

Difficult Sounds In English

English is full of difficult sounds! Some are difficult for you, but may be easy for others.

For example, Brazilians have a hard time with the H and R sounds.

Asian learners struggle with R and L.

Arabic speakers have a hard time with P and B,

BUT there are 5 sounds that **EVERYONE** struggles with!

Sounds Are Not Letters

AND keep in mind that **SOUNDS** are **NOT LETTERS**! Sounds are phonemes, represented by letters. For example, the letters “th” make the sound “th,” which is one sound not represented by a single letter. Other sounds may be represented by a single letter, but the most difficult sounds are represented by more than one letter.

A lot of English learners and teachers will tell you that pronouncing these sounds is essential for communication in English, and that causes a lot of stress because it can take years to get them right.

BUT honestly it is not essential to have perfect pronunciation in order to communicate.

For example, a lot of English learners say “t” instead of “th” or “tank you” instead of “thank you.” I will still know what you mean from the context.

Even if you say something like “turd” instead of “third” it might make us giggle, but we will be able to understand what you mean, which is the most important thing, right?

The truth is that perfect pronunciation is, well, for perfectionists. You **DON’T** need it for fluent communication.

BUT Mastering Difficult Sounds In English Language Pronunciation Will Improve Your Confidence

However, if your pronunciation is more native-like, it can help you to communicate more effectively by lowering the work (cognitive load) other people have to do to understand you. It’s especially difficult to talk with someone if you have a heavy accent and they have never spoken with someone like you before... but as for me, well, as an English teacher I’m used to speaking to people from all over the world with all kinds of cool accents!

Having native-like pronunciation can also make you feel more confident, and make you feel more a part of the native speaker’s culture.

You should, however, be proud of your accent and where you're from. If you can keep a little of that with you when you speak English, as long as it's not harming your communication, then why not?

The 5 Most Difficult Sounds In English Language Pronunciation

I've told you the truth — that you don't need perfect pronunciation for communication. There is something more important, however, and that is called STRESS. For the sake of time, I am not going to teach it in this lesson, but I will teach it next week. Be sure to subscribe so you get a notification when it is published! If it is already published, I will link to it here.

So what are the 5 most difficult sounds and how can you practice them?

1. The TH sound
 1. Father
 2. Theater
2. The ER sound
 1. Nurse
 2. Father
3. The schwa sound
 1. **A**mazing
 2. Ent**re**preneur
4. Consonant clusters
 1. Cluster
 2. Friend
 3. Stretch
5. Short vs. Long vowels
 1.
 1. App, ape
 2. election
 3. Lick or like
 4. rob , robe
 5. Umbrella, usually

Some common grammar mistakes result from mishearing English words

HOW PRONUNCIATION CAN CAUSE ERRORS

When we listen in a language that is not our mother tongue, we will inevitably misinterpret some of the sounds we hear, thinking they represent different words from those intended by the speaker. A well-known example is when we mix up number pairs like **15** and **50** (see **67. Numbers in Spoken English, #8**). In this case, misunderstanding results. Elsewhere, however, we might still understand the right meaning, but learn the wrong grammar. This will happen if we

repeatedly misinterpret a particular word in the same way, so that the incorrect word we think we heard becomes established in our memory and we start to produce it in our speech and writing.

This post is about errors of both kinds that I have noticed in an academic context. I wish to present a small number of them not so much in order to highlight them as to raise awareness of the importance of pronunciation study and accurate listening in the learning of English.

Pronunciation is, of course, just one among many causes of English errors. Alternative causes are considered in this blog under the headings **Words with Unexpected Grammar** (on the influence of similar-meaning words), **Confusions of Similar Structures** (on the influence of similar-looking grammar structures), **142. Grammar Errors with Passive Verbs** (on the role of skill deficiency), and **Words with Complicated Grammar** (on difficulties resulting from a word having an unusually wide range of uses).

EXAMPLES OF ERRORS CAUSED BY PRONUNCIATION

1. Misunderstanding of “Can’t”

People whose mother tongue is not English quite commonly hear *can’t* as *can*. Pronunciation is probably the sole reason. Two different points tend not to be appreciated. Firstly, the final “t” is unimportant: it is hardly pronounced at all because it undergoes “consonant reduction” as a result of being a “plosive” placed at the end of the word (see **91. Pronunciation in Reading Aloud**, #6).

Secondly, the letter “a” is pronounced differently in the two words. In *can*, it is pronounced /ə/ most of the time (but /æ/ for emphasis), while in *can’t* it becomes either /æ/ or (in some British English accents) the slightly illogical /ɑ:/ (see **29. Illogical Vowel Spellings**). The way the vowel is pronounced is the main means of distinguishing *can* from *can’t*.

The most likely reason why the difference tends not to be appreciated is that learners of English very often believe English vowel letters always have to be pronounced more or less as they are spelt, as in most other languages, and both are spelt with “a”. The idea that many English vowels must change their pronunciation to either /ə/ or /ɪ/ when pronounced weakly – as *can* usually is – is hard to remember, if learned at all (see **125. Stress and Emphasis** and **202. Some Strategies for Learning English**, #3).

To sum up, what seems to happen when *can’t* is misunderstood is that the /t/ is not heard and the /ɑ:/ is believed to signal *can*, since the normal pronunciation of *can* with /ə/ is not easily appreciated or remembered.

2. Misunderstanding of “... and eight(y)”

In a number-dictation exercise that I once used to do with Economics students, I noticed that many would write **482** as **492**. I surmised that pronunciation was the second of two different causes. The first was the students’ ignorance of the need

for **and** after the word **hundred** in spoken numbers (see **67. Numbers in Spoken English**). The second was my pronunciation of **and** in an abbreviated way that was new to the students but typical of English: /ən/ or /nd/ or simply /n/. These causes meant that I was saying “four hundred n’eighty two” and the students were understanding **n’eighty** as **ninety**, despite the obvious phonetic differences.

3. Wrong Preposition after “Reason”

The correct preposition for linking **reason** with a following consequence noun is **for** (see **111. Words with a Typical Preposition**). An example is:

(a) **There are numerous reasons for grammar errors.**

The incorrect preposition that is sometimes used in such sentences is **of**. Part of the reason for it is probably transfer from another language. In French, for example, (a) would have the equivalent of **of** instead of **for** (cf. **raison d’être** – “reason of being” – in **135. French Influences on English Vocabulary**). However, English pronunciation probably plays a part too, reinforcing the mother tongue influence.

In order to understand the role of English pronunciation in the error, it is necessary to examine the normal spoken forms of **of** and **for**. There is not so much difference as the spellings suggest. The phonological representations /əv/ and /fə/ show that both words comprise just a vowel and a consonant. Two features appear to differ: the consonants (a surprise, given their identical spellings) and the consonant positions. However, in fast spoken speech, the position difference virtually disappears because the /ə/ vowel is so weak as to be hardly heard. Therefore, the main difference between **of** and **for** is that one sounds like “v” and the other like “f”.

Now these two consonants are very similar – /v/ is just more “voiced” than /f/. As a result, they must be easily confusable, making it easy for someone expecting **of** after **reason** to think that that is what they heard and what they should always say.

4. Wrong Preposition before “Consideration”

After the verb BE, it is normal to say **under consideration** (see **111. Words with a Typical Preposition**), but after TAKE, **into consideration**. (see **264. Variations in the Use of TAKE**, #13). A common error is to use **under** instead of **into**. As with the previous error, pronunciation is probably not the only cause (the very variability of the preposition is confusing), but it does seem to be a factor. To see why, we must again look at the normal pronunciation of these two prepositions.

Under is pronounced /ʌndə/ and **into** /intə/. Once more, a greater than expected similarity is revealed: the same number of sounds in each word, the vowels in the same positions (beginning and end), and two of the four sounds /n, ə/ identical. Moreover, the /d/ of **under** and /t/ of **into** are as close to each other as /f/ and /v/ are. This means that the main difference between the two prepositions is their first

vowels. It is surely not impossible that a learner of English might ignore this slight difference and believe *under* has been said when in fact it was *into*.

5. Confusion of “Increasing” and “Increase in”

The pronunciation difference here between *-ing* /ɪŋ/ and *in* /ɪn/ involves two very similar-sounding consonants. It will trouble speakers of any language that does not clearly distinguish them. The main grammar error that can result may be illustrated as follows:

(b) *There is increase in doubt about the value of jogging.

The error is the absence of a word like *an* or *some* before the singular countable noun *increase* (see **110. Nouns without “the” or “a”**). A very likely cause of the error is the fact that *increasing* could correctly replace *increase in*, and it does not need a word like *an* or *some* before it because it is not a noun like *increase* but a participle describing *doubt*. This change makes *doubt* the main noun, and it needs no *a* or *some* because it is uncountable.

My hypothesis is that English users whose mother language does not clearly distinguish /ŋ/ from /n/ could easily, on hearing *increasing* in sentences like (b), think that they had heard *increase in*, and hence believe that it was alright to use this noun without an article before it.

6. Omission of -s and -ed

Errors with endings are often, of course, a result of a grammar rather than pronunciation confusion (see, for example, **142. Grammar Errors with Passive Verbs**). However, a case can be made for the involvement of pronunciation at least sometimes.

One likely culprit is the common use by mother-tongue English speakers of what I call “lengthening”: pronouncing the same consonant ending one word and starting the next just once (with a time delay) instead of twice. Examples are the /n/ sound across *can never*, and the /f/ across *enough food* (see **91. Pronunciation in Reading Aloud, #6**).

Lengthening involving *-s* and *-ed* is common. It is likely, for example, in *writes something* and *dropped down*. Obviously, learners not aware of lengthening might easily think that *-s* or *-ed* is not present in such combinations, and so drop them in writing.

The *-ed* ending could also fail to be heard as a result of the fact that it involves a “plosive” consonant (/d/ or /t/). Such consonants are often only half pronounced at the end of a word. They are pronounced most clearly when the next word begins with a vowel (e.g. *dropped out, removed everything*), and they are especially likely to be reduced before another (different) plosive (e.g. *passed behind, argued convincingly*) or at the end of a sentence.

7. Wrong Article after “with”

The difference between *with the* and *with a* is not as great as it seems. The underlined vowels are both pronounced /ə/. The difference would then appear to be just the number of times the “th” sound is pronounced. Even here, however, the real difference is smaller: in both phrases “th” tends actually to be pronounced just once, the only variation being the length of time taken to do so (longer in *with the*). This way of pronouncing repeated consonants is quite widespread in English (see “consonant lengthening” in **91. Pronunciation in Reading Aloud**, #6).

The pronunciation of *with the* with only a single (prolonged) “th” must sometimes mislead learners of English into thinking that they heard *with a*, thus building up a misconception that *with a* is correct in places where it is not. There might even be wider damage to the understanding of *a* versus *the*.

8. Confusion of “this” and “these”

The choice between these two visibly different words of course depends on whether they represent a singular or plural idea (see **204. Grammatical Agreement**). The problem is that, although the spellings indicate a difference of vowel pronunciation (/ɪ/ in *this*, /i:/ in *these*), this is not so helpful when someone with a mother tongue that does not differentiate the two vowels is mainly learning English through speaking and listening. In this situation, it is easy to think the same vowel is being used all the time, and to reflect that in writing by only ever using one spelling (usually *this*).

The difference between the two words is especially difficult for Spanish speakers to hear because Spanish words, besides only having one “i” sound, rarely end in the /z/ one – a secondary feature differentiating *these* from *this*.

MTI

One of the biggest challenges in teaching or learning a second or a foreign language is in mastering its sound patterns. This challenge is most acute as far as learning how to speak English is concerned; more so due to the absence of any set rules in pronouncing English sounds. With no concrete rules to accurately learn English sounds in place, the mother tongue influence (MTI) while speaking English also becomes difficult to remove. This adds to the woes of the teachers and the learners of this language.

To facilitate the removal of MTI and to support the learning of English sound patterns, it is hence imperative that the learners go through regular sessions on pronunciation. They need to consciously learn how to articulate English sounds to improve their pronunciation in English. With the teacher guiding the learners to the correct mouth movement to help them learn the production of these sounds, the learners will gradually be able to meet the challenge of correctly pronouncing

English sounds. If the teacher models a said sound, the learners will be assured of articulating the particular sound. It is understood that over a period of time, this exercise of correct mouth movement will result in the removal of MTI in the learner.

While many a teacher will not shy away from extending support to improving the pronunciation skills of her learners, it is always helpful for her to avail the benefits of a language lab to meet this objective. The language lab comprising an audio-visual based teaching-learning software can allow for a smoother and more effective process of learning of pronunciation. Such software provides a video display of mouth movements, position of the tongue or the shape of the mouth while demonstrating the production of a particular sound. This helps the learners learn about the various factors that affect pronunciation. The observation of the mouth shapes made using the software and the practise done thereof helps the learners articulate better.

What is MTI?

You might have come across or may be among the ones who have sound English knowledge and skills but go down when they speak. Their pronunciation and accent is highly influenced by their mother tongue. Such a problem is called Mother Tongue Influence or MTI issue.

Mother Tongue Influence or MTI issue is a common problem encountered by non-native English speakers. The influence of mother tongue in English language is a big problem for those aiming to score high in the speaking part of an English language proficiency test like IELTS. Mother Tongue Influence in English can play a significant role in diminishing their speaking component score.

How to Neutralise Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) while Speaking English?

Mother tongue influence (MTI) means the impact of the usage of our mother tongue on the second language; for example, English. In other words, we can figure out the ethnicity/nationality of someone with the way he/she uses the dialects that interferes with English speaking. This is very common in India.

The fact that **Impressive English Speaking** is key to good communication skills cannot be denied, and with grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation too is given equal weightage worldwide. However, the evidence of mother tongue influence is obvious, so this manifests in the form of incorrect pronunciation.

How to Overcome Mother Tongue Influence in English

After becoming aware of mistakes which we make while using English with interference of sounds from the mother tongue, we happen to lose our confidence when **Speaking English** in public which may result into embarrassment or hatred for English language. Don't you worry as this is not a serious problem and it can be overcome with the right practice.

Undoubtedly it is possible to overcome Mother Tongue influence (MTI) issue, however, only with hardwork and the right practice I repeat. Mother Tongue Influence issue is a major issue in India and cannot be solved in a day. You are required to be patient and take the right actions if you want to overcome Mother Tongue Influence issue.

When you begin practicing, your brain starts adapting the new speaking style, and the new sounds eventually get ingrained in your brain. As the routine takes hold, the level of effort required lowers, and once you get used to, the time and effort needed for practice is greatly decreased.

A few of various techniques for neutralisation of Mother Tongue Influence are

- Enhancing pronunciation
- Practicing English speaking regularly
- Performing as much communication in English as possible
- Listening to English songs
- Watching English movies
- Joining a reliable English speaking coaching

Why do People Face MTI Problem?

The biggest reason for MTI problem is the lack of importance given to pronunciation in most of Indian schools because the number of dialects in India is too high; hence, it is very difficult to pick each one for research

and neutralise it. So, it is considered a serious challenge faced by English teachers across India.

Influence of Mother Tongue in English Language

One of the most difficult aspects of MTI is that it impairs your ability to communicate effectively. You may feel depressed when speaking with a fluent English speaker because the individual may make fun of your accent and speaking manner. Apart from this, MTI may negatively impact your English language proficiency test scorecard and may diminish your chances to study or migrate abroad.

What can be done to Overcome Mother Tongue Influence?

It might sound like a pipedream to practice and master the sounds of consonants and vowels (phonetics); however, it is not so. Here are some ways to get rid of mother-tongue influence while using English.

- Well, reading the **Oxford dictionary** is highly recommended to know the pronunciation of each word as the words are also spelled phonetically; e.g.: *cuisine* /kwiˈziːn/.
- Practicing tongue-twisters may also help in improving the pronunciation particularly of homophonic words, and to learn differentiate between the sound of consonants like ‘s-sound’, ‘f-sound’, etc.
- Start watching English news on **Star World, CNN, BBC** if you haven’t started yet. Honestly speaking, I find this option quite boring, so I prefer watching **English series from Netflix** because I find it recreational and interesting. Undoubtedly, watching English news would be a great help as you would also improve your fluency by imitating the newsreader.
- Usage of Artificial intelligence eg: **SIRI**, google assistant for detection of the words. You may have to keep pronouncing the same word until Siri or google assistant detects it and bingo! There you go!
- Read aloud in **English for 15-20 minutes** daily and record your voice. I prefer to read aloud from the newspaper or magazines. Research has proven the fact that it takes at least three months to develop strong mouth muscles to speak a new language.

