

The aim of this leaflet

This leaflet provides information on why pronunciation problems may occur and specific sounds in English that Putonghua speakers may have difficulty with.

Why problems occur

Pronunciation problems tend to occur because most people are used to hearing and making sounds, which only exist in their mother tongue.

There are many sounds in Putonghua and English that are similar, some, are only partially similar and others are totally different. When you hear or are trying to say the similar or totally different sounds, it's easy to make mistakes because you are used to hearing and making sounds in your mother tongue. It is important therefore, to make yourself aware of how these different sounds are made and practice listening to them and saying them as much as possible.

To make language sounds we move our jaw, tongue, lips, and the vocal cords in our throat in a number of different ways. If for example, your brain is not used to telling your tongue to move into a certain position

in your mouth in order to make a particular sound, then you may have difficulty saying that sound clearly.

How do you solve the problems?

Here are a few suggestions on how to train your brain:

1. Learn to recognize that there are differences in the way some English sounds are made compared to Putonghua sounds
2. Learn to hear clearly and think about how sounds are made when you are listening
3. Discover how these different sounds are made. Find out for example:
 - ◆ how far open your jaw should be
 - ◆ whether the tip of your tongue should be touching the inside of your top teeth or whether it should be lying flat
 - ◆ if your lips should be 'rounded' like when you are going to kiss someone or 'spread' like when you smile
 - ◆ whether the vocal cords in your throat should be vibrating or not

(materials talk about this in terms of 'voiced' or; voiceless' sounds)

4. Practice moving your jaw, tongue, lips etc. as much as possible so that you are able to make the problematic English sounds clearly.

Many of the materials listed on **P3** give explanations and show pictures of where to put your tongue or how to move your lips etc. These materials help you understand how English is spoken and help you practice your English pronunciation. You can find more ideas on how to practice from **P1** to **P4**.

English sounds, which can cause problems for Putonghua speakers

Below is an explanation of which English sounds Putonghua speakers tend to have difficulty pronouncing:

Vowels

As mentioned above, some sounds including a few vowel sounds are the same in Putonghua and English. Some, vowel sounds however are different and can cause problems if pronounced incorrectly. Another reason may be related to not being aware of

how to move the jaw, tongue, lips etc. Below is a list of problematic sounds.

Examples:

/i:/ as in ‘heed’ is a long vowel sound and you need to spread your lips tightly to make the sound.	BUT	/ɪ/ as in ‘hid’ is a short vowel sound and your lips are more relaxed and less tightly spread.
/e/ as in ‘bet’ is a short vowel and you need to lower your jaw slightly to make the sound.	BUT	/æ/ as in ‘bat’ is slightly longer. More importantly, for this sound you need to lower your jaw even more
/u:/ as in ‘hoot’ is a long vowel sound and you need to push the back of your tongue	BUT	/ʊ/ as in ‘hood’ is a short vowel sound. Compared with /u:/ , your tongue

close to the back of your mouth. You also need to round your lips tightly and feel them push forward as you make the sound.		doesn’t need to be so high up at the back of your mouth and you don’t need to round your lips as much.
/ɔ:/ as in ‘caught’ is a long vowel and you need to lower your jaw very slightly and round your lips.. Your tongue should be pulled back.	BUT	/ɒ/ as in ‘cot’ is a short vowel sound. Compared with /ɔ:/ , you need to lower your jaw more and keep your lips more open and less round. Your tongue should be pulled back and lowered.
/ɑ:/ as in ‘dark’ is a long vowel sound and you need to keep your tongue down whilst	BUT	/ʌ/ as in ‘duck’ is a short vowel sound and you open your lips a little keeping them

lowering your jaw a lot. Your lips should be open and relaxed.		relaxed. You also need to put your tongue back a little.
--	--	--

(¹NB: identified sounds above from: Hung, 1997)

Consonants (see P5 & P3)

To understand how problems occur with consonant sounds, it’s important to understand how the vocal cords in your throat work. When you say any vowel sound and some consonant sounds your vocal cords should vibrate. Sounds produced this way are known as ‘voiced’ sounds. The consonant sounds that do not cause your vocal cords to vibrate are known as ‘voiceless’ sounds. All vowel sounds are ‘voiced’ so don’t worry, you already know how to do this.

Try feeling how your vocal cords vibrate to make a voiced sound. Place two fingers lightly across your throat. Say one of the vowel sounds listed above. You’ll notice that the vibration of your vocal cords can be felt in your fingers.

¹ Hung, T.T.N., (1997) The Phonemic system of some Asian varieties of English. Paper presented at the fourth International Conference on World Englishes, Singapore, 19-21 December, 1997

5. Other problems can also occur with some English consonant sounds. Below is a list of sounds that can cause problems.

6.

7. **Examples:**

8.

/v/ as in 'van', is a voiced sound. Your upper teeth rest lightly on your lower lip and you can feel the air forcing its way through them. Your vocal cords should vibrate.	But	/f/ as in 'fan' is voiceless. your teeth and lips are in the same position as with /v/ but there is no vibration of the vocal cords.
---	------------	--

/V/ as in 'vet' (see description above)	But	/W/ as in 'wet' is also a voiced sound but your lips must be round and your teeth don't touch your lips
---	------------	---

/r/ s in 'river' is a voiced sound and is made by curling the tip of the tongue back slightly. It is different to the 'r' sound in Putonghua.	But	/l/ as in 'liver' is also a voiced sound but instead of curling the tip of your tongue back, it should just touch the roof of your mouth.
/θ/ as in 'thin' is voiceless. Keep your teeth slightly apart, and let the tip of your tongue stick out slightly between them.	But	/t/ as in 'tin' is often said instead

/θ/ as in 'three' (see description above)	But	/f/ as In 'fee' is often said instead, esp. by Cantones e speakers.
/θ/ as in 'think' (see description above)	But	/S/ as in 'sink' is often said instead, esp. by mainland Chinese learners.

/ð/ as in 'those' is voiced. Otherwise,	But	/d/ as in 'dose' often said instead
---	------------	-------------------------------------

it is like /θ/		
----------------	--	--

(²NB: identified sounds above from Hung, 1997)

Clusters (See P5 & P3)

Consonant Clusters don't exist in Putonghua and can therefore cause problems. A common mistake for Putonghua speakers is to leave out some of the consonants in a cluster or to add a vowel sound in between the cluster. This can be dangerous because people may think you are saying a different word altogether. For example:

'**pray**' has a cluster of two consonants /p/ and /r/ at the beginning of the word. If you leave out the /r/, the word changes meaning to '**pay**' and if you leave off the /p/, the word changes meaning to '**ray**'. If you add vowel sounds between the consonants it sounds very strange.

Clusters are not all that easy so it's a good idea to spend a lot of time practising them.

² Hung, T.T.N., (1997) The Phonemic system of some Asian varieties of English. Paper presented at the fourth International Conference on World Englishes, Singapore, 19-21 December, 1997

Endings

Consonant sounds at the ends of words often cause problems. It is important in English to pronounce these clearly. Below are some common errors:

- ◆ Leaving the ending off as in:
 1. 'mo' instead of '**most**'
 2. 'po-corn' instead of pop**-**corn
 3. 'migh' instead of might'
 4. 'ki' instead of '**kick**'
- ◆ '- **ed**' endings. There are 3 ways to say '- ed' endings:
 1. /d/ as in '**claimed**'
 2. /t/ as in '**checked**'
 3. /ɪd/ as in '**commented**'
- ◆ 's' endings: Be very careful not to leave it off!. It should be pronounced /z/. A common mistake is to say 'need' /ni:d/ instead of 'needs' /ni:dz/ of which could be grammatically wrong, or even /ni:/ which would sound like '**knee**' and has a different meaning altogether.

Other areas to be aware of (see P6 & P3)

- ◆ Word stress
- ◆ Sentence stress
- ◆ Linking

Improving your English pronunciation is not just about understanding and practising the

differences between vowel sounds and consonant sounds, it is also very important to be aware of how all the different elements that create speech are put together. Understanding and practising English word stress, sentence stress, linking etc. will help you enormously in hearing connected speech clearly and in being able to speak English with confidence and more fluency.

And now...

After reading this Advice Sheet, you should have an idea of what to do and how to do it. Improving pronunciation is a long-term process and requires constant practice. Sometimes you may feel bored or frustrated or think that you are not progressing at all. If you would like any help or advice, or just a chat about your progress, please get in touch - **we are here to support your independent learning!** To contact us:

- Make an appointment to see an adviser. For details of advisers and their availability, please go to <https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-adviser-timetable/>).
- E-mail your questions to **iLANG** (lcilang@ust.hk).
- Ask at the reception counter of the Language Commons — if the receptionist cannot help you directly, s/he

will pass your query on to one of the advisers.

What else can you do?

- Browse the many physical (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-commons/#resources>) and online materials (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/resources-speaking/>) for Pronunciation.
- Join a Pronunciation activity or short course (<http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/speaking/>).

Last updated: September 2017