8 The sounds of English

A Warm-up

1 Your trainer is going to give you a 'new name'. Memorize your name, but keep it secret. Your trainer will call the class register. When you hear your name, say 'Present'.

2 Think about these questions:

a What problems might learners of English have with this activity? Why?
b What aspect of language does the activity target?

B Sounds v letters

1 Write down the words your trainer dictates. Then check your spelling with a partner.

2 Work in pairs. Discuss the meanings of these words and see if you agree on them.

3 Count the *letters* in each word. For example:

letter = six letters (L-E-T-T-E-R)

Count the *sounds* in each word. For example:

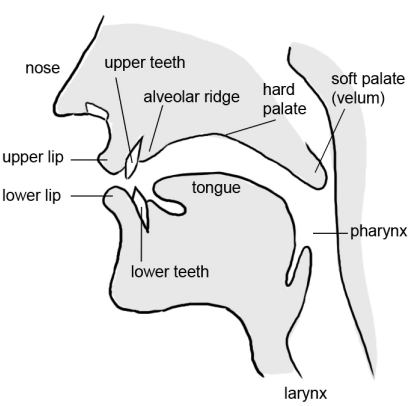
letter = four sounds (l - e - tt - er)

4 Work in pairs. Discuss what activity B3 demonstrates about the sound-spelling relationship in English.

C Consonant sounds

1 Consonant sounds are formed when the airflow from the lungs is obstructed by the moveable parts of the mouth, including the tongue and lips. Try pronouncing these sounds, and decide where the obstruction is occurring.

You can refer to this diagram:



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For example, the sound /b/ (as in *ban)* is articulated by obstructing the airflow at the lips.

/m/ as in *man*
/v/ as in *van*
/n/ as in *nan*
/t/ as in *tan*
/r/ as in *ran*
/k/ as in *can*

Because of the frequent mismatch between spelling and sound, it helps to use a special script (called *phonemic script)* to transcribe spoken language. Here are the 24 standard English consonant sounds in phonemic script:

CONSONANTS

voiceless	**p** pen /pen/	**t** town /taʊn/	**c** cat /kæt/	**f** fish /fɪʃ/	**θ** think /θɪŋk/	**s** say /seɪ/	**ʃ** she /ʃiː/	**ʧ** cheese /ʧiːz/
voiced	**b** book /bʊk/	**d** day /deɪ/	**g** give /gɪv/	**v** very /ˈver.ɪ/	**ð** the /ðə/	**z** zoo /zuː/	**ʒ** vision /vɪʒn/	**ʤ** jump /ʤʌmp/

l look /lʊk/	**r** run /rʌn/	**j** yes /jes/	**w** we /wiː/	**m** moon /muːn/	**n** name /neɪm/	**ŋ** sing /sɪŋ/	**h** hand /hænd/

Cambridge International Dictionary of English

Many of the consonants consist of *voiceless* and *voiced* pairs, such as /p/ and /b/. A *voiced* sound is one that is made by activating the *vocal cords.* (You can feel them vibrate if you put your hand on your throat). To produce a *voiceless* sound, no vocal cord activation is required.

2 Read these words, using the table above.

a /met/
b /dek/
c /ðen/
d /hedʒ/
e /breθ/
f /fetʃ/
g /nekst/
h /jet/
i /ʃred/
j /ʃrɪŋk/

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3 Write these words in phonemic script.

a *sent*
b *edge*
c *thin*
d *thing*
e *think*
f *this*
g *fixed*
h *jest*
i *yelled*
j *stretched*

D Vowel sounds

Vowels are formed, not by obstructing the airflow, but by modifying its passage through the mouth, principally through the use of the tongue and lips.

1 Say the vowel sounds in these words and notice any changes in the position of your tongue and lips:

Jean June
Gin John
Jen Shawn
Jan

Vowels are divided between *monophthongs* (single vowels) and *diphthongs* (a glide from one vowel to another). All vowels are voiced, that is, they involve activating the vocal cords.

On the left are listed the vowels of standard British English in phonemic script. On the right are listed the vowels of standard North American English (also known as General American). In each list, monophthongs are on the left; diphthongs on the right.

British English			
iː	we	ɪə	dear
ɪ	fit	eɪ	say
ʊ	look	ʊə	sure
uː	hoot	ɔɪ	toy
e	fed	əʊ	so
ə	alone/father	eə	fair
ɜː	hurt	aɪ	die
ɔː	ought	aʊ	how
æ	hat		
ʌ	but		
ɑː	spa, tar		
ɒ	pot		

North American English			
iː	we	eɪ	say
ɪ	fit	ɔɪ	toy
ʊ	foot	oʊ	so
uː	hoot	aɪ	die
e	fed	aʊ	how
ə/ɚ	alone/father		
ɝː	hurt		
ɔː	ought		
æ	hat		
ʌ	but		
ɑː	Pa, pot		

Note that one of the commonest vowels in English is the central, unstressed vowel /ə/ – known as *schwa*.

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2 Decipher these film titles, using the consonant chart and the vowel chart. Choose one variety of English.

British English	North American
a /bætmæn/	a /bætmæn/
b /kɪŋ kɒŋ/	b /kɪŋ kɑ:ŋ/
c /eəpleɪn/	c /erpleɪn/
d /ʤɔ:z/	d /ʤɔ:z/
e /ðə bɜ:dz/	e /ðə bɝ:dz/
f /saɪkəʊ/	f /saɪkoʊ/
g /pʌlp fɪkʃən/	g /pʌlp fɪkʃən/
h /vɜ:tɪgəʊ/	h /vɝ:tɪgoʊ/
i /ðə ʃaɪnɪŋ/	i /ðə ʃaɪnɪŋ/
j /ʤɔ:z tu:/	j /ʤɔ:z tu:/

3 Write these film titles in phonemic script:

a *Shrek*
b *Ben Hur*
c *Snatch*
d *Star Wars*
e *High Noon*
f *Blade Runner*
g *Memento*
h *Mystic River*

4 Work in pairs. Write two more film titles in phonemic script for your partner to decipher.

E Contrasting languages

1 Compare these charts of the consonant sounds in English and in Thai.

English

		Place of articulation Front of mouth ←----------→ throat							
MANNER OF ARTICULATION	stop	p b			t d			k g	
	stop + vibration					ʧ ʤ			
	through nose	m			n			ŋ	
	vibration		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
	little obstruction				r		j	w	
	sideways obstruction				l				

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Thai

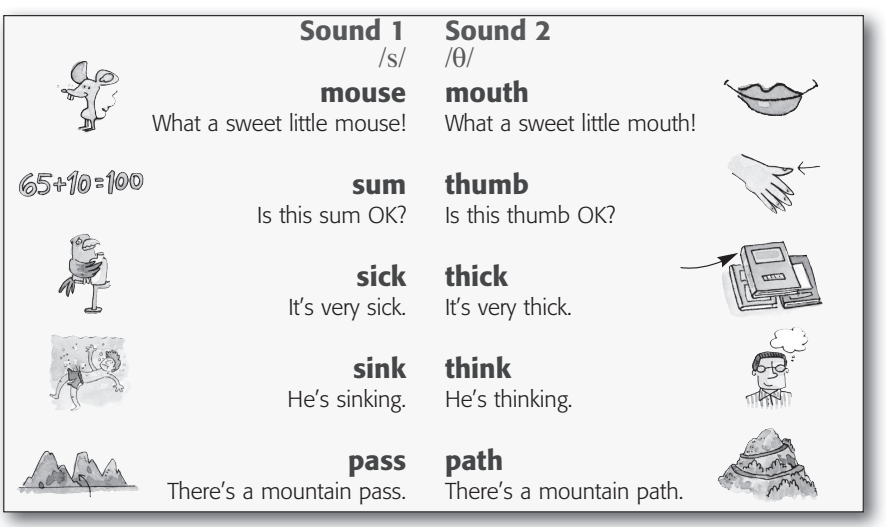
		Place of articulation Front of mouth ←----------→ throat							
MANNER OF ARTICULATION	stop	p pʰ b			t tʰ d			k kʰ	ʔ
	stop + vibration					tɕ tɕʰ			
	through nose	m			n			ŋ	
	vibration		f		s				h
	trill				r				
	little obstruction						j	w	
	sideways obstruction				l				

Adapted from M.R. Kalaya Tingsabadh and A.S. Abramson, 1999

Which of these English word pairs might a speaker of Thai have difficulty with? Why?

a pat v bat
b fan v van
c right v light
d mess v mesh
e moss v moth
f sin v sing
g latter v ladder
h back v bag
i sigh v thigh

2 Here is an extract from a pronunciation course. Which of the above consonant distinctions does it target?



Ship or Sheep?

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3 How could you use it in class? For example:
   a How would you model the two sounds?
   b How would you test students' ability to hear the difference?
   c How would you provide practice at producing the difference?

F Review

Can you answer these questions?

a How many letters are there in English?
b How many sounds are there?
c How many sounds are there in *thought*? In *six*? In *coaching*?
d How many ways is the letter 'a' pronounced in English? Clue: The tall cat ate the banana!
e What's the difference between a consonant sound and a vowel sound?
f What's the difference between the sound /s/ and the sound /z/?
g What's the name of the first and third vowel sounds in *banana*?
h What's the difference between the sound /ɪ/ in *pin*, and the sound /aɪ/ in *pine*?
i What sound do these three words have in common? *does, zoo, noise*
j What sound do these three words have in common? *first, surf, earns*
k True or false? /ʃeɪkspɪə rəʊt məkbeθ/
l True or false? /nju: jɔ:k ɪz ɪn teksəs/

KEY WORDS FOR TEACHERS

Check you know the meanings of these terms.

- *phoneme, vowel, consonant, monophthong, diphthong*
- *voiced sound, unvoiced sound*
- *schwa*
- *phonemic script*
- *minimal pair*
- *RP (Received Pronunciation)*
- *GA (General American)*

REFLECTION

1 To what extent does your own variety of spoken English match the descriptions of RP or General American (GA) outlined in this unit? Are there any significant differences? Do these differences mean that some words that are different in RP or GA are pronounced the same in your variety? For example, in many varieties of New Zealand English, the words *ear* and *air* are pronounced the same. And in some varieties of North American English, such as those spoken in Canada or in and around Boston, the words *cot* and *caught* are pronounced the same, which is not generally the case in many other regions.
2 How might the variety of English that you speak affect your teaching?

References

Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.1774.

Tingsabadh, M.R. Kalaya and Abramson, A. S. (1999). Thai. In *Handbook of the International Phonetic Association*, edited by the International Phonetic Association. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.147.

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