

Foreword



If you want to be clearly understood when you speak English, you must make the right sounds. Proper English, as spoken in the USA and the UK, consists of the 46 sounds listed in this book. Using the standard sounds when speaking is like using standard spelling when writing.

Children starting to learn English need to learn the right sounds from the start. Those who have already learnt English need to check their speech, and correct it if need be.

In this book, the sounds are represented with Simplified Standard Sound Symbols (S4) rather than the academic International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) that can represent all the sounds that a human can make with its mouth. This makes them easier to learn.

Some of the words listed here are pronounced differently in standard American speech (🇺🇸) and standard British speech (🇬🇧), and some are pronounced the same way in both.

Conventional spelling gives no clear indication as to how words should be said. Phonetic text, on the other hand, indicates exactly how. Phonetic text can be used as a reliable standard for learning and testing: it makes the whole thing understandable. Learning the sounds of English without phonetic text as a prop is like learning arithmetic without pencil and paper or playing the piano without sheet music. It *can* be done, but it is not easy.

In teaching English as a foreign language, there is a need for clarity about what the sounds of English actually are. Linguists identified the sounds used in English long ago. This book lists them all, indicating the corresponding sound-symbol and giving four playable examples for each.

Teachers of English know the sounds of English perfectly well, but often find them hard to explain. However, with the information in this publication, it is a simple matter to bring them into the conscious mind: read on...

The 46 Sounds of the English Language

Every student of English as a foreign language needs to be able to clearly recognise and accurately pronounce all the sounds used in spoken English.

Examples of these sounds are given in the following pages.

Important

There is only one way to make sure that you can pronounce the sounds of English correctly, check with a qualified teacher.

On-line courses are available [here](#) for checking and learning for teachers and students.



a

ap  up

lak  luck


sa'n  sun


ka'm  come




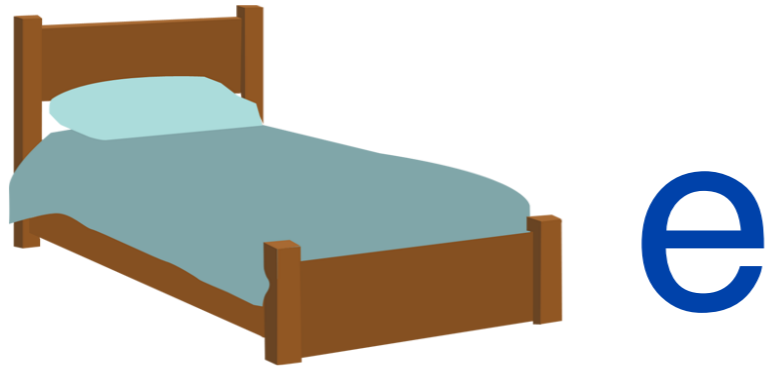
aa

paa'm  palm

daag  dog

daak  dark

laa  law



bed 🏰 🦅

bed

red 🏰 🦅

red

te'n 🏰 🦅

ten

pe'n 🏰 🦅

pen



bee·ə 🏰

bear

tʃee·ə 🏰

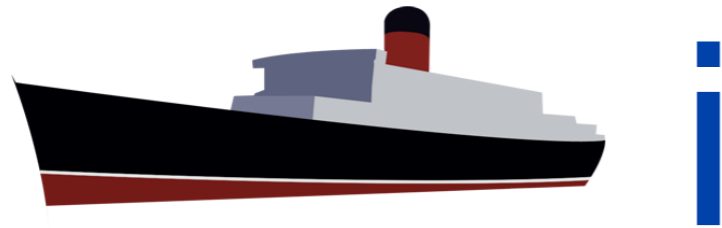
chair

fee'n 🦅

fan

mee'n 🦅

man



ʃip



ship

tʃik



chick

bi'n



bin

hi'l



hill



ʃiip



sheep

tʃiik



cheek

bii'n

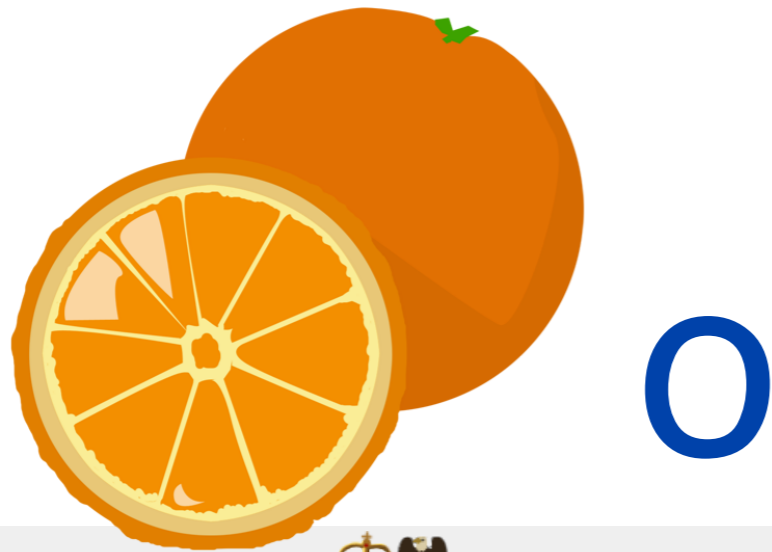


bean


hii'l





heel



ori'ndʒ   orange


sok  sock


boks  box


bot'l  bottle



doo  door

foo  four

sboot  sport

moo  more



u

buk 🇬🇧 🇪🇸

book

fut 🇬🇧 🇪🇸

foot

kuk 🇬🇧 🇪🇸

cook

ru'm 🇬🇧 🇪🇸

room



uu

ʃuu 🇬🇧 🇪🇸

shoe

fuud 🇬🇧 🇪🇸

food

ruuf 🇬🇧 🇪🇸


roof


ruu'l 🇬🇧 🇪🇸


rule



æp'ɪ  apple

ræt  rat

fæt  fat

hæt  hat

æ æ

This sound is not used in standard American or British English, except, perhaps, in a jocular way, as in “baaad!”. It is added here for symmetry only.



soudə



soda

bəneənə



banana

bənaanə



banana

əmerikə



America



bēəd



bird

ʃət



shirt

gə'ɪ



girl

wəd



word



ei

sbeid 🏰 🦅 spade

eidʒ 🏰 🦅 age

eit 🏰 🦅 eight

trei'n 🏰 🦅 train



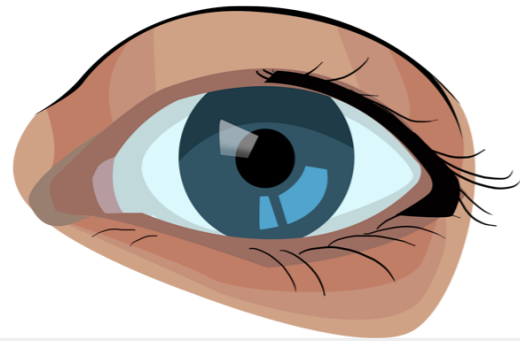
ou

bout 🏰 🦅 boat

bou'l 🏰 🦅 bowl

kout 🏰 🦅 coat

fou'n 🏰 🦅 phone



ai

ai 👑🦅

eye

baik 👑🦅

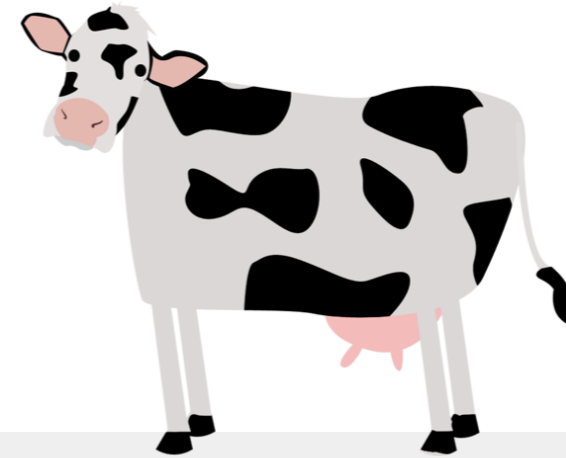
bike

sgai 👑🦅

sky

kait 👑🦅

kite



au

kau 👑🦅

cow

tau'n 👑🦅

town

haus 👑🦅

house

au'l 👑🦅

owl



oi

boi 🏰 🦅 boy

koi'n 🏰 🦅 coin

oi'l 🏰 🦅 oil

noiz 🏰 🦅 noise



liif



leaf

slou



slow

lip



lip

lai'n



line



baad'l



bottle

piip'l



people

lit'l



little

g'r'l



girl



maŋkii 🏰 🦅 monkey

maus 🏰 🦅 mouse

manii 🏰 🦅 money

mauþ 🏰 🦅 mouth

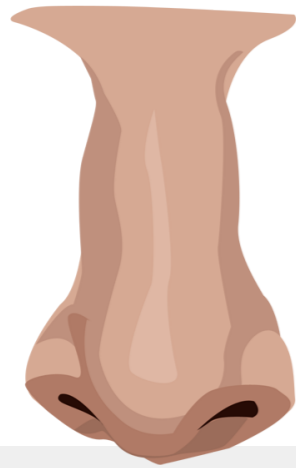


blaas'm 🦅 blossom

nei'm 🏰 🦅 name

sist'm 🏰 🦅 system

rið'm 🏰 🦅 rhythm



n

nouz 👑🦅 nose

snou 👑🦅 snow

nai'n 👑🦅 nine

nou 👑🦅 no



'n

wum'n 👑🦅 woman

sa'n 👑🦅 sun

nai'n 👑🦅 nine

tau'n 👑🦅 town



red 🏰🦅 red

roud 🏰🦅 road

greip 🏰🦅 grape



to'r 🏰🦅 tour

py'r 🏰🦅 pure

led'r 🏰🦅 letter



p

pe'n 🏰 🦅 pen

kæp 🏰 🦅 cap

pokit 🏰 pocket

pee·ə 🏰 pear



b

bii 🏰 🦅 bee

bakit 🏰 🦅 bucket

bib 🏰 🦅 bib

tæb 🏰 🦅 tab



t

trii



tree

tæksii



taxi

tədei



today

bet



bet



d

dræg'n



dragon

fiid



feed

dif

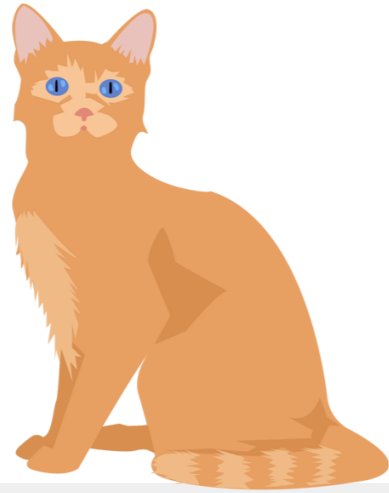


dish

drai



dry



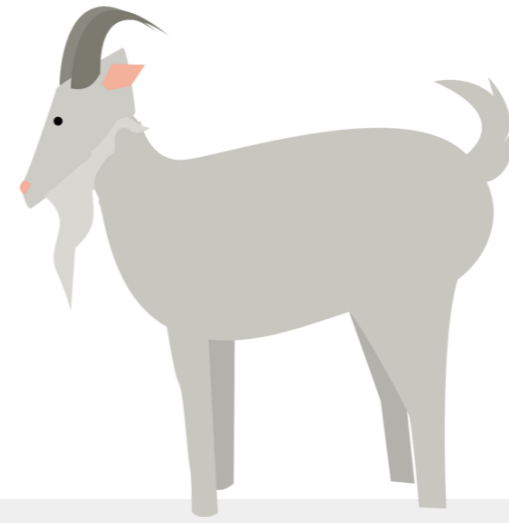
k

kæt 🏰🦅 cat

kau 🏰🦅 cow

bæk 🏰🦅 back

beik 🏰🦅 bake



g

gout 🏰🦅 goat

bæg 🏰🦅 bag

gou'ld 🏰🦅 gold

glæd 🏰🦅 glad



fiʃ 

fish

ʃop 

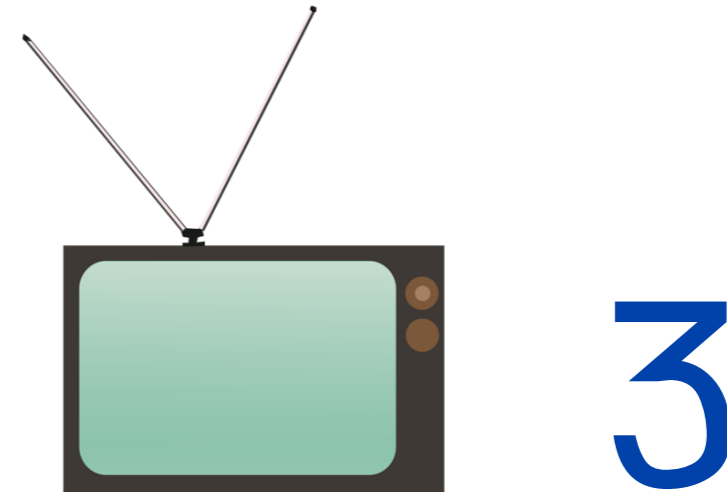
shop

ʃeip 

shape

ʃoʻldʻr 

shoulder



teʻləviʒʻn  television

meʒə 

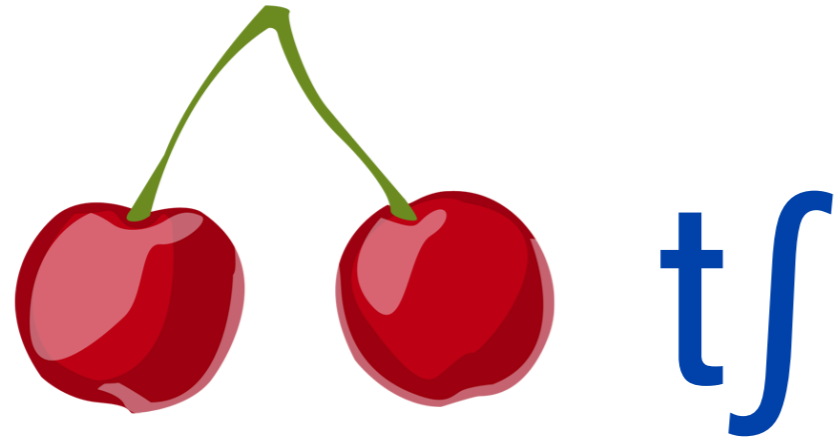
measure

treʒʻr 

treasure

pleʒʻr 

pleasure



tʃeriz 🏰🦅 cherries

tʃiiz 🏰🦅 cheese

tʃei'ndʒ 🏰🦅 change

tʃ'rtʃ 🦅 church



dʒiip 🏰🦅 jeep

dʒouk 🏰🦅 joke

dʒuus 🏰🦅 juice

dʒuu'l 🏰🦅 jewel



p

tuup



tooth

pi'n



thin

pinj



thing

prii



three



ð

feðə



feather

weð'r



weather

mað'r



mother

faaðə



father



fre'nz 🏰 🦅 friends

fi'n 🏰 🦅 fin

fiʃ 🏰 🦅 fish

faiv 🏰 🦅 five



vaaz 🏰 vase

vai'n 🏰 🦅 vine

hæv 🏰 🦅 have

verii 🏰 🦅 very



S

sa'n 

sun

siks 

six

lis'n 

listen

piis 

peace



Z

zUU 

zoo

ziibrə 

zebra

zebrə 

zebra

saiz 

size



ye'lou 🏰🦅 yellow

yes 🏰🦅 yes

ye'l 🏰🦅 yell

yan 🏰🦅 young



wai'n 🏰🦅 wine

woo'l 🏰 wall

wait 🏰🦅 white

w'rk 🦅 work



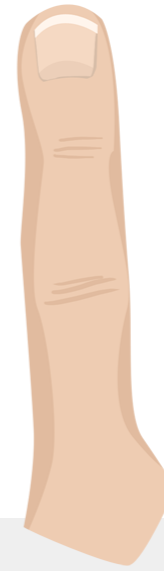
h

hee'nd 🦅 hand

hæpii 👑 🦅 happy

hag 👑 🦅 hug

hou'm 👑 🦅 home



ŋ

fiŋgə 👑 finger

siŋiŋ 👑 🦅 singing

riŋ 👑 🦅 ring

əmaŋ 👑 🦅 among

About S4

The S4 (simplified standard sound symbols) set is a cut-down version of the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) set just for English (the IPA set can be used for any language).

For why and how, see www.S4phonetics.com.

The differences between the two sets are shown on the following pages.

The examples correspond to standard British pronunciation, except where otherwise indicated.

Particularities of S4 text

S4 text is always written in blue, so that it can immediately be recognized as such.

*A single vowel symbol indicates a vowel that is short, and a double one indicates a vowel that is long. Accordingly “Mrs” is written **misiz** and “Dursley” is written **dæzlii**.*

*Dark consonants are represented by an apostrophe, not by a line below them as in IPA notation. Accordingly, “normal” is written **noom'l***

*Stressed syllables are in bold text. Accordingly, “perfectly” is written **pæfiklii***

This can all be seen in the following example:

mistər 'n misiz **dæzlii**
ɛv na'mbə **fo** privi **draiv**
wəə **prau** tə **sei**
ðæt ðei wəə **pæfiklii** **noom'l**
pænʃk yuu verii **matʃ**

All the S4 Symbols

Vowel sounds (can be said alone)

S4	Example	IPA	Name of sound
a	ap	ʌ	Short A (<i>foot ei</i>)
aa	paa'm	ɑ:	Long A (<i>lonj ei</i>)
e	bed	e	Short E (<i>foot ii</i>)
ee	bee·ə	ɛ:	Long E (<i>lonj ii</i>)
i	ʃip	ɪ	Short I (<i>foot ai</i>)
ii	ʃiip	i:	Long I (<i>lonj ai</i>)
o	ori'ndʒ	ɔ	Short O (<i>foot ou</i>)
oo	doo	ɔ:	Long O (<i>lonj ou</i>)
u	buk	u	Short U (<i>foot yuu</i>)
uu	ʃuu	u:	Long U (<i>lonj yuu</i>)
ə	soude	ə	Short Schwa (<i>foot fwaa</i>)
əə	bəəd	ɜ:	Long Schwa (<i>lonj fwaa</i>)
æ	æp'l	æ	Ash (<i>æf</i>)
ei	sbeid	ei	EI (<i>ii ai</i>)
ou	bout	ou	OU (<i>ou yuu</i>)
ai	ai	ai	AI (<i>ei ai</i>)
au	kau	au	AU (<i>ei yuu</i>)
oi	boi	oi	OI (<i>ou ai</i>)

Consonant sounds (put before and after vowel sounds)

S4	Example	IPA	Name of sound
l	liif	l	Clear L (<i>klii·ə e'l</i>)
l̥	baad'l̥	l̥	Dark L (<i>daak e'l̥</i>)
m	maŋkii	m	Clear M (<i>klii·ə e'm</i>)
m̥	blaas'm̥	m̥	Dark M (<i>daak e'm̥</i>)
n	nouz	n	Clear N (<i>klii·ə e'n</i>)
n̥	wum'n̥	n̥	Dark N (<i>daak e'n̥</i>)
r	rei'n	r	Clear R (<i>klii·ə aa</i>)
r̥	led'r̥	r̥	Dark R (<i>daak aa</i>)
p	pe'n	p	P (<i>pii</i>)
b	bii	b	B (<i>bii</i>)
t	trii	t	T (<i>tii</i>)
d	dræg'n	d	D (<i>dii</i>)
k	kæt	k	K (<i>kei</i>)
g	gout	g	G (<i>dʒii</i>)

This list is continued on the next page...

Consonant sounds (put before and after vowel sounds) continued...

S4	Example	IPA	Name of sound
f	fif	f	Esh (ef)
ʒ	te'ləviʒ'n	ʒ	Ezh (eʒ)
tʃ	tʃeriiz	tʃ	T Esh (tii ef)
dʒ	dʒiip	dʒ	D Ezh (dii eʒ)
θ	tuθp	θ	Thorn (poo'n)
ð	feðə	ð	Eth (ep)
f	fre'nz	f	F (ef)
v	vaaz	v	V (vii)
s	sa'n	s	S (es)
z	zuu	z	Z (zed)
y	ye'lou	y	Y (wai)
w	wai'n	w	W (dab'lyuu)
h	he'nd	h	H (eitf)
ŋ	fiŋgə	ŋ	Eng (eŋ)

Symbols

S4	Name	Use
'	Apostrophe əpostɹəfii	Placed before a consonant, the apostrophe indicates a dark character as in <i>nai'n</i> ("nine") and <i>lilt'l</i> ("little").
.	Mid Dot mid dot	The mid dot can be used to separate symbols within a word if ever this is necessary to eliminate ambiguity, as in <i>bee·ə</i> ("bear").
-	Hyphen haif'n	The hyphen is used to show liaison between words. This is the case, for instance, when "stop it" is said "sto pit". It is accordingly written <i>stop-it</i> to maintain the same gaps between the words as in conventional spelling.
	Blank Space blæ'nk speis	Blank space is inserted between words as they are conventionally spelled , to make them recognizable although there is no break in the flow of speech . To indicate a pause in the flow of speech, in S4 phonetic text, two blank spaces are used, as in <i>we'l ai sii</i> ("Well, I see").

Simplicity

S4 is just a practical superstructure built on a solid IPA foundation. In accordance with the Occam's razor principle, it is designed to be the simplest possible way of writing the sounds of English with symbols.

This has meant leaving a lot out.

It only covers the way English is pronounced in middle-class circles in America and England. It does not cover the way it is pronounced in Ireland, New Zealand etc., or the way my Great Aunt Madge who lived in Worthing used to speak.

If Cockney were to be covered, a Dark W would need to be added, as in li^ːw.

The use of metalanguage has been kept to a minimum. It will not help an EFL teacher to know that a Dark L is also called a "velarized alveolar lateral approximant".

To quote Voltaire "mieux est l'ennemi du bien".

Concerning vowels and consonants

Speech consists of syllables, spoken one after another.

As the eminent phonetician Jack Windsor Lewis stated: "Every syllable must have a vowel or syllabic consonant." In this book, syllabic consonants are referred to as "dark consonants". An example is the "and" in "rock 'n roll". Here the vowel is reduced to almost nothing.

Basically, a vowel is an autonomous sound that can be pronounced alone and a consonant is an auxiliary sound that can go with a vowel, before or after.

Vowels and consonants can be used singly or in groups.

Concerning light and dark consonants

A distinction is made between consonants that are pronounced differently when they come before a vowel and when they come after one in a syllable. For instance, in the word “little”, the L-sound occurs twice, but it is not said in the same way. The word is accordingly written lit'l. The first L is called a Clear L and the second a Dark L. The Dark L is very difficult for a non-native speaker to pronounce, and the difference needs to be highlighted

Dark consonants are very common.

Examples:

even	iiv'n
awful	oof'l
rhythm	rið'm

It could be argued that all the apostrophes accordingly needed make S4 text ugly and that if it is accepted as a rule that when a consonant ends a syllable it is automatically dark, then this does not need to be indicated. However, in multi-syllable words this might make it necessary to add mid dots to avoid ambiguity as to where the syllables divide.

On this basis, if S4 were used for communication between native English speakers, the apostrophes could indeed be left out. However, S4 is primarily intended for non-native speakers and the difference in the pronunciation of light and dark characters needs to be clearly shown for their benefit.

Why 46?

In English speech, words are distinguished by the sounds used to represent them. This is evidenced by what are called “minimal pairs”, e.g. “ship” and “sheep”.

Research shows that, if dark characters are counted but diphthongs are not, 39 sounds are needed to represent standard American and British speech.

Taking the number as 46 is in fact a compromise, reflecting the IPA origins of S4.

It could be argued that the T Esh and D Ezh sounds are just combinations of the letters that make them up, and should therefore not be counted. This would reduce the number to 44.

It could also be argued that the five diphthong sounds could be broken down into their component parts as follows:

*ei to e·ii
ou to ə·uu
ai to a·ii
au to æ·uu
oi to o·ii*

This would bring the number down to 39 but would complicate written text and would be a further step away from the IPA notation with which so many are familiar.

Concerning British pronunciation

With the BBC favouring all that is not standard pronunciation and making speakers of it figures of fun, or faceless Wikipedia authors asserting that there is no such thing and, anyway, it is not desirable, it remains true that what foreign students want to learn is not Cockney or Scottish pronunciation, but standard middle-class pronunciation.

It is to be noted that, when it comes to language, unity is a positive factor and diversity is a negative one, as it is standardisation that enables a language to function.

Maybe it is time for a standard English accent target to help to bring reconciliation to the deep divisions in British society. At least, S4 can serve as a yardstick against which other accents can be measured.

The English language is a national treasure for the UK, worth more than North Sea Oil ever was. It deserves to be protected and nurtured, not cast away in spite and self-righteousness.

Pronunciation of English should be taught in UK schools as a subject in its own right.

Witting or unwitting

English conventional spelling is so irregular that it does not give any clear guidance about pronunciation, indeed it is often positively misleading.

As there is no reliable correlation between conventional spelling and the sounds of English, many native speakers are not really aware of the set of sounds they actually use in speech.

*This does not matter in their everyday conversations but it **does** matter if they want to teach English to non-native speakers. EFL teachers need to be very clear about the sounds of English.*

Every native speaker of English unwittingly knows the sounds and the grammar of English. But teachers of English need need to be witting.

*This book can give them the **conscious understanding** they need, and hence the ability to unhesitatingly answer any pronunciation questions their students may ask them.*

Phonemic or Phonetic?

The term **phoneme** means one of the characteristic sounds of a given language. And phonetic text was just text written with symbols that corresponded to the phonemes.

Then academia pushed things further. It was observed that, in some other languages than English, certain sounds that seemed the same to English speakers were perceived as different by foreign speakers and, conversely, some sounds that sounded different to English speakers were perceived as the same by foreign speakers. These different versions were dubbed “allophones” and phonetic text that did not take them into consideration was downgraded to “phonemic”.

The first case can be illustrated by Mandarin Chinese where **tones differentiate phonemes**. To the native speaker, the sounds seem quite different, to the non-native speaker they seem much the same.

The second case can be illustrated by Japanese. For example “lice” and “rice” are considered by English speakers to differ in the first phoneme, but for Japanese speakers the sounds are considered the same and indistinguishable, hence the old joke when seeing someone off at the airport “Have good fright”.

The whole business has been **terribly fogged**. However, **if you are only considering one language, such distinctions are pointless**.

I call S4 “phonetic” but an academic might classify it as “phonemic”, or maybe not.

Breaking the cultural barrier

Every language uses its own set of sounds. And when someone starts learning a new language, it tends to use the sounds of its native language instead of those of the new language, which are generally somewhat different.

For instance, during a French lesson, as a student, I could not understand what was wrong with my pronunciation of “Paris” in French. Then Winnie Poon, from Hong Kong, who was sitting next to me, lent over and she said:

its 'n a not 'n æ i'n pæris
kaa'ntʃ yuu hii·ə ðə difr'ns saim'n

And I felt really silly.

Language is more than a means of communication, it also embodies a culture.

To successfully learn a language, one has to accept this. It means seeking to pronounce the language accurately, and also surrendering to its logic.

Register

The tone of English speech can range from pompous to rude. This is called “register”.

If you speak English, you have to choose a register. I recommend that, students of English should try to appear polite and well-educated. This means aiming for 4/5 on a register scale ranging from 5/5 for most formal to 1/5 for the least.

The examples in this book are therefore set at 4/5.

This scale is illustrated in the opposite column.

As you can see, one of the features of low-register speech is consonant-dropping:

wot becomes wo

yes becomes ye

rait becomes rai

and so on.

This is best avoided.

For example, the phrase “Is it not?” can be said in the following different ways:

1. iz it not

5/5 on the register scale: “pompous” or “ceremonial”.

2. iz'nt it

4/5 on the register scale:

“polite” or “neutral”.

A pause is marked between the two words (double space) to show that the first t belongs to the first word.

3. iz'nt it

3/5 on the register scale: “familiar” or “friendly”.

There is no pause between the two words, so the t at the end of the first word sounds as if it is the beginning of the second word. I found the extremely funny when I was ten year old (sounds like “tit”).

4. i'n it

2/5 on the register scale:

“casual” or “offhand”.

The first t is dropped.

5. i'n i

1/5 on the register scale: “vulgar” or “rude”.

The second t is dropped too.

Liaison in phonetic text

When reading phonetic text, don't pause between words!

*Remember that in S4 phonetic text, the **single-space** gaps between the words do not actually correspond to pauses in speech. Normal speech is delivered in chunks with no pauses between words. Accordingly, as shown in the register example, the end of one word may sound like the beginning of the next one: "isn't it" is generally pronounced "isn tit". In the example below, "children" would be written **tʃiːldrən**, ending in a Dark-N, if it were not followed by **iz**, which begins with a vowel.*

This is called "liaison" (and also "linking").

Also, sometimes, when a word ends in a vowel and the following one begins with one as well, a consonant is added between them to make the speech flow more fluid.

For instance:

ðiiy edʒəkeɪʃən əv ðee tʃiːldrən iz iˈmpooʊtnt

*Note the **y** added to the end of the first word.*

This makes the delivery smoother.

And what about "phonics"?

Phonics is a system for teaching English-speaking children how to read and write (more [here](#)) using **conventional spelling**. Phonics was the way I learned how to read English when I was a little boy: how, now, brown, cow. I could already speak English. Nobody needed to teach me how to say the sounds of English. They did not push it too far, English spelling being so irregular. And I soon learnt to recognise the words in books immediately. Looking back on it, learning written English is a bit like learning Chinese: "look and say" is really the only way. It could even be argued that the open-minded intelligent child will soon notice that English spelling is silly and that phonics is a bit of a sham, resulting in it viewing teachers with distrust.

Phonetics is not the same thing at all. It offers a way of representing the sounds of a language with corresponding **special symbols**, in a similar manner to that by which music can be represented with a set of notes. Simplified Standard Sound Symbols (**S4**) is a set of such symbols just for the sounds of American and British English (more [here](#)). It is "phonemic" in that each of its symbols represents a sound that needs to be distinguished from another one in the set to convey meaning as, for instance, in the case of 'ship' and 'sheep'. It is a complete system that provides the EFL teacher with a reliable and logical framework for teaching students to accurately say and recognise the sounds of English.

For EFL Teachers

Accreditation

As a speaker of standard English

Offer proof to students and employers that you can speak really English with standard British or American pronunciation by taking a S4-based test. The candidate reads a standard passage, speech is recorded and transcribed into S4. This is compared to a standard transcription and any differences are identified. This is an objective manner of establishing the candidate's pronunciation. If the candidate passes the test, credentials are shown on the S4phonetics website.

As a teacher using S4

Take a course and learn how to use S4 in EFL teaching. Gain a qualification and leverage your teaching potential.

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Resources

A range of S4 related source material can be found [here](#), some free and some paid

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Simon Vickers asserts the right
to be recognised as the author of this book
and as the originator of the novel ideas presented in it.