

The complexity of recognizing the ABCs for English language learners: More than twenty-six sounds

By Ricardo-Martín Marroquín, Redeemer University, Canada

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to support English language learners in the early literacy stages of English through raising awareness of more than one sound that may exist (or not) on certain English characters (letters). Having a character acquire more than one sound could add a layer of difficulty in learning how to read in English. Additionally, this could also be seen when two letters are placed together. Learning and memorizing the phonetics of each character would evidently allow for one to learn how to read. However, as a teacher, being able to recognize these characters, and then teaching vocabulary intentionally (by highlighting these characters, and the construction of new sounds), would benefit the learner, and may even speed up the language acquisition process.

The ABCs in any given language is usually the starting point when learning an L1 or an L2. This is usually the case because everything else stems from this foundation. In the English language, we first learn by memorizing the letters in sequence of traditional order (A, B, C, D...), usually through a popular catchy song. Then we assign a phonetic schema to each letter, allowing us to properly recognize and pronounce each character. In English, the good thing is that all of the consonants have a fixed sound, with the exception of the *h*, the *c*, and the *g* (both *c* and *g* being attributed a hard and a soft sound). This article will raise awareness of the different sounds one character might acquire, and how this could be a difficult task for an English Language Learner (ELL). For this reason, it is important to support the ELL when learning English, in this case, by being aware of the letter sounds and the general rules that accompany each consonant,



and the phonic that the formation of two consonants make. The goal of this article is to facilitate English language learning at its primary foundation, the ABCs. It is to provide the extra support in language, and in this case, in the early literacy stage.

To start, the *h* in most cases makes a soft voiceless sound (/h/). Letters have two types of sounds, a voiceless and a voiced one. The voiceless is the one when the speaker uses air by breathing out and fixating the position of the mouth to create the sound of the letter. Whereas, in the case of a voiced letter, the speaker uses their vocal chords while expressing the sound of the letter (Szczegielniak, n.d.). This sound is found in words such as *honey*, *home*, *house*, and *hi*. However, there are instances where this character is silent (Marian, n.d.). In this case, the term starts with the letter *h*, like in *honour*, *hour*, *honorable*, *honest*, *heir*, etc. There is also the case where the *h* is silent, and it is not found in the beginning of the word but rather anywhere in the sentence, such as *ghost*, *ghetto*, *whether*, etc. In all of these cases, the *h* is silent, which means that it is not pronounced. In addition, when mixed with another specific letter (*c*, *p*, *s*, *t*, and *w*), the *h* acquires a new phonic. For example, the *ch* generally speaking makes the /tʃ/, which are found in *church*, *change*, *chipmunk*, *champion*, *exchange*, among others (“Pronounce,” n.d.). In very rare cases, this combination of the *ch* makes a diverse sound known as the /ʃ/ and is found in words like *machine*, *brochure*, *charades*, *parachute*, *chalet*, etc. Although this last list of terms all use the *ch*, the *sh* (/ʃ/) sound is the appropriate form of pronunciation, not the *ch* (/tʃ/) itself. The *ch* also makes a hard *c*, which is found in terms such as: *choir*, *character*, *school*, *ache*, etc. The *h*, when it follows the *s*, makes /ʃ/ sound, depicted in the English language in words such as *shower*, *shin*, *show*, *shunned*, *fish*, etc. It is important to point out that the /ʃ/ sound may not be present in other languages, and therefore, ELLs would omit the appropriate sound. Spanish speakers, for example, would use the *ch* sound for the *sh* sound erroneously, and this is due to not having the sound in their native language.

Additionally, when the *h* is in front of the *ph* it makes the same sound similar to the *f* (just like when the *h* follows the *g* to form the *gh*). This is found in *phone*, *phonetic*, *phase*, *phenomenon*, etc. Although its origins are rooted in the Greek language, its spelling was altered in the English language with the character *f*. However, the *ph* spelling remained and/or was recalled in the English language for many terms. The idea with ELLs is to remind them that when a *p* and an *h* form the *ph*, the sound it acquires is now the *φ*, which simply (in English) is the *f* sound. Similarly, there is a list of words that acquire this same phonetic but rather found in the combination of *gh*, and these terms are (but not limited to) *enough*, *tough*, *rough*, *laugh*, etc.

The *k* sound is the same as the hard *c* sound when accompany by any vowel. Nevertheless, when the *k* and the *n* are placed side by side, it creates a silent *k*, allowing only for an *n* sound. This is seen in words such

as *knight*, *knife*, *knee*, etc. As for a silent consonant such as the *k*, there are a few letters that also become mute. Examples are: silent *g* in *sight*, *eight*, *bright*, *sign*, etc. and silent *w* for *wrap*, *wrestle*, *write*, etc.

Finally, when the *t* precedes the *h* to form the *th*, it forms a new sound [θ]. This sound depicted by the [θ] is found in words such as: *teeth*, *with*, *throw*, *tooth*, etc. The [θ] is a voiceless sound, made only with air, which is a voiceless sound compared to the [ð], which is a voiced sound (to make a sound with the vocal cords). However, the *th* also makes a different sound like in the following words: *then*, *this*, *they're*, *there*, which is depicted by [ð] (McCulloch, 2014). Furthermore, when the *wh* combination is formed, there are two sounds that are also made; one is simply the *w* sound (silent *h*) and the next one is the *h* sound. The former idea is depicted in *when*, *what*, *where*, *why*, *whence*, and the latter in *who* and *whose*.

It is also interesting to note that in English the *q* is always followed by a *u*. Nevertheless, this construction of letters is not necessarily visible in the Arabic language. Therefore, keeping in mind that our Arabic ELLs may omit the *u* when writing terms such as *quick*, *quiet*, or *quite*. Furthermore, it is important to note that the sounds that the *p*, the *g* and the *v* make are uncommon in the Arabic language. In fact, it is common for Arabic ELLs to compensate the *p* sound with the *b* or the *b* for the *v*. For this reason, it would be important for the ESL teacher to note the lack of phonetic concepts with the ELL and stress the usage in the English language.

In short, as teachers of the English language, it becomes important to teach the ABCs and the sounds that the letters form. This might be to reinforce the phonetic concept that the student already has for a consonant (hard *c* sound in front of the *a*, *o*, and *u* in English, Spanish, Italian, French, etc.) and adding a new notion or sound that a letter makes, either on its own or when combined with an additional letter. Doing so will facilitate the learning of the English language, by providing the ELL with strategic early reading intervention. This could help establish the building blocks of the ABCs while supporting early reading and writing.

References

How to pronounce the 'ch sound' /tʃ/. (n.d.). Pronuncian.com. Retrieved November 03, 2020, from

<https://pronuncian.com/pronounce-ch-sound>

Marian, J. (n.d.). *List of words with a silent 'h' in English*. Jakub Marian's Language Learning,

Science & Art. <https://jakubmarian.com/list-of-words-with-a-silent-h-in-english/>

McCulloch, G. (2014, June 10). *There are two “th” sounds. Here’s the difference.* Slate.

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/06/voicing-explains-the-difference-between-the-th-in-thing-and-in-then.html>

Szczegielniak, A. (n.d.). Phonetics: The sound of language [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from

<https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/adam/files/phonetics.ppt.pdf>



Author Bio

Dr. Ricardo-Martín Marroquín has taught second languages for more than ten years. These include: English, French, Spanish, and Italian. He is an adjunct professor at Redeemer University (Ancaster, ON) and the Assessor for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) in Hamilton, ON. His passion for teaching second language learners is clearly visible in his work. He contributes his findings in professional development and in his writings of novels.

