

# Phonetics in learning english



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## **Introduction**

The core of phonetic is to identify the characteristics of the sounds which human beings can use in language. Sounds can basically be divided into two types: vowels and consonants. Vowels are produced by altering the shape of the vocal tract by positioning of the tongue and lips. Consonants are sounds which are produced by the partial or complete construction of the vocal tract.

The picture of how your mouth looks when you say sounds. (Sharon Widmayer and Holly Gray) image of articulators

Your lips, teeth, tongue, nose, and roof of your mouth are all important for pronunciation. The epiglottis is also important. That is the thing that you use to hold your breath and to swallow. It closes your windpipe so the air cannot come out.

## **The components of teaching the sound of English**

### **1. Vowels**

Vowels are usually described by reference to five criteria, and these are adequate as a basic point of reference, although some vowel sounds require more specification:

1. the height reached by the highest point of the tongue (high, mid, low) ,
2. the part of the tongue which is raised (front, center, back),
3. the shape formed by the lips (unrounded or spread, rounded)
4. the position of the soft palate for oral vowels, lowered for nasal vowels,
5. the duration of the vowel (short, long)

Some Generalizations (Not Rules) about English vowels and spelling

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English vowels have “ long” and “ short” forms.

The long form is the “ name” of the letter: The short form is as follows:

Long vowels are usually (but not always) indicated by a second (silent) vowel in the same syllable:

Short vowels usually stand alone within a syllable and are often followed by “ double” consonants:

## **2. Consonant sounds**

Consonant sounds have three basic features in their articulation: place of articulation, manner of articulation, and voicing.

Consonants produce sounds that are more consistent and easier to identify than vowels. Therefore, they make a good starting point for learning to read.

Initially, work should be done on identifying beginning consonant sounds (ex: t-t-t tulip).

After that, activities can focus on identifying final consonant sounds (ex: cat ends with the t-t-t sound)

When children learn to recognize the sounds of consonants at the beginning and end positions of words, they gain the ability to look at a word and make a reasonable guess as to what it might be. Viewing the word in the context of a picture will help reinforce this skill.

(for example, a picture of a dog with the word DOG underneath. The ability to sound out the D and G letters will help the child identify that the word is DOG, not puppy or dalmation)

The ideas and activities presented in this section will help children develop the following skills:

- identifying beginning consonant sounds
- distinguishing between two or more beginning consonant sounds
- identifying ending consonant sounds
- distinguishing between two or more ending consonants
- choosing words that have a particular beginning or ending consonant

The following diagram shows the names of the various parts of the mouth involved in the production of English consonants:

A = nasal cavity

B = alveolar ridge

C = hard palate

D = soft palate or velum

E = lips and teeth

F = tongue 1 - tip 2 - blade 3 - body

G = uvula

H = larynx and vocal cords

For each consonant, two parts of the mouth are involved, and the name given to it reflects this. Starting from the front, some consonants are made using both lips - try saying /p/ /b/ /w/ and /m/ - and these are called bilabial consonants (bilabial = two lips)

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Now try /f/ and /v/. This time it's the bottom lip and top teeth which are involved. These are labiodental consonants (labio = lip, dental = teeth).

For nearly all the other consonants, the tongue will interact with another part of the mouth. The name of the consonant doesn't include a reference to the tongue however, just the point of the mouth which it meets. So for instance, sounds made by an interaction between the tongue and the teeth are just called dental sounds. These are /t/, /d/ and the voiced and unvoiced "th" sounds: /θ/ as in this and /ð/ as in thick .

If you run your tongue back behind your teeth, you come to a bony ridge called the alveolar ridge. Several sounds are made on or just behind the ridge - /s/ /z/ /t/ /d/ /n/ /r/ and /l/

Moving back from the alveolar ridge you come to a similarly hard but smoother zone - the hard palate. /j/ as in yellow is a palatal sound, are as the highlighted consonants in the words sheep, measure, cheap and jeep. There is also a palatal version of the /r/ consonant. If you found it strange that it was classed before as alveolar, you may have been saying the palatal version.

Notice that there is now a difference in the way the tongue is used. For the dental and alveolar sounds, it was the tip of the tongue which was involved. For palatal sounds, however, it's the blade of the tongue, and as we move further back to the velum (the soft part of the palate, closest to the throat) it's the back, or body, of the tongue. The velar sounds are /g/ and /k/ and the final consonants in sing and in bottle - often called the "dark" l.

This leaves only the consonant /h/ which is produced by air passing from the windpipe through the vocal cords, or glottis. It's therefore a glottal sound.

Place of Articulation tells us where the consonants are produced, but we also need to consider Manner of Articulation - how they are produced. The most important categories are:

**Plosives:** Plosive sounds (also called stop sounds) are formed by the air being completely blocked in the mouth and then suddenly released. For example, /k/ and /g/ are formed when the back of the tongue rises to the velum and momentarily blocks the air. These are therefore velar plosives. The other plosive consonants of English are the bilabial plosives /p/ and /b/ and the alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/. Some varieties of English - London English for example - also include a glottal stop which substitutes for the /t/ consonant between vowels. Imagine a London pronunciation of butter, for example.

**Fricatives:** Fricatives are formed when the two parts of the mouth approach each other closely, not completely blocking the passage of the air, but forcing it through a confined space. The air molecules start to bump against each other causing audible friction. Try the palatal fricative - the sh sound. You can feel your tongue up close to the alveolar ridge and the air passing through the small space left. The full list of English fricatives is : labiodental fricatives - /f/ and /v/; dental fricatives - the two " th" sounds; alveolar fricatives - /s/ and /z/; palatal fricatives - /ʃ/ as in in sheep and /ʒ/ as in measure; and the glottal fricative /h/.

**Affricates:** Affricates are really a plosive and a fricative combined. The air is initially blocked, and then released through a narrow passageway like a fricative. English has two affricates, the initial sounds in cheap and jeep – /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. These are usually classed as palato-alveolar affricates, as they're made in a position half way between the alveolar ridge and the hard palate.

**Nasals:** when a nasal sound is produced, the air is prevented from going out through the mouth and is instead released through the nose. There are three English nasals – the bilabial nasals /m/ and /n/ and the velar nasal /ŋ/ – the final consonant in sing.

**Approximant:** Approximants are a bit of a hotch-potch category, and contain some of the most problematic sounds in English. We'll look at them in detail another time, but for now will classify them together as sounds produced when the airstream moves around the tongue and out of the mouth with almost no obstruction. The English approximants are the alveolar approximants /l/ and /r/, the palatal approximant /j/, as in yes, and the dark l – the velar approximant – as in bottle. Keep in mind, however, that this is a simplification.

This leaves the third distinguishing category which we discussed in the last article – voicing. If the vocal cords are vibrated when the sound is made, the sound is voiced. If they are not, it is unvoiced. Several of the English consonants come in pairs. They have the same place and manner of articulation and are distinguished only by voicing (1). For example /t/ and /d/ are both alveolar plosives, but /t/ is unvoiced while /d/ is voiced. In the

summarizing chart below, where pairs occur the unvoiced sound is always given first.

### **3. Sounds in connected speech**

Sounds are seldom produced in isolation. In connected speech (that is, any sequence spoken at natural speed), many sounds tend to be altered or modified by the sound immediately before or after them, especially at the boundaries between words.

According to the Excerpt from Study Guide, Connected Speech is the key to gaining a natural, smooth-flowing style of speech. People do not speak in separate words; they speak in logical connected groups of words. Even native speakers sometimes “stumble over their words” because they are unaware of the “little tricks” for avoiding the pitfalls. Trained actors, of course, are able to deliver lengthy, complex, and even “tongue-twisting” passages flawlessly. This is not a gift. They have simply learned the “rules” for linking one word into another with intention. When you’ve finished this tape, you’ll know the rules, too; and with practice you’ll become a fluent, polished speaker.

These are the steps for speaking in connected speech:

- Direct Linking: Linking final consonants directly into vowels
- Play and Link: Linking final consonants fully played and linked to fully played non-related consonants.
- Prepare and Link: Prepare for the final consonant, and execute related consonant that it is linking into.



- Weak Forms: A lot of the very small connecting words in speech are so de-emphasized, or unstressed, that they often take on a Weak Form.
  
- Contractions: We use these words so much that, we usually contract them together.
  
- Word Endings and Contractions: Common Word Endings (Suffixes). These are mostly unstressed, and should be treated like weak forms.
  
- Dialogues Practicing Word Endings and Contractions: These dialogues have a double emphasis. Practicing both Word Endings and Contractions within a context.

### **Conclusion**

If other aspects of pronunciation are dealt with efficiently, sounds do not present such a problem. Again, much of the difficulty which students have when pronouncing English sounds comes, not from a physical inability to form them, but from language interference. This occurs when the student knows how an English word is spelt and pronounces it as if was written in his own language.

It is important for a teacher to know how sounds are formed so that he understands what his students are doing wrong.

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