

# Teaching the pronunciation of consonants to ESL students

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## Abstract

In this article, an experienced ESL pronunciation teacher explains the typical pronunciation problems many ESL students have with selected consonants. The author explains how these consonants are pronounced, and there are video links to demonstrate the pronunciation of these consonants. In addition, for each of the selected consonants within the article, the author gives practical suggestions as to how these consonants may be taught within the context of task-based and communicative lessons. This is important as such meaningful activities allow the students to apply their pronunciation of these consonants within classroom situations that mimic real life. The demonstrations of the pronunciation of the target consonants and the classroom practice activities are applicable for ESL lessons conducted on an online video-based synchronous platform, as well as for in-class ESL lessons.

## Introduction

Many second language teachers now believe that a purely communicative teaching approach with an *exclusive* focus on meaning is not the ideal teaching method (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Such an approach will deprive ESL students of the explicit feedback of the correctness of their language they sometimes need. Thus, it appears that some room should be made for form-focussed instruction in order to be able to teach students when their language forms are incorrect (Doughty & Williams, 1998). This appears to be particularly relevant for pronunciation as some pronunciation mistakes may: a) lead to non-understanding



or misunderstanding on the part of the listener; and b) require more effort on the part of the listener to try to understand what the speaker intended (Thomson, 2018).

In fact, the functional communicative purpose of phonemes, that is speech sounds, is to distinguish the meanings of words from one another (Rogers, 1991). For example, the following words are distinguished only by their first consonant phoneme: pin, bin, fin, VIN, thin, tin, din, etc. However, they all mean different things. An English learner who lacks the ability to receptively and/or productively distinguish the phonemes of a language (i.e. English) from one another, will sooner or later, face difficulty in understanding the intended message in English or being understood by English speakers.

Thus, there appears to be a good case for occasionally teaching and practicing the pronunciation of phonemes, including some typically problematic consonant sounds, within a communicative and/or task-based ESL teaching framework. In order to teach the articulation of these consonants, however, ESL teachers should undeniably know how these consonants are produced and what problems ESL learners often have with these sounds. In addition, it is often a good idea for longer, focussed practice exercises with these consonants to be meaningful (as opposed to purely metalinguistic) and to be related to real life language tasks. Such meaningful, real-life tasks are, at the very least, more interesting to learners given the centrality of meaning in human communication. Moreover, there is second language education research which indicates that L2 teaching is usually most effective when the classroom activities are meaningful with some opportunity for form-focussed feedback (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990).

Such form-focussed instruction is necessary in order for ESL students to improve their pronunciation. There is a substantial amount of research which indicates that ESL learners often improve their pronunciation, including their consonants, by getting specialized pronunciation training (Derwing et al., 1998; Saito & Lyster, 2012; Thomson & Derwing, 2015). It is reasonable to assume that even in more general ESL classes, students may benefit from some focus on pronunciation correction of their consonants.

The following sections explain the articulation of consonant sounds which are often difficult for some ESL learners. These sections also give some teaching tips. The diagonal slashes, “/ /”, are the symbolic notations often used in phonetics for speech sounds, while the angled brackets, “< >”, are the symbols sometimes used for letters or combinations of letters.

## **/p/, /t/, and /k/**

These consonants are usually aspirated at the beginning of a word in English. This means that there is a small puff of air associated with their articulation. In some languages, these consonants lack aspiration, and



ESL learners speaking such languages may pronounce these sounds without the puff of air that is made by English speakers. To demonstrate this puff of air, an ESL teacher may take a piece of bathroom tissue and place this in front of their mouth. The teacher should then pronounce words with these sounds, such as “Peter”, “tea”, and “cake”. For a video explanation and demonstration of these aspirated consonants, refer to the following YouTube videos:

- [P sound](#)
- [T sound](#)
- [K sound](#)

If students do not have a piece of bathroom tissue, they may practice the pronunciation of these sounds by blowing on their palm.

As I write this article, we are currently in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic. So, such a demonstration and such practice may perhaps not be advisable in the classroom until such a time as the pandemic subsides. Nevertheless, these activities could easily be done in an online video-based synchronous platform. In fact, one advantage of using video for teaching the articulation of sounds is that it allows the teacher to show close-ups of their mouth when demonstrating the pronunciation of sounds. Such close-ups may not be socially appropriate, even in a pandemic-free teaching environment.

If a student pronounces /p/, /t/, and /k/ without a puff of air, this will usually not cause any communication problems, as the context will generally make the L2 learner’s intention clear. However, one situation in which their intention may not be clear is when they need to spell a word, such as a person’s name or a place name. In particular, if a student spells out a foreign name with a /p/, /t/, or /k/ without aspiration, it will be very difficult for the English listener to understand the speaker’s intention as the English listener may not be familiar with the foreign name. For example, my last name is “Tiittanen”, which is of Finnish origin. If I were to spell out the name using unaspirated /t/ sounds for the letters (which is how it is pronounced in Finnish), the English listener would probably be confused as to whether I meant the letter <t> or the letter <d>. This is because aspiration is one important phonetic cue that helps English listeners to distinguish /t/ from /d/.

A useful focussed listening practice activity is the following. The teacher can make up a list of people’s full names that begin with /p/, /t/, and /k/ (e.g. **Paul Tucker**, **Carla Tyndale**, etc.). It may be advisable for the teacher to introduce the last names to the students, as well as less frequently used first names, prior to doing such a listening task. After such a brief introduction of names, the teacher can then spell out the names on the list and the students can write them down as a listening dictation activity. Such an activity is, in fact, a real-life task for things such as making appointments. To emphasize how important aspiration is



for understanding the pronunciation of letters, in this activity, the teacher can occasionally mispronounce the target sounds without aspiration, and then point out how this makes it more difficult for the students in class. As a follow-up activity, the teacher could hand out two different lists of names with the target sounds, and students could work in pairs. One student would spell out the names, and the other student would write them down (and then they would switch roles). For more practice, perhaps on another day, students could be asked to write down a list of people's names in their first language that have /p/, /t/, and /k/ sounds, and they could spell the names out to a partner who would write the names down. Such an activity could be easily integrated into a task-based topic, such as leaving a phone message or making a medical appointment.

## **/z/ versus /s/**

A common problem for some ESL learners is the pronunciation of the /z/ sound if their first language does not have this sound. Learners who have problems with the /z/ sound will typically substitute an /s/ sound. Thus, for example, they may pronounce “zoo” like “Sue”. Such mistakes will not usually cause communication problems, so this issue does not need to be emphasized when teaching pronunciation. Nevertheless, the substitution of /s/ for /z/ may occasionally cause confusion for semantically related words, with (of course) distinct meanings. For example, within the course of a lesson on application forms, a student who has written down “Ms.” (i.e. /miz/) on her application form may mistakenly pronounce “Ms.” as /mis/. In situations such as these, it may be appropriate to explain the difference in pronunciation between /z/ and /s/. In addition, some ESL students may want to be able to pronounce words with a /z/ sound (like “zoo”) the way English speakers say such words.

In such cases, an ESL teacher should explain to their students that the difference between /z/ and /s/ is that /z/ has vocal cord vibration, while /s/ does not. Teachers can model how to feel this vibration by gently placing their palm over the middle part of their throat and contrasting words with /z/ with nearly identical words with /s/ (e.g. zoo/sue, sip/zip, fussy/fuzzy, etc.). It is also advisable to demonstrate other sounds that have this distinction in voicing such as /f/ and /v/ (fan/van), /ʃ/ (shoe), and /ʒ/ (measure). For a video demonstration of how to pronounce /z/, click [here](#).

For focussed practice with the /z/ sound, an ESL teacher can make up a questionnaire with a list of questions containing “is it” in all of the questions. In the word “is”, the letter <s> is pronounced as the sound /z/. Such questions could be integrated into a unit on housing, in which a tenant asks questions about the neighbourhood about an apartment for rent (e.g. “Is it close to shopping?”; “Is it close to the subway?” etc.).



## **/θ/ (voiceless <th> sound)**

The /θ/ is articulated by placing the tongue between the teeth and then blowing air between the tongue and the teeth. It is voiceless, which means there is no vocal cord vibration, and the tongue should only protrude out of the mouth slightly. To watch a video explaining how /θ/ is pronounced, click [here](#).

To introduce this sound to my students, I find it useful to model the placement of the tongue between the teeth using a diagram. Then I give the students examples of common words that begin with /θ/ such as “thanks”, “think”, and “thin”. Then I have the students look at their mouths on the video app on their cell phone, so they can see if their tongues are in the correct place. Common mistakes for students to make are:

a) the substitution of /t/ or /s/ for /θ/ (i.e. “tanks” or “sanks” for “thanks”); b) not blowing enough air out; and c) not holding their tongues in place between their teeth firmly enough.

Useful task-based practice for the /θ/ sound is with the use of numbers such as “three”, “thirteen”, “thirty”, “thousand” etc. in a price-based listening activity. For such an activity, students could work in pairs. They would be given prices with the /θ/ sound. Student A would read a price to their partner (e.g. three hundred and thirteen). Student B would listen and write down the number. Then students could switch roles, using a different list of numbers.

## **/ð/ (voiced <th> sound)**

The /ð/ sound is identical to the /θ/ sound except that /ð/ is voiced (there is vocal cord vibration) and unlike /θ/, /ð/ does not have much air flow escaping from the mouth. Because of the similarity of the /θ/ sound to the /ð/ sound, they can be explained and demonstrated in similar ways (i.e. a diagram and video apps on students’ phones). I suggest using other voiced sounds such as /z/ and /v/ to help point out the voicing of the /ð/ sound. Students should lightly place their palms over their throats to feel the vibration. The teacher can use common examples of words with the /ð/ sound such as “the”, “this”, and “mother”. It is useful to point out the common mistakes that students make with this sound such as substituting /d/ or /z/ for /ð/ (i.e. “diss” or “ziss” for “this”). For a video explanation of this consonant sound, click [here](#).

There are a number of task-based and communicative activities that can be done to practice the production of the /ð/ sound. For example, for theme of housing, one could make up a list of questions that a tenant could ask about an apartment for rent beginning with “is there” (e.g. “Is there a balcony?”; “Is there a laundry room?”). Students could use these questions to ask about their own, real homes, or some made-up apartment ads with abbreviations. One could make up a geography board game that requires students to

try to answer questions about Canadian geography. It would be easy to elicit “the” (which begins with a /ð/ sound) for such questions given the prevalence of “the” in English (e.g. “What is the capital of Manitoba?”). Also, “the” is obligatory for rivers (e.g. the St. Lawrence River), oceans (e.g. the Arctic Ocean), mountain chains (e.g. the Rocky Mountains), etc.

## **/w/**

Some learners may substitute a /v/-like sound from their native language (a labiodental approximant) for the /w/ sound. This sound substitution will rarely cause any communication problems, so it may not be necessary to spend a lot of time on this sound. Nevertheless, English listeners tend to categorize the /v/-like sound some ESL learners make as an English /v/ rather than as a /w/. Thus, it is possible that out of context, the mispronunciation of /w/ will cause problems for English listeners. For example, some English-speaking people may not understand who the ESL speaker means if they say, “I like the author Wayne /veyn?/ Willis /villis?/”.

To teach the /w/ consonant, an English teacher should inform their students that, unlike a /v/ sound in English or a non-English /v/-like labiodental approximant, the /w/ sound has only lip-rounding. The upper teeth do not make any light contact with the lower lip—which is how some learners may mispronounce the /w/ sound. For a video explanation of this sound, click [here](#).

In case you want to do some more focussed speaking practice with the /w/ sound using a communicative or task-based activity, it would be easy to do this. Many question words (i.e. where, why, what, when, what time) begin with the /w/ sound. You could make up some questions on a given topic such as hobbies and routines (e.g. What do you like to do on the weekend? How often do you work out?), and then give students feedback on their pronunciation of the /w/ sound and other aspects of their pronunciation.

## **/l/ versus /ɹ/ = <r> (and other problems with /ɹ/)**

A few students may not have the /l/ and /ɹ/ (e.g. led/red) distinction in their native language. Such students will most likely have problems distinguishing these sounds in both their listening and speaking. They may also feel frustrated with their problems distinguishing /l/ and /ɹ/. If there are any such students in your class, it may be worthwhile to spend at least a little time on this sound distinction as an ESL learner who makes such mistakes will sometimes be misunderstood by English speakers and will possibly misunderstand English speakers. The /l/ versus /ɹ/ sound contrast is an important one in English as there are many minimal pairs for /ɹ/ and /l/ (e.g. light/right, lamb/ram, rust/lust). For a video explanation of the /ɹ/ sound and some mistakes ESL learners make with this sound, click [here](#).



As I explain in the above video link, there are several smaller problems with /ɪ/ that your students may have. They are not nearly as serious as the /l/ versus /ɪ/ contrast, but you may wish to briefly practice these with your students. A task-based activity for practicing the /l/ and /ɪ/ sound is the following. Make up a menu consisting of food and drink items that have the /l/ and /ɪ/ sounds (e.g. lobster, lamb, wrap, roasted chicken, etc.). A role-play between a restaurant server and a customer may be useful for lower level students who need to practice the language typically used in such situations. Higher level students could do the same activity, but the focus for them could be not only the language used in such situations, and the /l/ and /ɪ/ sounds, but the use of higher intonation by the server in order to appear to be professionally polite.

## Conclusion

In order to teach effectively, it is not enough for ESL teachers to just model the correct pronunciation of consonants and then ask the students to just mimic them. ESL teachers should know how to explain how the target consonants are pronounced, show them how they are pronounced, and use effective practice teaching techniques for them. For teachers who want more focussed practice with the target consonants, there are meaningful activities they can create, which they can integrate into their communicative and task-based ESL lessons.

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