

Helping Students Understand That Written and Spoken English Are Different



Many language teachers are gradually shifting from using grammar-translation, audio-lingual, and other more traditional methods of teaching ESL/EFL to more communicative, task-based approaches. Oddly, many instructors continue to teach pronunciation in very traditional ways. Early in ESL/EFL students' learning, instructors teach the phonemes of English, and they do so with varying degrees of success. Then when the students' pronunciation remains strikingly *foreign*, the instructors teach them the phonemes again with no better results. How many times must teachers cover the phonemes before they realize that the phonemes are not enough?

Learning the Phonemes of English Is Not Enough

The problem is a simple one. Learning the phonemes of English is only the first step to learning clear pronunciation. The phonemes are just the basic units, and if teachers never show students how the basic units fit together, the students will continue to sound foreign. Consider the bricks used to make a building. A pile of bricks (the basic units) do not a building make. It is only when the bricks are fit together—in different ways for walls, corners, door frames, window frames, and so forth—that a building makes sense. Yet many teachers insist on giving students a pile of bricks. And when the students fail to organize the pile into a proper building because they have not been instructed in how the bricks fit together, the teacher loses patience and gives them another pile of bricks.

So the essential question is, How do the sounds fit together? The connected speech phenomena explained in this book, along with the connected speech modules provided for teaching connected speech, are the mortar that holds the sounds together. The individual sounds of spoken English change within words, at syllable boundaries, and at the boundaries of words in particular and predictable ways. Depending on the environments in which they are found, vowels become schwa in unstressed syllables, phonemes are dropped, phonemes are added, and phonemes are changed to become more like the phonemes around them. All of which is done, not to make the lives of ESL/EFL learners difficult, but rather to make English smoother and easier to pronounce for the native speakers who use it in daily speech.

Differences Between Written and Spoken English

Why are students and teachers misled into thinking that learning the phonemes will be enough? Perhaps the written language plays a role in this misconception. Most students and teachers learned to read English at some point in their lives by first learning the letters. Each letter was shown to represent a sound. Next they learned to put the letters together into words. Each word had a pronunciation. Why then wouldn't these steps be the same for pronunciation? Why can't we just learn the phonemes, and then put them together into words? A written word is a written word and will look the same no matter where it is found.

The spoken language is not that portable. The problem is that a given phoneme can change in pronunciation depending on the context in which it is found. As a result, a particular word, made up of phonemes, may sound very different depending on where it is in the overall intonation and stress pattern, as well as on what precedes and follows it. Adding to this problem is the fact that there are the different dialects and various levels of formality (discussed in the next section). These factors, along with some syntactic constraints, largely govern how the sounds can and will combine.

The problem, of course, is that instructors teach students written English (and a fairly formal version of the written language, to boot), which has considerably less variation in dialects and levels of formality than spoken English. Then, when the students encounter the oral language in English language movies, lectures, and conversations, they suddenly run into much more varied representations of the sounds and words of English than they encountered in the written language. Naturally, many such students have considerable difficulty in both speaking and comprehending oral English.

To begin overcoming this written English handicap, teachers need to talk to students about the differences between written and spoken English. In addition, teachers may find it useful to show students that the spellings in written language can lead to wrong pronunciations of words. The modules in this section were created by teachers to help students understand the differences between written and spoken English, by demonstrating to them that the written language system will often fail them by not corresponding to the spoken language—even in the formal pronunciation known as *citation form* (i.e., the most “proper” dictionary pronunciation based on the word when it is read precisely in isolation).

MODULE 1.1

Written English Does Not Have Enough Letters

James Dean Brown

Levels	<i>Beginner to advanced</i>
Aims	<i>Illustrate that there are many more sounds in English than there are letters</i> <i>Show that symbols of written English are not adequate to represent all the sounds in the language</i>
Class Time	<i>20–30 minutes</i>
Preparation Time	<i>10 minutes for duplication</i>

PROCEDURE

1. Put the students into pairs and tell them to look at their handout but not at the one you are going to give to the other member of their pair.
2. Pass out the handout in Appendix A to one member of each pair.
3. Pass out the worksheet in Appendix B to the other member of each pair.
4. You can make this activity competitive by offering some sort of prize to the first pair that finishes the activity with all answers correct. Make a note of the order in which pairs finish.
5. Then, go over the answers with the students (using the Answer Key provided in Appendix C). Have the pairs correct their worksheets. Make sure that all of the pairs end up with the right answers by the time they are finished.
6. Now, determine which pair finished first with 100% correct answers.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

Similar activities can be developed to answer the following questions:

1. How many of the consonant sounds in the example words in Appendix A are written with one consonant letter, and how many are written with two consonant letters?
2. How many of the vowel sounds in the example words in Appendix A are written with one vowel letter, and how many are written with two vowel letters?

3. Why are all the consonant sounds in the consonant example words in Appendix A at the beginning of the word except for *mirage* and *sing*? (Answer: English words cannot begin with these sounds.)
4. Which consonant in the consonant example words in Appendix A is not written? What does *_uh_oh* in the example words mean? (Answer: a signal that *something is wrong*.)

If the students need it, you may also want to review the consonant and vowel sounds of English as they are shown in Appendices D and E.

APPENDIX A: *Written and Spoken English Symbols Handout*

The Letters of Written English

The letters in written English consist primarily of the following lower-case set (vowels are in italics):

a b c d e f g h *i* j k l m n o p q r s t *u* v w x y z

The Sounds of Spoken English (in IPA symbols)

Consonants of North American English

/p t k ʔ b d g f θ s ʃ h v ð z ʒ ʧ ʤ m n ŋ l r w j/

<i>p</i> apa	<i>f</i> ind	zipper	<i>l</i> ook
<i>t</i> ake	<i>th</i> ink	mirage	<i>r</i> un
<i>k</i> ick	sit	<i>ch</i> icken	<i>w</i> in
<i>_uh_oh</i> (<i>glottal stop</i>)	<i>sh</i> e	Jack	<i>y</i> ou
<i>b</i> oy	<i>h</i> e	<i>m</i> an	
<i>d</i> og	<i>v</i> iew	<i>n</i> one	
<i>g</i> o	<i>th</i> is	<i>s</i> ing	

Vowels of North American English

/i ɪ e ε æ ʌ ə a ɔ o ʊ u/

beat	bet	<i>but</i> I don't	boat
bit	bat	body	book
bait	butter	bought	boot

Diphthongs of North American English

/ai/ /oi/ /au/

buy	boy	bow
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APPENDIX B: *Written and Spoken Symbols Worksheet*

DIRECTIONS: Ask your partner each of the following questions and answer in the space provided.

1. How many vowels are there in the written English alphabet? _____
2. Written consonants? _____
3. Spoken consonant sounds? _____
4. Spoken vowel sounds? _____
5. Spoken diphthong sounds? _____
6. How many sounds total are there in spoken English? _____
7. How many letters total are there in written English? _____
8. How many more sounds are there in English than there are letters? _____
9. How is that possible? _____

10. List at least five examples of words where two written vowels become one sound in English. These five should show completely different vowel combinations.

APPENDIX C: *Written and Spoken Symbols Worksheet* **Answer Key**

1. 5 2. 21 3. 25 4. 12 5. 3 6. 40 7. 26 8. 14
9. Possible answers: (a) *Some written letters are pronounced in several different ways.* (b) *Some combinations of written letters produce a new pronunciation.* (c) *Some sounds are not ever written e.g., /ʌ ə ʔ /*
10. *Example answers: view, road, bread, book, seek, caught*

APPENDIX D: Manner and Place of Pronunciation for Consonants of NAE

Manner of Pronunciation	Place of Pronunciation							
	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops (vl)	p			t			k	ʔ
Stops (vd)	b			d			g	
Fricatives (vl)		f	θ	s	ʃ			h
Fricatives (vd)		v	ð	z	ʒ			
Affricates (vl)					tʃ			
Affricates (vd)					dʒ			
Nasals	m			n			ŋ	
Lateral				l				
Retroflex				r				
Approximant	w					j		

APPENDIX E: Position of Pronunciation for Vowels of NAE

	Front	Center	Back
High	i ɪ		u ʊ
Mid	e ɛ	ʌ (stressed) ə (unstressed)	o
Low	æ	a	ɔ

Word Cloud

Jeff Stewart



Levels	<i>Beginner to low elementary</i>
Aims	<i>Notice differences between spoken and written forms of common words in North American English</i>
Class Time	<i>10–20 minutes</i>
Preparation Time	<i>20–30 minutes in computer lab, 10–15 in class</i>

PROCEDURE

1. Prepare simple 10- to 15-word sentences for dictation. Try to employ several of the common modals, pronouns, prepositions, and verbs listed in Step 2 below. Some examples:
 What'll you do if we get a lot of people here?
 /wʌdljəduəfwigədələdəpiɹlɪr/
 I want to get it before it rains
 /aɪwʌnəgədɪtbəfɔrətɹenz/
2. Write the following words on the board; this list includes basic pronouns, modals, prepositions and verbs that are frequently reduced: *a are but can could do did does get go going got have he her his here how I if in is it lot my no not of our or she should that the there they this to want we will would what when where who why you your*
3. Add any additional words that appear in your sentence dictation below. Optionally, you can write evenly lengthened blanks for each word in the dictated sentence, leaving only the words that are not in the list above. For example, *I want to get in before it rains* would become _____
 _____ before _____ rains
4. Give the dictation; repeat as many times as required. Instruct students to transcribe the dictation, assembling the sentence from the listed common words.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

1. Dictations are a useful tool for teaching connected speech. However, obstacles other than the comprehension of connected speech, such as unknown vocabulary, can prevent students from focusing their full attention on these forms. Additionally, in the case of beginners, dictations may simply test what

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students do and do not already know; if they accurately write the sentence, it could simply show that they already knew the connected speech form, and if not, that they did not know the connected speech form.

2. This activity is designed to lighten the cognitive load on the dictation for beginners as much as possible, so that they are not overburdened by unknown vocabulary and are free to focus all their attention on common connected speech forms. As a result, you can dictate sentences with considerably more speed and connection than you normally could.
3. The words listed above are among the most common in the English language, and also the most commonly involved in connected speech. Most simple sentences will contain a high proportion of them. They have been listed alphabetically to aid searches, but if the list seems too long for your students, you can omit some that do not appear in your dictations.

MODULE 1.3

Phoneme Variations: Two/To and Four/For

Manna Aoki

Levels	<i>Beginner to intermediate</i>
Aims	<i>Gain awareness of strong forms and weak forms (especially in the prepositions to and for, and the numbers two and four)</i> <i>Pronounce those prepositions and numbers appropriately in sentences</i>
Class Time	<i>15–20 minutes</i>
Preparation Time	<i>10–15 minutes</i>



Many ESL/EFL students tend to pronounce most words in English in their strong citation forms because they have little or no idea that there are strong and weak forms of words in English. For example, many students seem to believe that *to* and *two* should always be pronounced as /tu/, and *for* and *four* as /for/. This may be a big problem in both listening and speaking in some authentic situations, such as when they tell a native English speaker their addresses (e.g., 2442 Broad Street) or zip codes (e.g., 92442), or when they ask or confirm the score when they are watching a sporting event like baseball, basketball, or soccer.

I designed this exercise with a focus on the prepositions *to* and *for* and the numbers *two* and *four* because the citation forms for each pair are the same but in connected speech the prepositions are usually pronounced in their weak forms /tə/ and /fər/, and the numbers in strong citation forms /tu/ and /for/. Hopefully, through this exercise, students will learn that *to* and *two*, and *for* and *four* should be pronounced differently even though they have the same citation forms.

PROCEDURE

1. Ask the students their addresses after demonstrating how to give addresses in English (e.g., *542 Broad Street* should be spoken as *five four two Broad Street* or *five forty-two Broad Street*). Show them how to give the score of a sporting event as well (e.g., *42–14* is spoken *forty-two to fourteen*).
2. Have the students listen as you read (a few times) the short statements with the numbers and the prepositions in Appendix A. Pass out the worksheet (Appendix C) and have them write in the blanks what they hear as you read

Appendix B out loud in a natural conversational manner (i.e., connected with the prepositions pronounced in their weak forms).

3. Give the students the correct answers. Have them think about and discuss where and why they made mistakes and explain that the prepositions and the numbers are pronounced differently in connected speech.
4. Also have the students work in pairs in which they listen to the dialogs in Appendix B and dictate the missing parts in Appendix C to another student.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

Nonnative-English-speaking teachers may wish to use recordings made by native English speakers instead of reading the statements and dialogs themselves.

APPENDIX A: *Script A*

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|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. My address is 248 Maple Street. | 6. Train 4 to New York |
| 2. My address is 2248 Maple Street. | 7. Train for New York |
| 3. My address is 2428 Maple Street. | 8. Tickets to Japan |
| 4. The score is 42 to 40. | 9. Two tickets to Denmark |
| 5. The score is 40 to 40. | |

APPENDIX B: *Script B*

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|--|--------------------------|
| 1. A: What's your address? | B: It's 2242 Elm Avenue. |
| 2. A: What's the score? | B: It's 2 to 1. |
| 3. A: Which gate am I supposed to go to? | B: Gate 4 to Japan. |
| 4. A: Which gate am I supposed to go to? | B: Gate 2 for Japan. |

APPENDIX C: *Student Worksheet*

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|--|--|
| 1. A: What's your address? | B: It's () Elm Avenue. |
| 2. A: What's the score? | B: It's (). |
| 3. A: Which gate am I supposed to go to? | B: Gate () () Japan. |
| 4. A: Which gate am I supposed to go to? | B: Gate () () Japan. |

MODULE 1.4

One Spelling, Three Sounds

Masao Tada

Levels	<i>Pre-intermediate to intermediate (words should be chosen according to the level of the learners)</i>
Aims	<i>Become aware of different pronunciations that can arise from the same spelling (in this case ou)</i> <i>Practice pronouncing words with different sound–spelling correspondences.</i>
Class Time	<i>15 minutes</i>
Preparation Time	<i>30–60 minutes</i>

PROCEDURE

1. Prepare a handout of words that contain the target spelling *ou* with target vowels underlined (see example words in Appendix A).
2. Using index cards, create a set of cards for each pair of students. Write a word with the target *ou* spelling on each card (see example words in Appendix A). Shuffle the cards for each set.
3. Prepare two sheets of paper for each pair of students. On each sheet of paper, draw a five-column chart with headings for each of the possible pronunciations for the *ou* spelling (i.e., /ʌ/, /ʊ/, /o/, /u/, and /au/).
4. Put students in pairs.
5. Write on the board that the *ou* spelling in *country* is pronounced /ʌ/, the *ou* spelling in *could* is pronounced /ʊ/, the *ou* spelling in *though* is pronounced /o/, the *ou* spelling in *through* is pronounced /u/, and the *ou* spelling in *out* is pronounced /au/.
6. Give out a set of cards and two of the prepared charts to each pair.
7. Explain to students that they will work in pairs, taking turns reading the words on the cards aloud. At first, Student A should read the words from each card aloud, and Student B should write the words on her sheet in the columns based on Student A's pronunciation. After Student A has read aloud all the words in the set of cards, Student B should then read the words aloud, and Student A should write the words in the columns on her sheet that fit Student B's pronunciation. Tell the students that they should not ask questions or discuss the pronunciation of the words at this point.