

# Pronunciation

*This resource is for speakers who use English as a second or additional language. It is about pronunciation and ways to speak clearly.*

## What is pronunciation?

Pronunciation consists of a number of different elements. Each of these elements is important and contributes to a speaker's ability to speak clearly and fluently so that they can be understood by many different people in many different situations.

## Rhythm - pausing and stress, linking and reduction

Rhythm in speech involves many things. It includes where you pause in a sentence and which words you stress, or which parts of words (syllables) that you stress. 'Stress' relates to how loud you say a word, or how much emphasis you put on that word or syllable. Related to rhythm is linking. Fluent speakers 'run' their words together and this sometimes makes it difficult for learners of English to understand native speakers. As a speaker you need to link words and to also reduce or weaken some words or parts of words. (For example when the phrase "night and day" is said by native speakers, they usually do not pronounce 'and' fully but make it sound like 'n'. This is an example of a reduced or weakened word. In the sentence, "Look out the window!" there is linking (loo-kout) and weakening or reduction (the).

## Intonation

This is the use of different pitch and changes in pitch to convey meaning in a sentence. The same words can be said with different pitch and the listener understands something different. e.g. "She's finished" said with a rise in pitch at the end becomes a question. Said without this rise it is a statement. Intonation is used to express a great number of different meanings, including emotions and attitudes.

## Sounds

The individual sounds of English may be different to the sounds in your first language. Or perhaps more importantly, they may be combined with other sounds in different ways or appear in different parts of a word. The vowels and consonants of English are important elements of pronunciation

## Body language

This element of pronunciation involves various parts of the body:

**Body** - the way you stand or sit when talking, the angle of your shoulders, your stance. **Your head / face** - where you look when you speak, how often you look at the people you are speaking to in the eye and how long you hold their gaze, whether you move your head up, down or side to side. **Your hands / arms** - your hand gestures and arm movements

## Voice quality

This relates to how your voice sounds. Your voice might be quiet, loud, high or low pitched, husky, squeaky, etc. How you breathe also effects your voice quality. The speed of your speaking, whether very quick or very slow can have an effect on your voice quality. This last thing is related to the rhythm of you speech.

Each of these elements contributes to a person being a competent and clear speaker of English and no single element alone is the key to good pronunciation. However, achieving competence in all of these elements is important and should be each learner's goal.

# How to improve your pronunciation

## 1. Awareness

You need to become aware of what you sound like and compare that to how other people speak. This can be done by taping yourself speaking. Many of us are surprised when we hear our own voice on tape and our response: "Is that how I sound??!!" seems to indicate that we are usually not aware of what we sound like. Therefore it is important to develop an awareness of this.

## 2. Goals.

You need to set yourself some goals for pronunciation. For example you might decide that you are going to speak more slowly, or more loudly, or you might focus on one or two sounds in English that you always have trouble with. For help with goal setting contact Academic Support.

## 3. Practice.

Practice makes perfect. It will probably take more than just one or two practices to change your speaking habits. It might help to think of pronunciation as if it were like a sporting skill (for example hitting a ball in a game of tennis, or kicking a football). You need to do it a lot of times to get it right, and even then you may not get it right every time. Many people find that their pronunciation varies from day to day, sometimes it even seems to get worse. However, if you accept that there is no quick and easy solution, then you are probably less likely to become frustrated or to give up trying.

## 4. Feedback

It is important to check if other people have understood you. You can do this in several ways:

### Look for signs -

The people who you talk to might appear confused by frowning, or squinting their eyes, or staring at you. They might also respond inappropriately with a comment that is not related to what you are saying. In some cases they might suddenly end the conversation.

### Ask the people you talk to

Ask other people to tell you when you make a mistake. Ask them if you are unsure if what you've said is clear or pronounced correctly. Ask them if they want you to repeat what you said.

*"Have I said that clearly?" OR*

*"Would you like me to say that again?" OR*

*"I'm sorry, English pronunciation is a bit difficult for me. I said, 'XXXXXX'.*

*Did I pronounce that correctly?"*

### Make your listener comfortable

It is important to remember that some people who are not used to speaking to people who have English as a second language feel embarrassed or perhaps a bit threatened if they do not understand what they are being told. In these situations you can make the listener feel more comfortable by showing them that you realise that your pronunciation might make it difficult for them to understand you. By showing that you are not embarrassed to talk about your pronunciation, it is likely that the person you are talking to will also feel more comfortable. This will probably result in them feeling happy to help you with words or sounds that you have difficulty with. In other words, you can encourage the people you speak to, to help you monitor and modify the way you speak.