

# Teaching the pronunciation of vowels on Zoom

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The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted many previously in-person ESL classes to online learning. Many of these online classes are taught synchronously using video conferencing software such as Zoom. The exclusive focus in this article is on teaching ESL classes using Zoom, since that is the software that the author uses to teach with and am thus most familiar with. However, the same points that are made with regard to synchronous video teaching with Zoom could presumably also be made for Zoom's competitors such as Microsoft Teams.

The use of video conferencing software such as Zoom for synchronous ESL classes has the obvious advantage of enhancing the safety of students and teachers from the COVID-19 virus. The advantages of using Zoom appear to be particularly evident for ESL pronunciation classes. This is because Zoom allows the pronunciation teacher to magnify his/her own video image (i.e. *spotlight* oneself using the Zoom function) while demonstrating the correct articulation of consonant and vowels. This makes it possible for an ESL teacher who is knowledgeable in the articulation of English speech sounds to show close-ups of their mouth while demonstrating the correct pronunciation of the target sounds of the lesson. In addition, students in the Zoom pronunciation class can see the position of their own mouths in their own video image on their screen while attempting to articulate the target sounds. Thus, they can readily compare their own articulation of the target sound with the model provided by the pronunciation instructor. As Bliss et al. (2018) argue in their review of computer-mediated pronunciation instruction, visual feedback is helpful for language students to improve the accuracy of their pronunciation.

Such close-ups of the instructor's mouth for pronunciation would not be feasible in an in-person pronunciation class during the pandemic as it would frequently violate social distancing requirements, as the demonstration of certain speech sounds would require the students to come physically very close to the instructor in order for them to see the position of the instructor's tongue and the articulatory motion of the tongue. This would be particularly ill-advised during the ongoing pandemic because the production of any speech sound results in the exhalation of air, which would naturally contain water droplets.



In addition to preserving student safety in the demonstration of speech sounds, such close-ups of the instructor's mouth avoid the violation of social conventions of maintaining a certain amount of physical distance between people. Many students may feel uncomfortable, for purely social reasons, even if there were no pandemic, if their instructor was physically close to them.

As is well-known, Zoom also has a breakout room feature that permits the instructor to group students into pairs or small groups. This breakout room feature allows the students to safely practice the target sounds using communicative/task-based teaching materials. One advantage of breakout rooms over in-person pair/small group work is that the participants do not need to struggle to hear one another, which is sometimes an issue in crowded, noisy classrooms.

Finally, teaching on Zoom allows students to attend ESL classes without needing to commute to class, which can sometimes be time-consuming, particularly during rush hour. This is particularly a challenge for students with daytime jobs who are attending night classes. Naturally, with Zoom, your students do not need to live in the local area. They may live far away, even in different countries.

In the following section, the author shall briefly explain how certain vowels, which are often problematic for English learners may be taught on Zoom. There are also video links that demonstrate the pronunciation of the target vowels.

## Selected vowels

### ***/iy/ versus /i/***

Many ESL students have problems with the diphthong */iy/* (e.g. *seed*, *neat*) and/or the short, lax vowel */i/* (e.g. *Sid*, *knit*). Given how frequently minimal pairs such as *neat* and *knit* (i.e. the functional load) occur in English, it is very useful to explain the difference in articulation between these phonetically similar vowels and to practice them with your students.

Many of the crucial pronunciation differences between these vowels can be shown and explained in a Zoom-based class. As stated above, */iy/* is a diphthong, meaning that it begins with a pure vowel, */i/*, and in this case it changes to a */y/* glide (O'Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1987), which has noticeable lip spreading (Lane, 2010), particularly when it is exaggerated. One can show this change in lip position on the video screen to one's students with representative words such as *need*, *lead* etc. Also, */iy/* is longer than */i/*, and the teacher should point out this difference in length using minimal pairs, or near-minimal pairs of words, such as *lead/lid*, *greed/grid*, *need/knit*, etc. To see a video explanation of the difference in pronunciation between these phonetically similar vowels, please click here: [/iy/ versus /i/ vowels](#)



Because /iy/ is longer before a voiced consonant (i.e. a consonant with vocal cord vibration) such as /d/, /z/, etc., it is helpful to give examples of words ending in a voiced consonant such as /z/ **peas** (cf. **peace**, which ends in a voiceless /s/). It is worthwhile pointing out to students that length is frequently symbolized with a colon, and that /iy/ will usually be written as /i:/ in most dictionaries that use IPA symbols. In general, depending on the first language of the student, the student will often have more problems with the short /i/ (e.g. – **lid**) than with the longer /iy/ diphthong (e.g. **lead**).

After demonstrating and explaining the contrast between /iy/ and /i/ for your students, it is useful to do a minimal pair listening discrimination such as those explained earlier (e.g. *lead* and *lid*). After taking up the answers, students can practice pronouncing the words in the minimal pair list in pairs in Zoom breakout rooms, while the teacher monitors their pronunciation and gives feedback when necessary.

As stated earlier, there are many words which contain /iy/ and /i/, so it will be easy for the teacher to construct task-based and communicative practice exercises for the students to practice these sounds. If your students have more problems with /i/ than with /iy/, which has been the experience of the author, it would be useful to use more example words with the short vowel /i/ than with /iy/. The author personally uses questionnaires with the simple past tense auxiliary *did* for practice with his students, as *did* has the short /i/ vowel. In these questionnaires, students ask their partners in the breakout rooms various questions with *did you* (e.g. When **did** you immigrate to Canada?). In such cases, the author often points out that there is often an assimilation of /d/ before /y/ to /dʒ/, so many English speakers say *dij ya*, with a schwa (/ə/) for the vowel in *you*.

### **/ey/, /e/, and /æ/**

Many students also have problems distinguishing between /ey/ (e.g. **late**) and /e/ (e.g. **let**) or between /e/ (e.g. **bed**) and /æ/ (e.g. **bad**) (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992), so it is useful to also practice these vowel contrasts in a Zoom class. The difference between /ey/ and /e/ is the same as the difference between /iy/ and /i/; /ey/ is a diphthong, in which the /e/ vowel becomes the glide /y/ (O’Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1987). And /ey/ is longer than /e/. Thus, the points I made about lip spreading and vowel length for /iy/ and /i/ are the salient differences, which should also be made about /ey/ and /e/. As for /iy/, which is frequently written as /i:/ in dictionaries, it is a good idea to inform your students that /ey/ will probably be written as /e:/ in many dictionaries that use IPA symbols. The instructor should slowly show the differences on screen between the vowels /ey/ and /e/ as discreet sounds, and then show the differences in minimal pairs such as **laid/led**, **pain/pen**, etc. For a video demonstration and explanation of the differences in articulation between these phonetically similar vowels, please click here: [/ey/ and /e/ vowels](#)



As with the other sounds, it is useful to do some minimal pair listening discrimination work (e.g. laid and led; pain and pen, etc.), and to have the students practice contrasting these words in the breakout rooms. In terms of communicative practice, the teacher could make up some questions about the student's childhood using the causative verbs *make*, which has an /ey/ sound, and *let*, which has an /e/ sound. For example, a questionnaire such as the following could be created for the students:

“When you were 11 years-old...”

did your parents make you take music lessons?

/ey/     /ey/

did your parents let you stay up late on weekends?

/e/     /ey/   /ey/

When contrasting these sounds, it would also be useful to point out the common spellings of these two vowels; i.e. /ey/ is often spelled with an <a> and an <e> between a consonant or as <ay>, while /e/ is often spelled with the letter <e>.

As mentioned earlier, /e/ is often mixed up with /æ/ (e.g. *hat*, *cat*), so it is useful to show your students the difference in how these vowels are articulated. For /æ/, the mouth is considerably more open than for /e/, and with /æ/ the tongue touching the back of the bottom teeth (Orion, 1997). It is useful to put your hand under your jaw to show the lowering of the jaw to produce /æ/. Also, some students do not put their tongues far enough forward in their mouth for /æ/, so it is often useful to tell them to lightly push their bottom teeth with their tongue. To see a video explaining the articulation of this vowel, please click the following links: [example 1](#) and [example 2](#).

Minimal pair listening practice should be done to contrast /æ/ and /e/ [e.g. *bed* and *bad*; *met* and *mat*, etc.]. While doing this exercise with your students, encourage them to look at your mouth if they are having problems hearing the difference between these two vowels. Also please inform them that /æ/ is longer than /e/, which they might hear more easily before a voiced consonant such as /d/. As with the other vowels, it is useful for the students to practice pronouncing these minimal pairs in a breakout rooms while the teacher listens in and offers corrections and feedback when necessary.

In terms of communicative practice for this vowel contrast, one exercise I sometimes do is to ask the students to make up yes-no questions in pairs (in breakout rooms) with the present perfect; e.g. *Have you ever...?* When spoken with a careful pronunciation style, the auxiliary verb *have* has an /æ/ vowel and the first vowel in the adverb *ever* is always correctly pronounced as /e/. It is useful to give the students some

examples (e.g. *Have you ever been to Niagara Falls? Have you ever eaten (some exotic food)?* etc.) It is also very useful to point out that, in terms of meaning, such questions refer to at least one previous time in the indefinite past. Once the students have finished making up some questions in their breakout rooms, the teacher can close the breakout rooms and the students can ask the teacher the questions. Afterwards, the teacher may choose to have the students ask each other these same questions. But, in this case, the teacher should write down the present perfect questions on MS Word as the students ask the teacher their questions. Then when the students are finished asking their questions, the teacher can email the students the list of questions and/or share the list of questions in the chat function on Zoom. Some lower-level students find it beneficial to be able to see the questions they are asking, so the teacher may choose to enable the share screen function for this purpose when the students ask each other the questions.

### ***/ʌ/ versus /ɑ/***

Another vowel contrast which some students have problems with is /ʌ/ (e.g. **luck**) versus /ɑ/ (e.g. **lock**; as pronounced in many regional dialects of North American English, including Canadian English); and/or /ʌ/ (e.g. **luck**) versus the back, rounded /ɒ/ pronounced in many other dialects of English. As the author lives in Canada, he focuses on the contrast between /ʌ/ (e.g. **luck**) versus /ɑ/ (e.g. **lock**), but teachers whose target English dialect is British English, for example, may choose to focus on the contrast between /ʌ/ and the rounded /ɒ/. For an explanation of the differences in pronunciation of these vowels, please click here: [/ʌ/ and /ɑ/](#) and [/ɑ/ and /ɒ/](#). As shown in the first video link, it is useful to put your hand under your jaw to show the differences in how more open your mouth should be for /ɑ/ than it is for /ʌ/. It is also useful to point out that /ɑ/ is longer than /ʌ/.

As with the other vowels, it is useful to do some minimal pair practice (e.g. **luck/lock**, **shut/shot**, **duck/dock** etc.) after an explanation and a demonstration. As well, naturally, it is a good idea to make up some questions with words that have these target vowels so that the students can practice these vowels in a more meaningful way.

In general, it is easiest to demonstrate the pronunciation of vowels that involve visible articulations of the mouth such as the lips (e.g. rounded lips, lip spreading) and for jaw movement (for more open or more closed vowels). In addition, the tongue position of some front vowels (e.g. /æ/ as in **hat** and **cat**) can be demonstrated. Many phonetic diagrams indicating tongue positions are also freely available on the internet, which the instructor can use as a teaching aid.



## References

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### Author Bio

Mike Tiittanen has been teaching pronunciation to ESL students since 1996. He has also taught a variety of other ESL classes with the TDSB, Seneca College and other schools. He is the author of *Brain Waves* (Oxford University Press), an ESL activity book. He has a PhD in Applied Linguistics and a TESL certificate.