



**CAES**

Centre for  
Applied English Studies  
The University of Hong Kong

# **Enriching Knowledge Series:**

## **3) Improving English Pronunciation and Speaking Skills**

**The Centre for Applied English Studies at The University of Hong Kong**

# 1. Introduction: Workshop Aims

By the end of this session, you will have an improved awareness of:

- How to identify, distinguish between and practice single vowel sounds and diphthongs, consonant clusters, past tense –ed endings and words with silent letters
- How appropriate word and sentence stress can improve clarity and communication
- How to use intonation, word stress and pausing to improve delivery when reading aloud

# Rationale: Areas to prioritize for successful communication

- Segmental features, i.e., parts of words such as consonant clusters and monophthongs can have an impact on intelligibility (Levis, 2018, as cited in Chan, n.d.)
- Consonants: consonant clusters, voiced vs unvoiced consonant sounds, past tense and plural endings
- Vowels: differences between long and short vowel sounds; vowels in stressed syllables
- Stress: word, phrase and sentence stress; the schwa and weak forms
- Intonation: basic patterns in phrases, statements and questions; patterns in yes/no and wh- questions
- From text to speech: indicating emotion, pausing, stress and intonation in a spoken text
- Further reading – see Appendices for suggestions and further examples

## 2. Warm-up – experience sharing

In small groups, discuss the following questions:

- Which areas of pronunciation do your students often have difficulty with?
- Which areas of teaching pronunciation do you feel less confident about?
- In this session, we aim to **share experience** and provide hands-on activities to **refresh** and **enrich your knowledge of English phonology and pronunciation**, and to heighten your awareness of **common pronunciation problems of ESL learners in Hong Kong**.

# Suggested flow of class activities

1. One table / person reads the examples to the class
2. Table groups identify the main issues and generalize the rule
3. Think of further examples
4. Take turns to give feedback to the class

Updated instructions are on the PPT slides!

# 3.1. Terminology Quiz: Part 1 – Concepts

Work in groups. Choose the correct word from the box below to complete the gaps.

1. **Phoneme**: a sound that makes up part of a word in a language, and distinguishes that word from another, e.g., the /t/ sound in tin. .... are used to represent phonemes.
2. IPA – International ..... Alphabet → Uses symbols to show individual phonemes and other identifiable, specific features of human speech. This is commonly referred to as phonetic or ..... transcription (Carley et al. 2018).
3. Dictionaries commonly use phonemic transcription, AKA ..... transcription, i.e., a general description of how a word or phrase sounds (Carley et al., 2018).
4. .... are variations of the same sound, e.g., the /p/ in stop vs the /p/ in pots.
5. Phonology: The study of where ..... appear in a language.
6. Phonetics: The study of .....; the symbols used to represent sounds.
7. ‘Phonics’: An ..... method which separates words into individual and combined sounds.
8. Prosody: Language features such as stress and ..... that can be observed 'beyond' the level of phonemes.

educational / symbols / sounds x 2 / intonation / allophones / **phoneme** / broad / narrow /  
phonetic

# 3.1. Terminology Quiz: Part 1 – Concepts

Work with a partner. Choose the correct word from the box below to complete the gaps.

1. **Phoneme**: a sound that makes up part of a word in a language, and distinguishes that word from another, e.g., the /t/ sound in tin. **Symbols** are used to represent phonemes.
2. IPA – International **Phonetic** Alphabet → Uses symbols to show individual phonemes and other identifiable, specific features of human speech. This is commonly referred to as phonetic or **narrow** transcription (Carley et al. 2018).
3. Dictionaries commonly use phonemic transcription, AKA **broad** transcription i.e., a general description of how a word or phrase sounds (Carley et al., 2018).
4. **Allophones** are variations of the same sound, e.g., the /p/ in stop vs the /p/ in pots.
5. Phonology: The study of where **sounds** appear in a language.
6. Phonetics: The study of **sounds**, i.e., where and how they are made and perceived; the symbols used to represent sounds.
7. 'Phonics': An **educational** method which separates words into individual and combined sounds.
8. Prosody: Language features such as stress and **intonation** that can be observed 'beyond' the level of phonemes.

## 3.2. Terminology Quiz: Part 2 – Sounds

Choose the best option. An example has been done for you.

1. Vowel sounds (e.g., /e/): Sounds in which the airflow is is not blocked.
2. Monophthong /'mɒn.əf.θɒŋ/ (e.g., /æ/): One / two vowel sound(s).
3. Diphthong /'dɪfθɒŋ/ (e.g., /ɔɪ/): One / two vowel sound(s).
4. Consonant sounds (e.g., /b/): Airflow is / is not blocked.
5. Voiced consonants (e.g., /b/): The vocal cords do / do not vibrate.
6. Unvoiced consonants (e.g., /p/): The vocal cords do / do not vibrate.
7. Minimal pairs (e.g., 'bin' and 'pin'): Two words that are different in one / more than one sound.
8. Weak forms: How monosyllabic grammatical words (e.g., 'does', 'have') are pronounced when they are / are not stressed in connected speech (Underhill, 2005).
9. Strong forms: How grammatical words (e.g., 'does', 'have') are pronounced when they are / are not emphasized in speech (Underhill, 2005).
10. Intonation: The rise and fall / volume of the voice during speech.
11. Bonus question: When we whisper, do we use our vocal cords?



## 3.2. Terminology Quiz: Part 2 – Sounds - Answers

Choose the best option. An example has been done for you.

1. Vowel sounds (e.g., /e/): Sounds in which the airflow **is not** blocked.
2. Monophthong /'mɒn.əf.θɒŋ/ (e.g., /æ/): **One** vowel sound.
3. Diphthong /'dɪfθɒŋ/ (e.g., /ɔɪ/): **Two** vowel sounds.
4. Consonant sounds (e.g., /b/): Airflow **is** blocked.
5. Voiced consonants (e.g., /b/): The vocal cords **do** vibrate.
6. Unvoiced consonants (e.g., /p/): The vocal cords **do not** vibrate.
7. Minimal pairs (e.g., 'bin' and 'pin'): Two words that are different in **one** sound
8. Weak forms: How monosyllabic grammatical words (e.g., 'does', 'have') are pronounced when they **are not** stressed in connected speech (Underhill, 2005).
9. Strong forms: How grammatical words (e.g., 'does', 'have') are pronounced when they **are** emphasized in speech (Underhill, 2005).
10. Intonation: The **rise and fall** of the voice during speech.
11. Bonus question: When we whisper, do we use our vocal cords? No!

# Phonemes: An interactive guide

- Useful interactive guide to phonemes: <https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/phonemic-chart-ia.htm> (EnglishClub, n.d.)
- In today's class, please refer to the extra handout.
- Some of the example sounds in the online chart include an added /ə/, e.g. /f/ becomes /fə/
- 20 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds

## 3.3. Introducing common problems

Listen to the audio.

Discuss in pairs: Which word is pronounced incorrectly in each example? Why might this be?

1. The cat sat on the mat.
2. I bought a box of green beans.
3. The boy threw a coin into the well.
4. She likes to play tennis in her free time.
5. The dog was very wary of the postman.
6. She put her clothes in the suitcase.

## 3.3. Introducing common problems

Which sounds is pronounced incorrectly in each example?

1. The cat **sat** on the mat. [“set” instead of “sat”]
2. I bought a box of green **beans**. [“bins” instead of “beans”]
3. The boy threw a **coin** into the well. [“con” instead of “coin”]
4. She likes to **play** tennis in her free time. [“pay” instead of “play”]
5. The dog was **very** wary of the postman. [“ferry” instead of “very”]
6. She put her **clothes** in the suitcase. [“clothe” instead of “clothes”]

## 4. Vowel sounds

### 4.1. Distinguishing between short vowel sounds /e/ and /æ/

A common problem for students in Hong Kong is the distinction between the phonemes /e/ and /æ/ (Chan, n.d.). It is useful to compare these sounds using minimal pairs, as this can help demonstrate the difference. It can be helpful to ask learners to listen to examples and think about how and where sounds are formed.

Listen to a volunteer and repeat:

Pat: /pæt/ vs pet: /pet/

Had: /hæd/ vs head: /hed/

In groups, discuss the following questions:

1. What happens to the position of the jaw and the shape of the lips when pronouncing each word?
2. Where does each vowel sound *feel* like it comes from in the mouth? (Please refer to figure 9a on the extra handout.)
3. Do you notice a difference in the length of the vowel sound in this example: had /hæd/ vs hat /hæt/?

● Key takeaway: Sounds are often influenced by adjacent sounds

## 4.1. Practice: Pronouncing /e/ vs /æ/

Volunteer from Table ...: Read the following sentences aloud. How are the underlined words pronounced?

- Have a salad made of eggs and apples.  
/hæv ə 'sæləd/      /egz ənd 'æplz./
- I set the cat on the bed. The cat was angry and scratched my leg.  
/set/    /kæt/      /bed/    /kæt/    /'æŋgri/    /skrætʃt/    /leg/
- Has anyone got a penny? Yes, but I haven't got many.  
/'eniwʌn/      /'peni/    /jes/      /hævnt/    /'meni/

## 4.1. Practice: Pronouncing /e/ vs /æ/

In pairs, practice reading following words and phrases. See how quickly you can move between the /æ/ and /e/ sounds!

/æ/	sad had dad fad	bat pat paddle	band bland	batter	gas	flash mash
/e/	said head dead fed	bet pet pedal	bend blend	better	guess	flesh mesh

### **/æ/ and /e/ combinations and tongue twisters**

A yellow hat; a red bag; a black dress; angry hens; happy elephants;  
black and red beds; many men ate bad apples; Jen gambled ten  
pennies on the game.

## 4.2. Vowels – long and short pairs

Put your hands on your face. Notice how your face shape changes when you pronounce the following two words:

Chip vs cheap /tʃɪp/ → /tʃi:p/

Is it only the **length** of the vowel that changes, or does **anything else** happen?

Lip and tongue shape also change slightly!

Note: Carley et al. (2018) refer to long vowel sounds and diphthongs as 'free vowels'.



## 4.2. Vowels – long and short pairs

1. Practise the following sounds. Notice how the vowel quality changes (Carley et al., 2018).

- a) Chip vs cheap /tʃɪp/ → /tʃi:p/
- b) full vs fool /fʊl/ → /fu:l/
- c) Knot vs naught /nɒt/ → /nɔ:t/
- d) Pill vs peel /pɪl/ → /pi:l/
- e) Bin vs bean /bɪn/ → /bi:n/
- f) Cat vs cart /kæt/ → /kɑ:t/
- g) Forget vs her → /fə'gɛt/ → /hɜ:/

2. Listen to a volunteer from Table .... Do you hear the long or the short vowel sound?

Long vowel sounds are identified by ▼ ▲

## 4.2. Vowels – long and short pairs

1. Practise the following sounds. Exaggerate the longer vowel sound in each pair.

Vowels – long and short pairs

	/ɪ/ vs /i:/	/ʊ/ vs /u:/	/ɒ/ vs /ɔ:/	/æ/ vs /ɑ:/	/ə/ vs /ɜ:/
'short'	hit bid	pull full	cot knot cod	cat Sam had	forget surprise
'long'	heat bead	pool fool	caught naught cord	cart psalm hard	fur sir

2. Practice reading the following long vowel sounds aloud. Notice the spelling patterns.

/i:/ - Seem; dream; feed; exceed; leave; teen; cheese.

/u:/ - Blue; review; shoe; new; two; moon; do; you.

/ɔ:/ - Naughty; shore; adore; explore; corn; awful; awesome.

/ɑ:/ - Father; car; shark; heart.

/ɜ:/ - Stir; dirt; her; occur; earn.

**Key takeaway:** Focusing on vowel length *can* be confusing for learners, as it is not just the length that changes (Carley et al., 2018).

## 4.2. Vowels – long sound combinations

In pairs, practice reading the following sentences. Check the accuracy of how you pronounce the long vowel sounds.

- a) Do you believe people landed on the moon?
- b) She adores her new blue shoes.
- c) The blue cheese seems to be free of E-numbers.
- d) My heart jumped when I saw the shark in the water.
- e) We need to learn how to search for birds and herbs.

## 4.2. Vowel sound focus: /I/ vs /i:/ - practice

Volunteer from Table ... : Choose a sentence in each pair to read aloud.

Class: Listen and vote for the correct option.

1a. You can get vitamin C from orange peels.

1b. You can get vitamin C from orange pills.

2a. There's a bean on the kitchen counter.

2b. There's a bin on the kitchen counter.

3a. The horse beat the dog in the race.

3b. The horse bit the dog in the race.

Teacher's tip: Activities like this should have believable sentences so that the correct choice cannot be guessed from the context!

## 4.3. Diphthongs

1. A diphthong is a combination of **two vowel sounds**.
2. Usually, the focus is on the **first sound** in the diphthong.
3. Some diphthongs sound like **letters**, e.g. /əʊ/, 'letter o' and /aɪ/ 'letter I'.
4. Diphthongs are also known as **glides**, as the vowel sound 'glides' from one **towards** the other (Carley et al., 2018).
5. There are eight diphthongs in the Underhill chart, but some authors now consider /eə/ a monophthong, due to changes in how words with this sound are pronounced (Carley et al., 2018)

## 4.3. Practice: Identify the Diphthongs

Volunteer from Table ...:

Read aloud each pair of words and identify the word that contains a diphthong.

Class: Which mistakes might students make when pronouncing diphthong sounds?

Spy	Spa
Mate	Met
Did	Deer
Tall	Toil
Two	Tour
Tar	Tower

## 4.3. Practice: Identify the Diphthongs

In pairs, identify the word in each row that contains a diphthong.  
Practise reading each pair of words aloud. Notice the change in vowel sound.

<b>Spy</b>	Spa
<b>Mate</b>	Met
Did	<b>Deer</b>
Tall	<b>Toil</b>
Two	<b>Tour</b>
Tar	<b>Tower</b>

## 4.4. Practice: Identify the Diphthongs

Some learners may find diphthongs difficult, and either shorten or replace diphthong sounds. The following sentence pairs highlight some common examples (see Education University of Hong Kong [EdUHK], 2023 for more details).

- 1) Missing second vowel: /ɔɪ/ becomes /ɒ/ (e.g., coin vs con)
- 2) Vowel replacement: /eɪ/ becomes /æ/ (e.g., same vs Sam), /e/ (e.g., sail vs sell), or /ɪ/ (e.g., take vs tick).

Student A: Choose a sentence to read aloud; Student B: Listen and choose the correct option.

1a. Bank tellers deal with coins every day.

1b. Bank tellers deal with cons every day.

2a. Can you take this box for me?

2b. Can you tick this box for me?

3a. They went to sail the boat.

3b. They went to sell the boat.



## 4.4. Practice: Diphthong sounds

Work in pairs. Match the phrases to the symbols

- take a break
- brown cow
- a poor tour
- over the road
- day by day
- the mind's eye
- point to point
- barely there
- a-hoy!
- clear beer
- pie in the sky
- a pure cure
- a pound of trout
- fair hair
- cold snow

Symbol	Phrases	
/eɪ/		
/eə/		
/aʊ/		
/aɪ/		
/ɔɪ/		
/əʊ/		
/ɪə/		
/ʊə/		

## 4.4. Practice: Diphthong sounds

Bonus question: Can you identify a difference between sounds 1-6 and 7-8?

Symbol	Phrases	
1. /eɪ/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
2. /eə/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
3. /aʊ/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
4. /aɪ/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
5. /ɔɪ/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
6. /əʊ/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
7. /ɪə/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
8. /ʊə/	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Key takeaway: Learners may shorten or replace diphthongs with other short vowel sounds. Focusing on the change in vowel sound and articulation can be helpful.

## 5. Consonant sounds

### 5.1 Word initial sounds: /v/ and /r/ vs /w/, and /n/ vs /l/

- Chan (n.d.) explains that /v/ and /r/ sounds when they appear at the start of words can be tricky for learners, who may replace these sounds with /w/. Sometimes this can create a new word, or simply make the speaker difficult to understand.
- The distinction between /n/ and /l/ at the start of words is also important in order to maintain communication (Chan, n.d.)
- Listen and mimic the teacher!

/v/	/w/	/r/
veil	whale	rail

/n/	/l/
night	light

# 5.1 Sound focus: /v/and /r/ vs /w/, and /n/ vs /l/

It can help to focus on how and where these initial sounds are produced.

- Spelling rules can make this confusing!
- Advice: Teach sets of words with similar sound-spelling connections.

Listen to a volunteer from Table .... Which word do you hear, 1, 2 or 3?

	1	2	3
	/v/	/w/	/r/
a	vary	wary	
b	veil	whale	rail
c		where	rare
d		white	right
e		white	write
f		Wong	wrong
	/n/	/l/	/r/
g	night	light	right
h	know	low	row

## 5.2. Initial consonant clusters /pr/ vs /pl/

The following consonant clusters are important for intelligibility. Students in Hong Kong often replace /r/ with /l/, which can impede communication and sometimes change the meaning of the word (Chan, n.d.).

**Bonus question: Look at the extra handout. Can you identify where the individual phonemes are formed?**

Listen to the following sounds: /pr/ vs /pl/

- Prod vs plod vs pod
- Prow vs plough vs pow
- Pray vs play vs pay

Listen to the following sentences. Notice what happens to the meaning of each sentence when a mistake occurs!

- I was proud of how they played. They worked hard for their prize.  
/praʊd/                      /pleɪd/                                      /praɪz/
- I loved the present – it was a pleasant surprise.  
/'prezənt/                      /'plezənt/
- The police gave a press release which started at 4pm and ended at 5.  
/pə'li:s/                      /pres rɪ'li:s/

## 5.2. Initial consonant clusters /fr/ vs /fl/ and /gr/ vs /gl/

The following consonant clusters are important for intelligibility. Students in Hong Kong often replace /r/ with /l/, which can impede communication and sometimes change the meaning of the word (Chan, n.d.).

Listen to the following sounds: /fr/ vs /fl/ and /gr/ vs /gl/

- Free vs flee vs fee
- Fright vs flight vs fight
- Green vs glean
- Grass vs glass vs gas

Work in small groups. Practise reading the following tongue twisters aloud.

- I got a fright when I saw the fee for the 'free' flight.
- A frequent flier got into a fight with a flight attendant.
- The green grass grew between the glass bottles.

**Key takeaway: Learners may replace or omit phonemes in consonant clusters. Helping them focus on articulation individual phonemes may be useful.**

## 5.3 Word final consonant sounds: The past tense “-ed” consonant clusters

played	worked	loved	started	ended

Notice how the endings of the words above are pronounced differently. Choose the correct answer for each example.

- Worked /kt/ → The –ed is pronounced /t/ because the preceding sound is a voiced/unvoiced consonant.
- Played /eɪd/; Loved /vd/ → The –ed is pronounced /d/ because the preceding sound is a voiced/unvoiced sound.
- Started /ɪd/; Ended /ɪd/ → The –ed ending is pronounced with the extra syllable/ɪd/ when the verb stem ends in

.....

## 5.3 Word final consonant sounds: The past tense “-ed” consonant clusters

Notice how the endings of the following words are pronounced differently

- Worked /kt/ → The –ed is pronounced /t/ because the preceding sound is an unvoiced consonant.
- Loved /vd/ → The –ed is pronounced /d/ because the preceding sound is a voiced sound.
- Wanted /ɪd/; Ended /ɪd/ → The –ed ending is pronounced with the extra syllable /ɪd/ when the verb stem ends in /t/ or /d/.



## 5.3 Word final consonant sounds: The past tense “-ed” consonant clusters

1. Notice how the endings of the following words are pronounced differently.

### The past tense “-ed”

Final /d/ sound	Final /t/ sound	Final /Id/ syllable
played failed climbed loved phoned	worked stopped cooked laughed typed	started ended decided wanted hunted

2. Practise reading the following phrases.

- a) She stared at the screen until she started to fall asleep.
- b) They played tennis in the afternoon and worked in the kitchen in the evening.
- c) The cat sniffed the food and walked away.
- d) The film ended at 9 o'clock.
- e) They cooked dinner and watched TV.

## 5.4. Plural noun endings

How are the plural nouns pronounced in the following sentences? Can you notice any sound-spelling patterns?  
In pairs, read the sentences aloud.

- The **chefs** didn't like the **chips**.
- **Pots, forks** and **knives** were piled up in the sink.
- I saw five **foxes** in the **fields**.
- She packed her **clothes** into the **suitcases**.
- There were many delicious **dishes** on the menu.
- The **changes** happened over **days, weeks** and **months**.

## 5.4. Plural noun endings

- The **chefs** didn't like the **chips**.  
/ʃefs/                      /tʃɪps/
- **Pots**, **forks** and **knives** were piled up in the sink.  
/pɒts/ /fɔːks/ /naɪvz/
- I saw five **foxes** in the **fields**.  
/'fɒksɪz/            /fiːldz/
- She packed her **clothes** into the **suitcases**.  
/kləʊðz/            /suːtkeɪsɪz/
- There were many delicious **dishes** on the menu  
/'dɪʃɪz/
- The **changes** happened over **days**, **weeks** and **months**.  
/'tʃeɪndʒɪz/            /deɪz/ /wiːks/            /mʌnθs/

*Can you notice any sound-spelling patterns?*

## 5.4. Plural noun endings

The final sound of the singular word influences the pronunciation of the plural form.

**The following unvoiced final sounds /p/, /f/, /t/, /θ/ and /k/ result in a /s/ sound (Carley et al., 2018).**

- /p/ - chips /tʃɪps/
- /f/ - chefs /ʃefs/
- /t/ - potsts /pɒts/
- /θ/ - months /mʌnθs/
- /k/ - forks /fɔ:ks/
  
- Other consonants or final vowel sounds --> /z/ sound,  
e.g. clothes /kləʊðz/; days /deɪz/
- When the plural forms another syllable, “es” –  
e.g. dishes /dɪʃɪz/

**Key takeaway: Sounds are often influenced by adjacent sounds.**

## 5.5. Final consonant clusters: /ts/ vs /sts/ and /sp/ vs/ps/ vs /sps/

In a plural noun such as 'pots' /pɒts/, the /t/ and the /s/ sounds are important to pronounce for intelligibility. Students in Hong Kong might not pronounce the /t/ sound clearly (Chan et al., n.d.). In addition, plural forms of words ending in /st/ can be tricky due to the required change in articulation and an interruption of the airflow!

Teacher's tip: work backwards and isolate sounds. Remember that sounds are often influenced by adjacent sounds. In this exercise we will consider the words below in isolation. How the words may be pronounced in connected speech will be addressed in Section 6.

- Mast → masts (Treat /ts/ as an individual sound! There are some very subtle changes in the individual phonemes in the plural form. The first /s/ sound is slightly shorter, and there is slightly less force in the plosive /t/.)
- Pest → pests
- Crisp → crisps
- Mask --> masks
  
- Crisp → crops (note the switch in order of the consonant sounds)
- Tongue twisters: The man's last task was to cut the crisp crops.
- We popped to the shops and got some crisps, masks and pots.

## 5.5. Extra challenge: Consonant cluster combinations

As we have seen, consonant clusters can be tricky due to the change in articulation between individual sounds in a cluster.


**Use the following sentences to help practice more challenging clusters.**

- The clean clothes flapped on the clothesline.
- The flimsy blouse had a pattern of flowers and feathers.
- The plain pearls pleased the pleasant girls.
- The seven silver dishes splashed in the sink.
- Ten brave clowns brought the cows to town.
- The rain dripped down and made the steps slippery.

## 5.6. Common silent letters

Identify the silent letters in column A, then match the corresponding word in column B

A + silent letter	B
Climb = b	write; who
muscle	autumn
grandfather	Bonham
campaign; sigh	resign; foreign; might
Graham	science
knee	listen
half	guitar
column	Wednesday
cupboard	receipt
whistle	knife
colleague	thumb
answer	salmon



# 5.5. Common silent letters

Identify the silent letters in column A, then match the corresponding word in column B

A + silent letter	B
climb = B	thumb
muscle = C	
grandfather = D	
campaign; sigh = G	
Graham = h	
knee = K	
half = L	
column = N	
cupboard = P	
whistle = T	
colleague = U	
answer = W	



## 5.7. Consolidation

Test your knowledge. Work in small groups. Take turns to accurately produce the commonly mistaken vowel and consonant sounds in bold. Discuss the main reasons for the problem(s) highlighted in bold in each example.

1. **Have** a **salad** made of **eggs** and **apples**. (/e/ vs /æ/)
2. I bought a box of **green beans**. (/I/ vs /i:/)
3. The **boy** threw a **coin** into the well. (full diphthongs)
4. Can you **take** this box for me? (full diphthongs)
5. She likes to **play** tennis in her **free** time. (consonant clusters)
6. The dog was **very** wary of the postman. (/v/ vs /w/ vs /f/)
7. She put her **clothes** in the suitcase. (plural endings)
8. We **popped** to the **shops** and got some **crisps**, **masks** and **pots**. (past tense –ed endings; final consonant clusters)

# 6. Prosody: Developing awareness of stress, pitch, intonation and pausing

## 6.1. Experience sharing

Share your experience by discussing the following questions in small groups:

- When reading aloud, do your students tend to read in a monotone?
- Does their spoken language sound lively?
- Are the ideas easy to follow?

## 6.2. Rapid connected speech: An overview of key features

Whilst an awareness of key features of rapid connected speech and how they impact the comprehension of spoken language for the listener can be useful for learners, it has been suggested in the literature that a focus on developing sentence stress and weak forms in teaching and learning can be more productive in terms of improving communicative competence (Underhill, 2005). It can be helpful for learners to understand that features of connected speech may affect listening comprehension (Carley et al., 2018).

This section provides a brief overview of some key features of rapid connected speech.

- Assimilation
- Catenation
- Elision
- Intrusion

The main reason for these features is that the resulting sound is easier to pronounce at speed.

## 6.2. Assimilation

**Assimilation** can occur in rapid connected speech at word boundaries when one phoneme changes due to the influence of another, and becomes more similar to this sound, e.g., in handbag, the /nd/ sound often becomes /m/ due to the influence of the following /b/.

/hændbæg/ --> /hæmbæg/

/t/ → /tʃ/

/n/ → /m/

/d/ → /b/

Phrase and rapid connected speech transcription

- Don't you? /dəʊntʃə/
- in bold /ɪmbəʊld/

Question: Why does assimilation happen?

The reason is that the **changed sound** is easier to pronounce at speed.

## 6.2. Catenation

### Catenation – consonant + vowel linking

Catenation can occur when a consonant sound at the end of a word joins to a vowel sound at the start of the following word. Again, this is because it makes the phrase easier to pronounce at speed.

#### Phrase and rapid connected speech transcription

- An injection      /ə nɪn 'dʒekʃən/
- Boiled eggs      /bɔɪl degz/
- An apple      /ə 'næpl/
- I've already finished /aɪ vɔ:l 'redi 'fɪnɪʃt/

## 6.2. Elision

**Elision** occurs when sounds are omitted. This can happen for both consonant and vowel sounds.

Weak vowel sounds may be omitted after a plosive in a multisyllabic word: police /pə'li:s/ to /pli:s/; history /'hɪstəri/ to /'hɪstri/. This can happen to **avoid a consonant cluster**, e.g., fifths and sixths /fɪfθs ænd sɪksθs/ becomes /fɪfsnsɪks/.

Elision of /t/ and /d/ before a consonant is common, particularly when these sounds occur in –ed endings (Carley et al., 2018). Thus, in rapid connected speech, it is common for native speakers to drop the /t/ and /d/. This can also happen for the /p/ and /k/ sounds in the words ‘crisps’ and ‘masks’.

I washed my clothes. /aɪ wɒʃ mɪ kləʊz/

We cooked dinner. /wi kʊk 'dɪnər/

Crisp → cris**ps**

Mask --> mask**s**

We popped to the shops and got some crisps, masks and pots.

wɪ: pɒp tə ðə ʃɒps ən gɒt sʌm kɪs, mɑ:s ən pɒts. [Possible rapid connected speech form]

**Key takeaway: Elision is a key feature of rapid connected speech. A distinction can be made between pronunciation of words in rapid connected speech and in isolation (i.e., in citation form).**

## 6.2. Intrusion

### Intrusion: Approximants

Intrusion of approximants /w/, /r/, and /j/ can occur between vowel sounds in order to make pronunciation easier. These sounds are referred to as ‘**intrusive**’ when the linking sound does not occur in either word pronounced individually. In rapid connected speech, the sound is smoother and there is no pause or break between the words due to the intruding sound.

- Intrusive /j/ → we asked → /wi: ɑ:skt/ becomes /wi:jɑ:skt/

Tea and coffee /ti:jən kɒfi/

Me and you /mi:jən ju:/

- Intrusive /w/ → Just do it → /dʒəs dəwɪt/
- Intrusive /r/ → /I saw a dog → /aɪ sɔ:r ə dɒg/

- **Key takeaway: Intrusion occurs to ease pronunciation.**

## 6.3. Primary and secondary stress in multi syllabic words

- Multi-syllabic words may contain both primary and secondary stress. A reliable dictionary will indicate the stress pattern.
- Speakers usually show stress by lengthening the syllable and using a higher pitch.
- How are primary and secondary stress indicated in the transcriptions below?

● /,kʌmpə'tɪʃən/ - COMpeTition

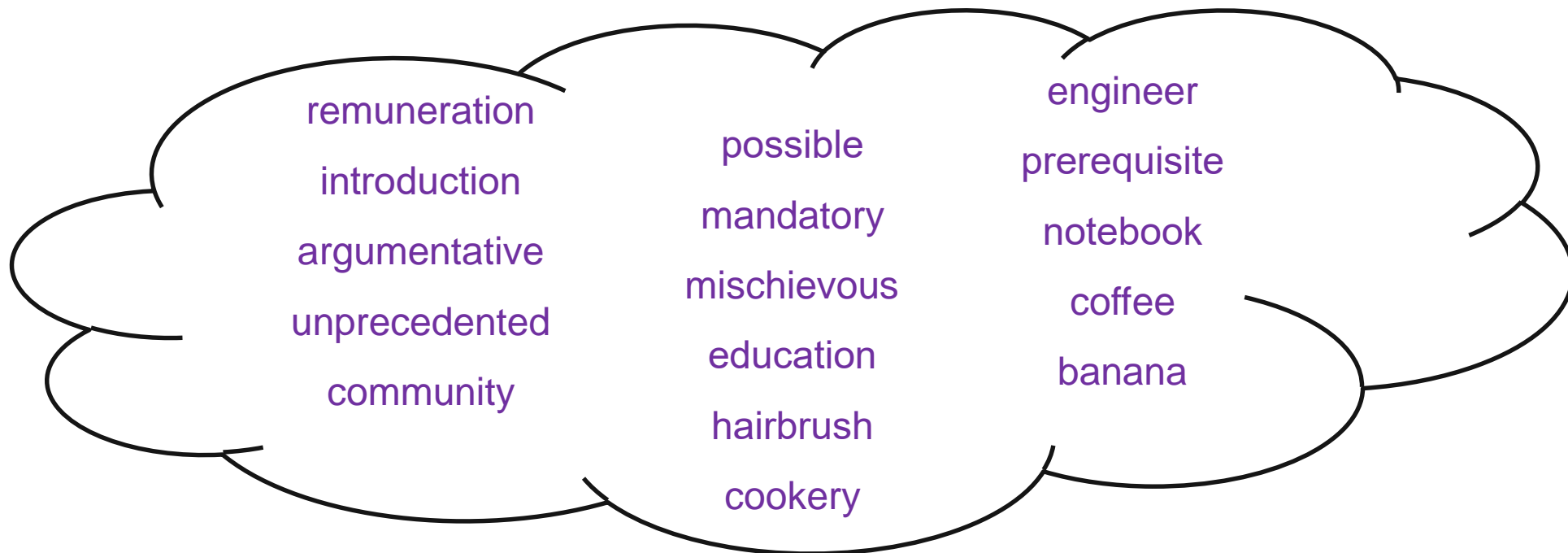
● /,kælə'fɔ:njə/ - CAliFORnia



















## 6.3. Identify the stress patterns

The following words have between 2 and 5 syllables. For each word, answer the following questions:

1. Which syllable holds the main stress?
2. Is the word a single compound noun? If so, which noun holds the main stress?
3. Does the word have both primary and secondary stress? If so, identify these syllables.



## 6.3. Identify the stress patterns - answers

Volunteer feedback:

Which syllable holds the main stress? See the CAPITALISED syllable.

Is the word a single compound noun? If so, which syllable holds the main stress? Hairbrush and notebook.

The first syllable usually holds the main stress.

Does the word have both primary and secondary stress?

## 6.3. Noun-verb stress patterns

In words with the same spelling in the noun and verb forms, there is often a difference in word stress. Identify where the main stress occurs in each repeated word, and summarize the general rule.

1. Please **record** the meeting so that we have a **record** of the discussion.
2. In order to have an **increase** in sales, we need to **increase** our advertising budget.
3. We need to **decrease** spending to see a **decrease** in debt.
4. Before we **imported** the goods, we secured an **import** license.
5. After we **exported** the goods, we received an **export** summary.
6. Don't **discount** the savings after **discounts**!
7. **Refunds** can only be **refunded** in store.
8. Please **permit** the officer to check your **permit**.
9. The managers felt **conflicted** over their **conflict** of interests.
10. If you don't agree with the result of the **contest**, you can **contest** it in court.
11. I was **insulted** by her **insult**.
12. The **rebels** **rebelled** against the decision.
13. The **survey** **surveyed** public opinion.
14. The **details** were **detailed** in the document.
15. We **conducted** a workshop over good **conduct** at work.
16. The **object** of the meeting is to learn how to **object** to meetings.

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2. In order to have an **increase** in sales, we need to **increase** our advertising budget.
3. We need to **decrease** spending to see a **decrease** in debt.\*
4. Before we **imported** the goods, we secured an **import** license.
5. After we **exported** the goods, we received an **export** summary.
6. Don't **discount** the savings after **discounts**!
7. **Refunds** can only be **refunded** in store.
8. Please **permit** the officer to check your **permit**.
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14. The **details** were **detailed** in the document.\*
15. We **conducted** a workshop about good **conduct** at work.
16. The **object** of the meeting is to learn how to **object** to meetings.

Noun form: stress 1<sup>st</sup> syllable

Verb form: stress 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable

\*Stress varies depending on variety of English, e.g. BrE or AmE.

## 6.4. Stress vs 'unstress' and the schwa /ə/

Close your notebook, please!

How would you read the following text aloud? Pay attention to the difference in how the underlined words should be pronounced. In groups, identify some rules.

*My cat was sitting on the sofa staring at me.*

*I asked him, "What are you looking at? Are you hungry?"*

*"Yes, I am" he replied.*

*I was shocked! I really was!*

## 6.4. Stress vs ‘unstress’ and the schwa /ə/

The pronunciation of some commonly used grammatical words (e.g., prepositions, auxiliary verbs and conjunctions) changes depending on how and when the word is used. If the word is stressed or emphasised, it is said to have a **strong** pronunciation; if not, the **weak** form is used (Carley et al., 2018). Underhill (2005) refers to weak forms as a part of ‘unstress’, i.e., words in speech that are not stressed.

The weak form often contains the vowel sound schwa /ə/, which is often referred to as a reduced vowel sound (Underhill, 2005). This has the effect of shortening the word.

How would you read the following text aloud? Pay attention to the difference in how the underlined words should be pronounced.

*My cat was sitting on the sofa staring at me.*

*I asked him, “What are you looking at? Are you hungry?”*

*“Yes, I am” he replied.*

*I was shocked! I really was!*

## 6.4. Stress vs 'unstress' and the schwa /ə/

What do you notice about the pronunciation of the underlined words in each sentence?

1. *My cat was sitting on the sofa staring at me.*
2. *I asked him, "What are you looking at? Are you hungry?"*
3. *"Yes, I am" he replied.*
4. *I was shocked! I really was!*

1. **Auxiliary verbs and prepositions in their usual weak forms.**
2. **Prepositions in final position - strong form. Auxiliary verb is not emphasised.**
3. & 4. **Auxiliary verbs in short yes/no answers or with emphasis have a strong form.**

## 6.4. Stress vs 'unstress' and the schwa /ə/

### General features of the schwa

Notice what physically happens when you create this sound - not much! Moving parts of the mouth are not activated.

The sound also commonly appears as the vowel sound in unstressed syllables of multisyllabic words.

Listen to your teacher read the following short text. Identify the schwa sound in weak forms and unstressed syllables

I was walking home from the shops when I heard an odd sound. I thought I was alone as there was nobody around, but then a cat jumped out of the bushes and landed on the ground.



## 6.5. The connection between thought groups, intonation and pausing

Close your booklet. Listen to a recording of a short text without an effective use of pauses, stress, weak forms and intonation.

Is it easy to follow? Why (not)?

In many parts of Italy margherita pizzas are often described as the only true pizzas for many people other toppings and extras spoil the flavour pepperoni pizzas have consistently ranked as the most popular pizza outside of Italy

Discuss the following question in small groups: Where would you add punctuation, pauses, stress and weak forms?

## 6.5. The connection between thought groups, intonation and pausing

Compare your answers.

Now listen to a volunteer read the text again, this time including pauses, stress, weak forms and intonation. Is this version easier to understand?

In many parts of Italy, margherita pizzas are often said to be the only true pizzas. For many people, other toppings and extras spoil the flavour.

Pepperoni pizza has consistently ranked as the most popular type of pizza outside of Italy.

## 6.5. The connection between thought groups, intonation and pausing

Noun phrases	Verb phrases	Prepositional phrases

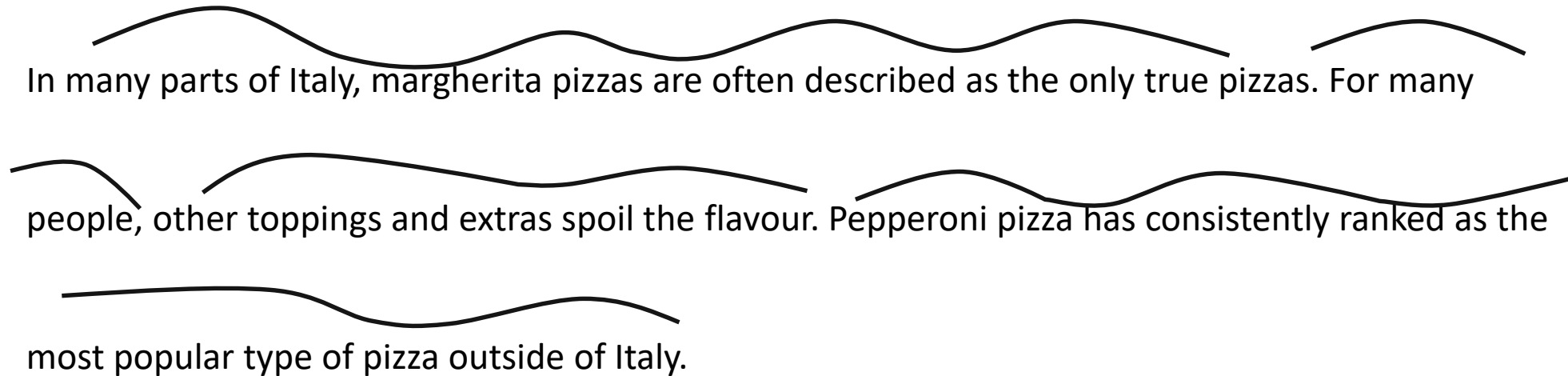
When deciding on where to include pauses, you can start by dividing sentences into clauses. Grammatical phrases in spoken language are often referred to as 'thought groups' (Lane, 2010; Underhill, 2005). There can sometimes be a very short pause, or a moment of suspension, between thought groups.

Spoken utterances also have their own 'intonation contours' (Lane, 2010; Underhill, 2005). Lane (2010) defines an intonation contour as a pattern of intonation across a thought group, which is a bit like a musical phrase. Intonation contours can change depending on the speaker's intended meaning.

The most important pauses generally follow the rules of written punctuation, and so should be the focus when reading aloud. Remember that speech is fluid, and there are endless possibilities!

## 6.5. The connection between thought groups, intonation and pausing

Now listen to your teacher read the text again. Can you follow the intonation contours? When does the intonation appear to rise and fall? Try reading the text aloud yourself.



The text is annotated with three hand-drawn intonation contours. The first contour, above the first sentence, shows a series of four small peaks and valleys, indicating a rising intonation pattern. The second contour, above the second sentence, shows a single large peak followed by a gradual decline. The third contour, above the third sentence, shows a single large peak followed by a gradual decline.

In many parts of Italy, margherita pizzas are often described as the only true pizzas. For many people, other toppings and extras spoil the flavour. Pepperoni pizza has consistently ranked as the most popular type of pizza outside of Italy.

# 6.6. Intonation in question forms and statements

Whilst intonation patterns can be extremely varied, some general patterns in questions and statements can be observed (Underhill, 2005).

Which of the following utterances would have a rising intonation, and which would have a falling intonation?

“What’s your name?”

“Do you like coffee?”

“The weather has been so good this week.”

“Put your bag on the chair.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news!”

“This class is free, isn’t it?”

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

Falling tone	Rising tone

(Adapted from Underhill, 2005).

# 6.6. Intonation in question forms and statements

Whilst intonation patterns can be extremely varied, some general patterns in questions and statements can be observed (Underhill, 2005).

Which of the following utterances would have a rising intonation, and which would have a or falling intonation?

Falling tone	Rising tone

## 7. Key Takeaways

- Sounds are often influenced by adjacent sounds
- Focusing on vowel length *can* be confusing for learners, as it is not just the length that changes (Carley et al., 2018).
- Learners may shorten or replace diphthongs with other short vowel sounds. Focusing on the change in vowel sound and articulation can be helpful.
- Learners may replace or omit phonemes in consonant clusters. Helping them focus on articulation individual phonemes may be useful.
- Elision is a key feature of rapid connected speech. A distinction can be made between pronunciation of words in rapid connected speech and in isolation (i.e., in citation form).

## 7. Consolidation: Part 1

# Helping students bring a written text to life when reading aloud

Listen to your teacher read a short fictional text. Your teacher will read the text twice.

Group A: Pausing: Mark pauses in the speech with a forward slash /

Group B: Sentence stress: Circle key words that are stressed

Group C: Intonation: Mark where the intonation shows question forms or strong emotions.

Compare your answers in small groups. What did you notice?



## 7. Consolidation: Part 1

# Helping students bring a written text to life when reading aloud

The sun was shining, the birds were singing, the wind chime was chiming...but all of this was happening on the other side of the window.

“What a wonderful day!” she thought to herself. “Why am I stuck here inside with a mountain of homework to do? Pathetic!”

All of a sudden, there was a knock on the door.

“Hello?” she said.

“Fancy some ice cream?” asked her mother.

“Fantastic!” she yelled.

“There’s one catch” her mother said. “We have to stop by your school first.”

“Well, that’s just great, isn’t it?” she said. “I bet they give me more homework.”

# 7. Consolidation: Part 1

## Helping students bring a written text to life when reading aloud

The **sun** was **shining** / the **birds** were **singing** / the **wind chime** was **chiming** /

but **all** of **this** was **happening** on the **other side** of the **window**. /

“**What a wonderful day!**” / she **thought** to **herself**. / “**Why** am I **stuck** here / **inside** / with a  
mountain of homework to do? / **Pathetic!**” /

All of a **sudden**, / there was a **knock** on the **door**. /

“**Hello?**” / she **said**. /

“**Fancy some ice cream?**” / asked her **mother**. /

“**Fantastic!**” / she **yelled**. /

“**There’s one catch**” / her **mother** **said**. / “We have to **stop** by your **school** **first**.” /

“**Well, that’s just great, isn’t it?**” / she **said**. / “I **bet** they **give** me **more homework**.”

# 7. Consolidation: Part 2

## Diagnosing and correcting errors

Listen to the following audio clips.

What error(s) do you hear in each clip?

How would you correct the error(s)?

What advice would you give the student?

Source: Student 1; Student 2

# 7. Consolidation: Part 2

## Diagnosing and correcting errors

Listen to the following audio clips. You can also read the transcript (p.18).

What error(s) do you hear in each clip?

Student 1: Some difficulties with consonant cluster /nt/ at the end of 'point'. Student tends to stress every word. Stresses second syllable on pressure when 1st syllable should be stressed.

Student 2:

Student tends to stress every word. Student tends to use full forms. Some difficulties with final /t/ sounds.

How would you correct the error(s)?

What advice would you give the student?