/	tʃ cheese /tʃi:z/
	b book /bʊk/	d day /deɪ/	g give /gɪv/	v very /'ver.i/	ð the /ðə/	z zoo /zu:/	ʒ vision /'vɪʒn/	dʒ jump /dʒʌmp/

l look /lʊk/	r run /rʌn/	j yes /jes/	w we /wi:/	m moon /mu:n/	n name /neɪm/	ŋ sing /sɪŋ/	h hand /hænd/
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Cambridge International Dictionary of English

Many of the consonants consist of *voiceless* and *voiced* pairs, such as /p/ and /b/. A *voiced* sound is one that is made by activating the *vocal cords*. (You can feel them vibrate if you put your hand on your throat). To produce a *voiceless* sound, no vocal cord activation is required.

2 Read these words, using the table above.

a /met/

b /dek/

c /ðen/

d /hedʒ/

e /breθ/

f /fetʃ/

g /nekst/

h /jet/

i /fred/

j /frɪŋk/

3 Write these words in phonemic script.

- a *sent*
- b *edge*
- c *thin*
- d *thing*
- e *think*
- f *this*
- g *fixed*
- h *jest*
- i *yelled*
- j *stretched*

D Vowel sounds

Vowels are formed, not by obstructing the airflow, but by modifying its passage through the mouth, principally through the use of the tongue and lips.

1 Say the vowel sounds in these words and notice any changes in the position of your tongue and lips:

Jean June
Gin John
Jen Shawn
Jan

Vowels are divided between *monophthongs* (single vowels) and *diphthongs* (a glide from one vowel to another). All vowels are voiced, that is, they involve activating the vocal cords.

On the left are listed the vowels of standard British English in phonemic script. On the right are listed the vowels of standard North American English (also known as General American). In each list, monophthongs are on the left; diphthongs on the right.

British English			
i:	we	ɪə	dear
ɪ	fit	eɪ	say
ʊ	look	ʊə	sure
u:	hoot	ɔɪ	toy
e	fed	əʊ	so
ə	<u>a</u> lone/fath <u>er</u>	eə	fair
ɜ:	hurt	aɪ	die
ɔ:	ought	aʊ	how
æ	hat		
ʌ	but		
ɑ:	spa, tar		
ɒ	pot		

North American English			
i:	we	eɪ	say
ɪ	fit	ɔɪ	toy
ʊ	foot	oʊ	so
u:	hoot	aɪ	die
e	fed	aʊ	how
ə/əʃ	<u>a</u> lone/fath <u>er</u>		
ɜ:	hurt		
ɔ:	ought		
æ	hat		
ʌ	but		
ɑ:	Pa, pot		

Note that one of the commonest vowels in English is the central, unstressed vowel /ə/ – known as *schwa*.

2 – Language analysis and awareness

- 2 Decipher these film titles, using the consonant chart and the vowel chart. Choose one variety of English.

British English	North American
a /bætˈmæn/	a /bætˈmæn/
b /kɪŋ kɒŋ/	b /kɪŋ kɑːŋ/
c /eəpleɪn/	c /erpleɪn/
d /dʒɔːz/	d /dʒɔːz/
e /ðə bɜːdz/	e /ðə bɜːdz/
f /saɪkəʊ/	f /saɪkoʊ/
g /pʌlp fɪkʃən/	g /pʌlp fɪkʃən/
h /vɜːtɪgəʊ/	h /vɜːtɪgoʊ/
i /ðə ʃaɪnɪŋ/	i /ðə ʃaɪnɪŋ/
j /dʒɔːz tuː/	j /dʒɔːz tuː/

- 3 Write these film titles in phonemic script:

- a *Shrek*
- b *Ben Hur*
- c *Snatch*
- d *Star Wars*
- e *High Noon*
- f *Blade Runner*
- g *Memento*
- h *Mystic River*

- 4 Work in pairs. Write two more film titles in phonemic script for your partner to decipher.

E Contrasting languages

- 1 Compare these charts of the consonant sounds in English and in Thai.

English

		Place of articulation							
		Front of mouth ←-----→ throat							
MANNER OF ARTICULATION	stop	p b			t d			k g	
	stop + vibration					ʃ ʒ			
	through nose	m			n			ŋ	
	vibration		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
	little obstruction				r		j	w	
	sideways obstruction				l				

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Thai

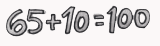
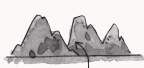
		Place of articulation							
		Front of mouth ←-----→ throat							
MANNER OF ARTICULATION	stop	p p ^h b			t t ^h d			k k ^h	ʔ
	stop + vibration					tɕ tɕ ^h			
	through nose	m			n			ŋ	
	vibration		f		s				h
	trill				r				
	little obstruction						j	w	
	sideways obstruction				l				

Adapted from M.R. Kalaya Tingsabath and A.S. Abramson, 1999

Which of these English word pairs might a speaker of Thai have difficulty with? Why?

- a pat v bat
- b fan v van
- c right v light
- d mess v mesh
- e moss v moth
- f sin v sing
- g latter v ladder
- h back v bag
- i sigh v thigh

- 2 Here is an extract from a pronunciation course. Which of the above consonant distinctions does it target?

	Sound 1 /s/	Sound 2 /θ/	
	mouse What a sweet little mouse!	mouth What a sweet little mouth!	
	sum Is this sum OK?	thumb Is this thumb OK?	
	sick It's very sick.	thick It's very thick.	
	sink He's sinking.	think He's thinking.	
	pass There's a mountain pass.	path There's a mountain path.	

Ship or Sheep?

2 – Language analysis and awareness

- 3 How could you use it in class? For example:
 - a How would you model the two sounds?
 - b How would you test students' ability to hear the difference?
 - c How would you provide practice at producing the difference?

F Review

Can you answer these questions?

- a How many letters are there in English?
- b How many sounds are there?
- c How many sounds are there in *thought*? In *six*? In *coaching*?
- d How many ways is the letter 'a' pronounced in English? Clue: The tall cat ate the banana!
- e What's the difference between a consonant sound and a vowel sound?
- f What's the difference between the sound /s/ and the sound /z/?
- g What's the name of the first and third vowel sounds in *banana*?
- h What's the difference between the sound /ɪ/ in *pin*, and the sound /aɪ/ in *pine*?
- i What sound do these three words have in common? *does*, *zoo*, *noise*
- j What sound do these three words have in common? *first*, *surf*, *earns*
- k True or false? /ʃeɪkspɪə rəʊt məkbeθ/
- l True or false? /njuː jɔːk ɪz ɪn teksəs/

KEY WORDS FOR TEACHERS

Check you know the meanings of these terms.

- *phoneme*, *vowel*, *consonant*, *monophthong*, *diphthong*
- *voiced sound*, *unvoiced sound*
- *schwa*
- *phonemic script*
- *minimal pair*
- *RP* (*Received Pronunciation*)
- *GA* (*General American*)

REFLECTION

- 1 To what extent does your own variety of spoken English match the descriptions of RP or General American (GA) outlined in this unit? Are there any significant differences? Do these differences mean that some words that are different in RP or GA are pronounced the same in your variety? For example, in many varieties of New Zealand English, the words *ear* and *air* are pronounced the same. And in some varieties of North American English, such as those spoken in Canada or in and around Boston, the words *cot* and *caught* are pronounced the same, which is not generally the case in many other regions.
- 2 How might the variety of English that you speak affect your teaching?

References

Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.1774.
Tingsabadh, M.R. Kalaya and Abramson, A. S. (1999). Thai. In *Handbook of the International Phonetic Association*, edited by the International Phonetic Association. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.147.

9 Stress, rhythm and intonation

A Warm-up

- 1 Work in pairs. Do the activity and discuss what it demonstrates.
Imagine you are in a bar or café, and you've both just finished a drink, or a slice of chocolate cake. Have a conversation in which you both use only the word *Well*. The conversation should convey these meanings:
A: That was nice!
B: Shall we have another one?
A: I shouldn't really.
B: I'm going to have another one, even if you're not.
A: If you're going to insist ...
B: You're easily persuaded – you surprise me!
- 2 Discuss whether learners would find this activity easy or difficult. Give reasons for your opinion.

B Stress

Stress is the prominence that is given to particular syllables (in a word) or to particular words (in an utterance).

- 1 Work in pairs. Read these invented words and try to predict which syllable is stressed in each one. Decide what the results of this exercise suggest about the way words are stressed in English.
pawler
veddle
malmish
pandiful
loomitive
loomition
imbelist
imbelistic
geon
geonetics
geonetology
geonetological
- 2 Identify six to eight vocabulary items relating to a particular theme (such as jobs, food and drink, clothing, etc) in the coursebook you are currently using with your teaching practice class. Then answer the questions.
 - a Which is the stressed syllable in each of these words?
 - b What techniques could you use to highlight the stress?

2 – Language analysis and awareness

- 3 a Work in pairs. Mark the main stressed syllable in the second part (i.e. after the |) of each of the following sayings and catchphrases. Then answer the question.
- Don't worry | be happy.
 - You win some | and you lose some.
 - You can run | but you can't hide.
 - It's not what you know | it's who you know.
 - Don't just stand there | do something.
 - The bigger they are | the harder they fall.
 - Two steps forward | one step back.
 - You scratch my back | and I'll scratch yours.
- b What determines which word is stressed?
- 4 Study this coursebook activity. How does your answer to the last exercise apply to this one? (Note that 'the words in pink' are: *Susie owns a flat in Leeds.*)

HELP WITH PRONUNCIATION

Stress and rhythm (4): emphasis and meaning

- 1** a  **24** Listen to these sentences. Notice how the extra stress on one word affects the meaning.

- I **THOUGHT** Ann would come.
(She's here. My prediction was right.)
- I thought Ann would **COME**.
(She's not here. My prediction was wrong.)

b Listen again and practise.

- 2** a Read the sentence in pink. Then match responses 1–5 to meanings a–e.

Susie owns a flat in Leeds.

- I think she's **RENTING** it.
 - I **THOUGHT** she owned that flat.
 - JAMES** owns that flat.
 - I thought she owned a **HOUSE** there.
 - I think the flat's in **BRADFORD**.
- Tom said she didn't, but I knew I was right.
 - I don't think she owns it.
 - You're thinking of the wrong person.
 - I don't think it's in Leeds.
 - I don't think it's a flat.

b  **25** Listen and check.

c Listen again. Take turns to say the sentence in pink in **2a** and responses 1–5 and a–e.

C Rhythm

- 1 Work in pairs. Take turns to read aloud the following sentences so that each sentence takes the same number of beats as the first sentence (which you should read fairly slowly and deliberately). Repeat each sentence before moving to the next. It may help to beat the rhythm with your hand. Then answer the questions.



Words
Words
Words
Some words
Some words
Some of the words



take
should take
should take
should take
should've taken
should've taken



stress.
stress.
the stress.
the stress.
the stress.
the stress.

- 1 What happens to the individual words as the sentence becomes longer?
- 2 Why might this create a problem for students – in terms of both listening and speaking?
- 2 Work in pairs. Study this coursebook activity.
 - 1 Decide what aspect of pronunciation it targets.
 - 2 Discuss how this aspect of pronunciation might be connected with rhythm.

HELP WITH PRONUNCIATION

- 1 **CD2** 44 Work in pairs. How do we say these strong and weak forms? Listen and check. Listen again and practise.

strong	weak	strong	weak
was /wɒz/	was /wəz/	does /dʌz/	does /dəz/
were /wɜː/	were /wə/	do /duː/	do /də/

- 2 **a** Work in pairs. Look at this conversation. Do we usually say the strong (S) or weak (W) forms of the words in blue?

- A** Sorry we're late. We ¹were (W) having lunch. Right, ²do () we need anything for the meeting?
- B** Yes, we ³do (). We need these reports. ⁴Does () Lisa know about the meeting?
- A** Yes, she ⁵does ().
- B** OK. ⁶Were () you at the last meeting?
- A** Yes, we ⁷were ().
- B** ⁸Was () it a very long meeting?
- A** Yes, it ⁹was ().
- B** What ¹⁰was () it about?
- A** I don't know. I ¹¹was () asleep!

- b** **CD2** 45 Listen and check. When do we use the strong and weak forms of the words in 1?

- c** Work in pairs. Practise the conversation.

2 – Language analysis and awareness

D Intonation

Most learners of English as an additional language [...] are not taught intonation and do not study intonation. Yet they do not speak English on a monotone. [...] How can this be?

It must be because the principles of intonation in language are sufficiently universal for us to be able to rely on them even in a foreign language.

J.C. Wells, 2014

1 Work in pairs. Say each of these sentences aloud in two different ways, conveying two different meanings.

- 1 What is the difference in meaning, in each case?
- 2 How is this difference conveyed?

For example: *I like Chinese art and opera*

- 1 I like | Chinese art and operal (= Chinese art and Chinese opera)
- 2 I like | Chinese artl and operal (= Chinese art and any kind of opera)

- a the people who left suddenly started running
- b when shall we eat grandma
- c the mouse which ate the cheese escaped
- d he's a nurse
- e Sigrid is not Swedish is she
- f I'll have it with ham basil olives pineapple
- g hi
- h thanks a million

2 In the light of the above exercise, identify ways that intonation affects meaning.

3 Study this coursebook material and answer the questions.

a  **1.38** Listen to the examples. Does the tone go up (↗) or down (↘) on the question tag? What's the difference in meaning?

- 1 No, it isn't very quick, is it?
- 2 No, they weren't helpful, were they?
- 3 Yes, you need to make things easy, don't you?

b  Practise saying the exchanges in 2e. Try to use the correct tone in the reply.

c  Discuss people and things you and other students know – for example, a person, a café, a film or a car. Use the adjectives below and question tags to agree.

- amusing – funny
- cheerful – happy
- interesting – fascinating
- frightening – terrifying
- exhausting – tiring

That photo is really striking.

Yes, it's stunning, isn't it?

Empower B2

9 Stress, rhythm and intonation

- 1 What feature of intonation does the material target?
- 2 Look at exercises a and c again. Which of the following activities would be useful after a and before c?
 - a A 'read aloud' task, where learners read a number of sentences that include question tags, attempting to apply the appropriate intonation.
 - b A gap-fill exercise where learners write in the missing question tag.
 - c A dialogue activity, in which learners write dialogues that include question tags, and then perform them.

KEY WORDS FOR TEACHERS

Check you know the meanings of these terms.

- *stress* (word stress, sentence stress)
- *rhythm*
- *strong and weak forms*
- *intonation*

REFLECTION

Discuss these questions in pairs or groups.

- 1 Which of the following areas do you think is most critical in ensuring communicative effectiveness? Why?
 - a accurate production of individual sounds (i.e. vowels and consonants)
 - b accurate stress placement in words
 - c accurate stress placement in utterances
 - d native-like rhythm
 - e accurate use of intonation
- 2 Which of the above areas do you think is the most easily learnable? Why?

Reference

J.C. Wells (2014) *Sounds Interesting: Observations on English and general phonetics*. Cambridge University Press, p.133.