

# Some Basic Concepts

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## Why do we need to teach pronunciation?

There are many things that English teachers need to fit into their limited class time—grammar and vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Pronunciation often gets pushed to the bottom of the list. Many teachers say there’s just not enough time to teach pronunciation. Students often think it isn’t that important—after all, it won’t be tested on their college entrance exams!

But if students need or want to speak English understandably, pronunciation *is* important. The days when learners only needed reading and writing skills in English are past. Many of your students will need to speak and understand English in real life to communicate with both native speakers of English and speakers of other languages. Even if their grammar and vocabulary are strong, if their pronunciation isn’t easy to understand, their communication will fail. We owe it to our students to give them the tools they’ll need to be able to communicate successfully in English.

## Letters are not sounds

First of all, it’s important to remember that sounds and letters are two separate things. Letters are written symbols. We can see them, but we can’t hear them. Sounds are vibrations that our ears can hear and interpret. We can hear sounds, but we can’t see them. Even though people sometimes talk about “the *g* sound” or “the *a* sound,” *g* and *a* are letters, not sounds. In the English spelling system, letters can often represent more than one sound, depending on the word they’re in. For example, the letter *g* represents two completely different sounds in the words *go* and *gentle*. Also, a written letter sometimes represents no sound at all, like the *k* in *knee* or the *e* in *bake*.

Be careful not to confuse letters with the sounds they represent. When we talk about pronunciation, we’re talking about *sounds*, not written letters.

## Phonemes and allophones

**Phonemes** are the distinctive sounds of a language; the sounds that a native speaker of the language considers to be separate sounds. Every language has its own set of phonemes; no two languages have exactly the same set.

In reality, no two spoken sounds are precisely the same. After all, speech sounds are produced by human beings, not machines. Each time you say a sound, it might be slightly different. Sometimes the differences are tiny and random, and sometimes they can be pretty substantial. When we listen to someone talk, we don't usually notice all these differences. Our minds only recognize a limited number of sounds—in English, about 42. These basic sounds of a language are its **phonemes**.

If sounds can have so many variations, how can we know if two sounds are the same phoneme or different phonemes? That is, how can we tell which sounds that we hear count as the same sound in a particular language?

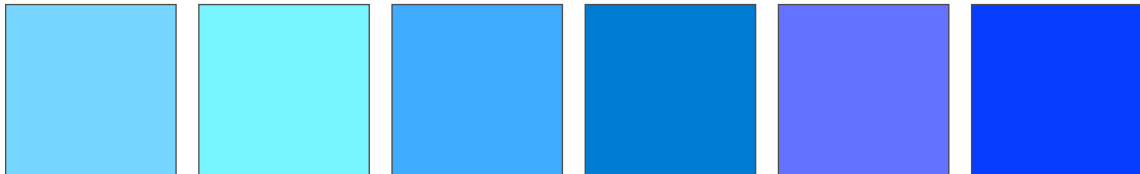
We can use this test: If we change one sound to another in a word and the meaning of the word changes or the word becomes meaningless, those two sounds are different phonemes. We say they are **in contrast**. For example, if we say *talk* (/tɔk/), it means “to speak,” but if we say *walk* (/wɔk/), then it means “to move around on foot.” Because changing /t/ to /w/ changed one word into a different word, we know that /t/ and /w/ are separate phonemes in English. They function as different sounds. If we start with the same word *talk* and change /t/ to /z/, the word becomes meaningless—*zalk* isn't a real word in English. So we can be sure that /t/ and /z/ are also different phonemes.

On the other hand, if we change one sound to another and the meaning of the word does not change, those sounds belong to the same phoneme.

For example, if we say the word *butter* (/bʌtər/), we can say /t/ in different ways. We might say it the way most Americans do in words like this—like a quick, voiced /d/—and the word will still be *butter*. We could also say /t/ in *butter* as a “normal,” voiceless /t/, or even say a very puffy, breathy /t/, and it will still be the same word, *butter*. Because saying /t/ in these different ways did not change the meaning of the word *butter*, we can tell that these sounds are *not* separate phonemes in English. They're just three variations of the same phoneme, /t/. These variations of a phoneme that are still heard to be the same sound are called **allophones** of the same phoneme. Although they're physically different sounds, they *function* as the same sound in English.

A phoneme is an abstract concept. It's related not so much to the physical sounds themselves, but to the way our minds perceive and categorize sounds. And the way our minds categorize sounds is different for each language. That is, each language has a different set of phonemes.

To illustrate how phonemes and allophones work, let's compare sounds to colors. If you look at the boxes below, you'll probably say that they're all blue.



And yet no two of them are exactly the same color. Some are lighter or darker, more greenish or more purplish. So why do we call them all by the same name, “blue”? It's because English has a category called “blue” that includes all these colors, not because they're really physically identical. (In fact, in another language the colors in these boxes might not all have the same name. In that language, color categories might be divided differently.) We could say that all these shades of blue are “allocolors” of the same “coloreme.” (These are not real words, so you don't have to remember them.) We understand them as all being “blue,” even though they're really slightly different. They all function as the same color.

In the same way, allophones are groups of (usually) similar sounds that native speakers of a language recognize as being the same sound. Speakers don't usually even notice that the sounds are different. They just assume that they're the same.

## Consonants and vowels

We can divide the phonemes of any language into two types of sounds: **consonants** and **vowels**. Consonants are sounds in which the air stream meets some obstacles in the mouth on its way up from the lungs. The air stream is bumped, squeezed, or completely blocked. Words like *big*, *map*, and *see* begin with consonants.

Vowels are sounds in which the air stream moves out very smoothly because there's nothing blocking or constricting it—it doesn't meet any obstacles on the way. Vowels are the “heart” of words and syllables. Words like *apple*, *east*, *over*, and *out* begin with vowels.

## The phonemic alphabet

A **phonemic alphabet** is a set of symbols that represent the sounds of a language. One symbol represents exactly one phoneme.

Why do we need a phonemic alphabet? It's because languages generally don't have perfect spelling systems, with exactly one symbol for each phoneme. Sometimes the same symbol can stand for more than one sound. For example, in English the letter "c" can represent at least three different phonemes:

- /k/ as in *cat*
- /s/ as in *city*
- /tʃ/ as in *cello*

In other cases, the same sound can be represented by more than one spelling. For example, the sound /f/ in English can be spelled in these ways:

- "f" in *fun*
- "ph" in *phone*
- "gh" in *cough*

Because of this, it's useful to have a special set of symbols that can represent sounds more consistently. These phonemic symbols can help both teachers and learners to record and interpret the pronunciation of new words accurately.

There are actually several different versions of the phonemic alphabet that are used to represent the sounds of English. They're all variations of the International Phonetic Alphabet, or **IPA**, a system of symbols developed in the late 1800s to try to represent all the sounds that are used in human languages. These variations of IPA are used in many textbooks and dictionaries to represent pronunciation. Although these alphabets are often referred to as "IPA," most of them are not exactly like "real" IPA. The tables on the following page show phonemic symbols for American English consonants and vowels. These are similar to the symbols commonly used in American textbooks.

## Consonants of American English

Example	Symbol	Example	Symbol
<i>pot</i>	/p/	<i>shop</i>	/ʃ/ or /ʒ/
<i>book</i>	/b/	<i>beige</i>	/ʒ/ or /ž/
<i>take</i>	/t/	<i>house</i>	/h/
<i>dog</i>	/d/	<i>chip</i>	/tʃ/ or /č/
<i>cat</i>	/k/	<i>jump</i>	/dʒ/ or /j/
<i>good</i>	/g/	<i>man</i>	/m/
<i>fun</i>	/f/	<i>now</i>	/n/
<i>very</i>	/v/	<i>sing</i>	/ŋ/
<i>thick</i>	/θ/	<i>lamp</i>	/l/
<i>then</i>	/ð/	<i>road</i>	/r/
<i>sun</i>	/s/	<i>win</i>	/w/
<i>zoo</i>	/z/	<i>you</i>	/y/ or /j/
<i>(why)</i>	(/hw/)	Most speakers of English don't use /hw/ as a separate phoneme. They use /w/ instead.	

## Vowels of American English

Example	Symbols	Example	Symbols
<i>beat</i>	/iy/    /i:/	<i>boot</i>	/uw/    /u:/
<i>bit</i>	/ɪ/    /i/	<i>book</i>	/ʊ/    /u/
<i>bait</i>	/ey/    /eɪ/	<i>boat</i>	/ow/    /ou/
<i>bet</i>	/ɛ/    /e/	<i>bought</i>	/ɔ/    /ɔ:/
<i>bat</i>	/æ/    /æ/	<i>box</i>	/ɑ/    /a/
<i>but</i>	/ʌ/    /ə/	<i>by</i>	/ay/    /ai/    /aɪ/
<i>sofa</i>	/ə/    /ə/	<i>cow</i>	/aw/    /au/    /aʊ/
<i>her</i>	/ɜ/    /ɜ:/    /ɛr/    /ɛr/	<i>boy</i>	/oy/    /ɔy/    /ɔi/    /ɔi/