

# Speaking clearly

## Pronunciation: Consonants

If you speak English as a second language, others may occasionally have difficulty understanding what you say. If this happens frequently, you should consider seeking help from a professional who is qualified in accent modification. For occasional problems, there is a lot you can do on your own to make communication easier.

Clear speech is important at university to enable you to participate successfully in tutorials and discussions, to give presentations, collaborate with other students and to enable you to communicate your academic ideas and queries to your lecturers and tutors.

**Accurate pronunciation will increase your confidence and encourage you to communicate more freely**

Clear speech is essential in many careers, especially when speaking is a basic tool, as in teaching, or any job where you meet the public.

### Common problems with speech sounds

#### 1. Consonant sounds

Typical consonant sounds that students of English as a second language have trouble with include:

|      |       |        |      |       |
|------|-------|--------|------|-------|
| r    | l     | f      | v    | w     |
| red  | light | face   | very | win   |
| ʃ    | tʃ    | dʒ     | ð    | θ     |
| ship | chip  | bridge | the  | think |

You may find that you substitute a similar sound from your own language, or that you can say the sound correctly in some words, but not in others.

#### Learn to hear and say the new sound

Make sure you can clearly hear the difference between the sound you are making and the correct sound in English. Also, examine diagrams that show what your lips and tongue should be doing. The University of Iowa website provides listening training as well as moving diagrams:

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/english/frameset.html>

**Say the sound accurately in words.** Being able to hear and make the right consonant is just the start. It takes time to train yourself to make the sound in the right places in fluent speech. Start with simple repetition or reading aloud tasks and increase the difficulty of the task until you can produce the sound in difficult speaking situations without having to think about it.

**Make lists of words** that contain the sound at the start, middle and ends of words. For the sound **L**, for example, your list might contain *lip, really, fill*.

**Collect common expressions** that contain the sound and practise saying them in conversation: 'See you later'; 'Hello'; 'I'd like...'; 'Very well'.

**Read aloud:** Take simple texts (magazines and brochures are fine) and highlight the sound you are working on every time it occurs. Read it aloud and record yourself. Listen and note how many times you got the sound right. Repeat the exercise and see if your score improves. Now retell the passage from memory and see if you can maintain the same level of accuracy. Don't worry if you can't retell the story with complete accuracy, the important thing is getting the sound right in the right places.

**Find a song** that you like that contains your sound many times. Learn the lyrics and sing it to yourself in the shower! For example, if you confuse **l** and **r** try 'Crazy' by Patsy Kline: "Crazy, I'm crazy for feeling so lonely".

For **v** and **f**, try John Lennon's 'Imagine': "Imagine there's no heaven / It's easy if you try / No hell below us / Above us only sky / Imagine all the people / Living for today..."

**Tell a story** that you know, or the plot of an enjoyable movie. Record yourself and replay it to check your accuracy with your sound. Retell it and see if your accuracy improves. Ask someone to listen and rate your accuracy.

**Find a partner to practise with.** Have short conversations and ask them to tell you every time you make the sound incorrectly. Keep to a strict time limit, e.g. 5 minutes. See if you can get to the end of 5 minutes with no errors.

**Collect lists of terms** from your field of study and practise the words that have your difficult sound in it until you can say them reliably. This is excellent preparation for speaking tasks at University, such as contributing in a tutorial or giving a presentation.

## Academic Skills

## 2. Word Endings or Closing Syllables

English has many words that sound similar, but have a different final sound. In fact, hearing the difference between words like *wet*, *wedge* and *west* depends heavily on the final consonant or consonants.

If you have problems with sounds on the ends of words, you should address it because it can make your speech very difficult to understand. You may have no difficulty saying a sound alone or at the start of a word, like 't' in *two*, but you may find it very hard to say that sound at the end of a word, as in *beat*.

### Listen to the sound in words:

First, can you clearly hear the difference between sounds? (See Iowa website above.) However, in this case you need to listen to the sounds in words, and even within whole sentences. Find someone who speaks English very clearly, and ask them to read one of each of the following pairs of phrases:

*I can't get his name.*      *I can't guess his name.*

*Right on the beach.*      *Right on the beat.*

*The right dish.*      *The rice dish.*

*Today's cash.*      *Today's catch.*

### Some tips for saying sounds at the ends of words:

Join the last sound on to the next word. This is much easier if the next word begins with a vowel.

e.g. *Wri\_\_ta letter.* (*Write a letter.*)

*Ri\_\_siz tasty.* (*Rice is tasty.*)

*Ca\_\_sha cheque.* (*Cash a cheque.*)

Now try the word in a number of different sentences e.g. *Cash a cheque / Cash or credit? / Cash in hand.* You can find phrases like this if you look up the word in a good learner's dictionary.

You will not need to go through this lengthy process for every word in the English language that ends with your difficult sound. Once you have acquired improved pronunciation of a few, the rest will be easier.

Next you must accurately produce the sound in words in longer, more complex phrases and sentences.

## 3. Voicing on the ends of words

Many learners of English find it hard to say voiced sounds on the end of a word or syllable. Can you say these sentences so that sentence A sounds different from sentence B?

**A**

*What is a rope?*

*A long coat.*

*Blue ice.*

**B**

*What is a robe?*

*A long code.*

*Blue eyes.*

Some consonants have 'partners': another sound in the language which is almost identical, but one uses voice and the other does not. Compare the following 'partners':

*p b*      **tap, tab**      *t d*      **rate, raid**

*s z*      **bus, buzz**      *f v*      **safe, save**

*k g*      **back, bag**      *ch dg*      **batch, badge**

For sounds with voice you will feel the vibration. Try this with some of the long sounds, e.g. **f** and **v**, **s** and **z**.

### Tips for producing voiced sounds on the ends of words or syllables:

**Start by practising the long sounds.** It will be easier to clearly pronounce words that end in long sounds like *safe* and *save*, *bus* and *buzz*. It will take longer to be successful with words that end in short sounds like *back* and *bag* or *coat* and *code*.

**Make the vowel longer** before voiced sounds. When a word ends in the voiced sounds; *b, d, z, v, g, dg*, the vowel sounds longer. Lengthening the vowel for these words will make your pronunciation more accurate. You can make vowel sounds in English quite long without losing any clarity.

When you are confident you can produce voiced sounds on the ends of words or syllables, try some of the tips under '**Say the sound accurately in words**'.

## 4. Consonant Clusters

Some learners cannot say consonants when they occur together within a word. Typically the sounds **r** and **l** are difficult to say straight after a consonant. Students either leave out the **r** or **l** (*bread* sounds like *bed*), or make a vowel sound between the two consonants (e.g. *prayed* sounds like *parade*). Large groups of consonants are even more difficult. e.g.

*extract (KSTR) transfer (NSF) abstract (BSTR)*

Such words are common in academic English. It is important that you feel confident to say them clearly.

### Tips for pronouncing consonant clusters:

Look in your study notes for new words with groups of consonants. Underline any consonant clusters. Count the number of consonants. Try saying the consonants slowly, one after the other, and gradually increase your speed. Do not make a vowel sound in between the consonants. When you can say the cluster with every consonant, try saying the whole word.

e.g. *amplitude*

mpl...mpl...mpl...

### Further resources

Hancock, M. (2006). *English pronunciation in use. Intermediate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Hewings, M. (2007). *English pronunciation in use. Advanced*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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