



Área Académica de Humanidades

Language as a system

Unit 1: Sounds

Unit 1. Sounds

Competence: Identify some of the characteristics that sounds provide the language with and the elements of the language system taking part in pronunciation.

Presentation

In this unit, we will explore a little bit of the world of sounds: what they are, how are they produced, and some of their features. Keep in mind that the intention, for this and all units, is not to throw you loads of information about the topic, but just deal with the most significant issues to hopefully make you more aware of the elements of the language system, in this case, the ones regarding pronunciation.

To be assessed in this unit, you will have to send on due time the portfolio activities, participate in the forum discussions, and write a short essay about your insights on the unit topics.

Introduction

A sound can be defined as “the particular auditory effect produced by a given cause” (wordreference.com). Evidently, there are different kinds of sounds as there are different causes that produce them. As language teachers, and for the purposes of this course, it is the sounds that we produce with our speech organs that we are interested in. The minimal unit of utterances in a language system is the phoneme. When we put them or string them together, we can produce utterances that express meanings and communicate, and which have what is called suprasegmental features, that is, stress and intonation.

Counselling

You can ask for personal counselling for this unit every time you finish a topic. I’m eager to hear your questions and comments, so don’t hesitate to get in touch!
Now, we’re ready to get started, aren’t we?

Getting started



Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

1.1 Phonemes

As mentioned before, a phoneme is the minimal unit of utterances produced in order to communicate a message using a language system, that is, sounds within a language. Although it is a minimal unit, a phoneme does not lack importance. A single phoneme may usually lack of meaning, but a single phoneme can be the difference in meaning for words. This is what happens with minimal pairs.



Stop and think

The following are two kinds of minimal pairs. Can you tell what the difference is?

1. sheep – ship
2. cat – fat

You must certainly have noticed that the only difference in the first pair is the vowel sound, and that for the second pair it is a consonant sound. However, dealing with vowels and consonants in English is not always easy for non-native speakers. The written form of vowels and consonants in English does not always correspond to their 'spoken version'. In general, there are 20 vowel sounds (8 diphthongs), and 24 consonant sounds, in contrast to the 5 vowels and 21 consonants that are used when writing.

Phonetic symbols chart

The following is a chart with the phonetic symbols that correspond to the vowel and consonant sounds:

æ	ɑ:	aɪ	ʌ	aʊ	b	d	e
ɜ:	ə	eə	eɪ	f	g	h	ɪ
i:	ɪə	j	k	l	m	n	əʊ
ɒ	ɔɪ	ɔ:	p	r	s	t	u:
ʊ	ʊə	v	w	z	θ	tʃ	ʃ
		dʒ	ŋ	ʒ	ð		



Activity 1. LAS 101 Phonetic symbols chart. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

As you can see, vowels can occur as a single sound or as a combination of sounds, such as diphthongs, which involve one vowel sound moving to another one. When the combination involves three vowel sounds, then we are talking about triphthongs. The following link provides some extra information about the phonemic chart and how it can be used to help with pronunciation: <http://www.macmillanenglish.com/pronunciation/interactive-phonemic-charts/#british-englis>

Single vowels sounds can be classified in short and long. For example:

Short

- Hit
- Book
- Left
- About
- Hat
- Run
- Dog

Long

- Bead
- Food
- Shirt
- Call
- Far



Stop and think

Do you think phonemic symbols are useful? In what ways? How necessary is it for an English teacher to be familiar with phonemic transcription?

While vowels are all voiced sounds, consonants are classified in two different categories: voiced and unvoiced. The difference between voiced and unvoiced is that to produce a voiced sound you make the vocal cords in the larynx vibrate. There are nine voiced consonant sounds, from which eight have a very similar unvoiced pair. The consonant sound 'h' is voiced, but it does not have a similar unvoiced pair.

The following is an example of a pair of voiced and unvoiced consonants:

b bin
p pin

As 'b' is a voiced sound, you can hold the sound for while. On the contrary, unvoiced sounds like 'p' cannot be easily held, or not even held at all. Try holding the sound 'b' and then the sound 'p'. Which one can you hold more easily?

There are still seven voiced consonant sounds with a similar unvoiced pair that have not been mentioned.



Stop and think

From the following pairs of consonant sounds, which one is voiced and which one unvoiced?



Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

The voiced-unvoiced component is not the only element to take into account for producing sounds. To produce different vowels, for example, which are all voiced sounds, you have to move your lips to modify the shape of your mouth, and place parts of your tongue (front, back, or centre) at different positions in your mouth (close, mid, or open, regarding the distance between your tongue and the roof of your mouth).

With regard to consonant sounds, there are two other aspects to consider: the manner and the place of articulation. Manner has to do with how much air passes through the vocal tract, and place refers to the movements of the articulators – lips and tongue – in relation to teeth, alveolar ridge, palate, and vocal cords. These are some of the parts of the body that constitute the organs of speech.



Activity 2. LAS 102 Organs of speech. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

There are 8 organs of speech and 3 parts of the tongue that have been mentioned.

There are other parts of the body that are also organs of speech, and many other issues about phonemes, but this information is enough to get an idea of how 'things' work so that we can produce sounds.

For further concise information related to these issues, you can consult chapter one in Kelly, G. (2000) How to Teach Pronunciation.



Stop and think

Do you think phonemic symbols are useful? In what ways?
How necessary is it for an English teacher to be familiar with phonemic transcription?



Read the directions and do **Activity 3. LAS 103 Phonetic symbols and examples (PORTFOLIO)** in the corresponding section on Eminus.



Activity 4. LAS 104 Self-evaluation 1. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

1.2 String of sounds

In the previous section we had a look at how individual sounds are meant to be produced. It was also mentioned why this is important for communication: a single sound may make the difference between saying one word or another (do you remember minimal pairs?). However, every single sound is not really perfectly pronounced in a real context situation.

In everyday conversation, we put all these sounds together to form words, phrases, and sentences (strings of sounds) in order to transmit a message, and when we do it, sounds do not always come out perfect. This does not necessarily mean that communication is hindered; on the contrary, it can be said that it is simplified. There are many processes going on in our minds other than identifying sounds while 'deciphering' a transmitted message. The context (place, people involved, discourse) in which we develop a conversation also helps to transmit the intended meaning of our messages.

Moreover, this is not the only reason why we can simplify our 'sound production'. The real purpose of sound simplification is to make communication easier, and there are several ways in which this simplification can occur. In the following sub-sections, we will briefly explore these phenomena: assimilation, elision and linking.



Stop and think

What do you understand by assimilating sounds? What about eliding or linking them?

Assimilation

This phenomenon consists in simplifying speech by making 'neighbouring sounds', as called by Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994: 28), more alike. When we put sounds together, we combine them in many different ways, that is, they are not always followed by the same other sounds. This means that when producing a sound in connected speech, its ideal position of the articulators does not always start or finish at the same point. This will happen even when speaking at a normal speed; therefore, it is common that sounds be 'adapted' so they can be produced more easily and make the connected speech more fluent. This may happen within or between words, but never at the beginning sounds of words, as they are essential to understand utterances.

The assimilation of sounds is the main responsible for the existence of allophones. The same phoneme may have different ways to be produced depending on the 'sound environment' they occur in. These different ways to produce the same phoneme are the so called allophones, and in English, the main phonemes which present such phenomenon are /t/, /d/, and /h/, and sometimes /n/, when followed by /k/, /g/, /m/, or /b/. When these combinations occur in connected speech, then assimilation usually takes place.



Activity 5. LAS 105 Assimilation. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

Check the 'ideal' pronunciation of these instances and their 'real' pronunciation in colloquial speech in Dalton, C. and Seidlhofer (1994) Pronunciation. Oxford: OUP, page 28.

apartment	[ə'pɑ:ʔpmənt]	/ə'pɑ:tmənt/
Great Britain	[greɪʔp'brɪtn]	/greɪt'brɪtən/
won't come	[wəʊnʔ'kʌm]	/wəʊnt'kʌm/
banned for life	[.bæmbfə'laɪf]	/.bændfə'laɪf/
down by law	[.daʊmbaɪ'lɔ:]	/.daʊnbaɪ'lɔ:/
pancake	[ˈpæŋkeɪk]	/ˈpænkeɪk/

Elision

Elision, which is in this case a quite close synonym of 'elimination', occurs when, in connected speech, a sound that should be pronounced in theory disappears. The sound disappears because, as previously discussed, we tend to minimize the effort of articulating sounds when we speak in order to make it easier for us to pronounce them. These 'left out' sounds may be originally found within or between words, and in English, they are most commonly weak vowel sounds, such as the schwa (/ə/), or the consonants /t/ and /d/.



Activity 6. LAS 106 Elision. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

Linking

Linking words is an almost natural phenomenon when speaking given that we have to connect words to transmit our messages. However, the kind of connection that is referred to with this simplification method is slightly different from the necessary connection that we must give to words when speaking. In English, there are two kinds of linkings as a simplification phenomenon.

The first type of linking consists in adding a consonant sound between a word finishing in a vowel sound and another word beginning also with a vowel sound. The second type of linking occurs when the final consonant sound of a word is pronounced as if it were part of the following word, specially, but not exclusively, when this following word begins with a vowel sound. It is also possible that the first consonant of a word be treated as part of the previous word when this has a final vowel sound. This type of linking is the origin of homophonous pairs, two sets of different paired words that sound the same.



Activity 7. LAS 107 Linking. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.



A Little of fun

The following is a poem that can be found at <http://www.ahajokes.com/eng003.html>, and it has to do with sounds and “homophones strung together”.

Halve a Spelling Chequer

Eye halve a spelling chequer
It came with my pea sea
It plainly marques four my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea

Eye strike a key and type a word
And weight four it two say
Weather eye am wrong oar write
It shows me strait a weigh
As soon as a mist ache is maid
It nose bee fore two long
And eye can put the error rite
Its rarely ever wrong
Eye have run this poem threw it
I am shore your pleased two no
Its letter perfect in it's weigh
My chequer tolled me sew

1.3 Stress

Although most of us are aware of the concept stress, it is not easy to give an accurate definition. First, let's consider the term syllable. At this point, all of us are surely familiar with this term. But just as stress, syllable is a concept difficult to define. We know words have at least one syllable, and we are usually able to divide a given word in our mother tongue into syllables even if we have never heard this word before.

Therefore, knowing what syllable is and knowing how to divide words into syllables appears to be a matter of a developed intuition when it comes to our mother tongue. However, we, as non-native speakers, may find it not that easy to divide English words into syllables. Still, as we have some experience using and maybe teaching the language, we are usually able to identify how many syllables English words have.

But, why is the concept of syllable so important regarding stress? Because the kind of stress we are talking about is always associated with either monosyllabic or polysyllabic words. In the latter, there is a syllable which is pronounced more loudly than the other or others, which is precisely the stressed syllable. Every language has its own rules about how to stress polysyllabic words. English is regarded by non-native speakers as a particularly difficult language because of the so many sound combinations and possibilities to stress words that it has.

Moreover, when we speak and put several words together, we stress or emphasize some words of our choice more than others. This selection usually forms patterns that give rhythm to our speech by contrasting the stressed and unstressed syllables. At the same time, these selection and rhythm affect the intended meaning of our utterances.



Stop and think

Why is it important to be aware of the concepts syllable, stress and rhythm?

Forum Stress

Go to the forum “**Activity 8. LAS 108 FORUM Stress**” when indicated to discuss the importance of these concepts. Comment also on the usefulness of phonetic symbols and phonemic transcription.

1.4 Intonation

Stress and intonation are both suprasegmental features. This means that they are characteristics of sounds or phonemes regarded as segments that can be analysed. These features definitely play an important role when giving meaning to our utterances. Different stress and rhythm for the same utterance can change its sense, but it is intonation that has more functions regarding meaning.

Intonation has to do with the pitch of the voice, that is, the voice going up (rising) or down (falling) when speaking. It also has to do with loudness (loud vs. soft), with length (fast vs. slow), and with pauses. Whenever we speak, we raise or lower our tone of voice, produce

utterances at different speeds, and make pauses after certain chunks of sounds. This is because in this way we express a specific meaning or intention.

Therefore, we can use the same group of sounds to express different meanings by changing the rhythm, pitch and length of our utterances, and by pausing at different 'points' in your speech. There is a very well-known joke in Spanish that exemplifies this using the words *cómo* and *amaneciste*. Do you know it?



Stop and think

A newlywed to his wife after their first night of their honeymoon:
¿Cómo amaneciste? (with a mellow intonation, speaking slowly and a falling pitch towards the end)

The same man, after a 25-year marriage: ¡CÓmo! (pause)
¿AmaneCISte? (with a rising pitch towards the end, speaking fast and capital letters expressing stress)

As can be assumed, we use intonation and stress to convey different meanings in our daily lives, both consciously and unconsciously. These meanings, or information, have different functions, and according to Crystal (1987; in Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994:49), there are six functions for intonation, which gives meaning to everything we say.



Activity 9. LAS 109 Intonation. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

Forum Intonation

Go to the forum "**Activity 10. LAS 110 FORUM Intonation**" when indicated to discuss the importance of intonation and give more examples of its six different functions.



Activity 11. LAS 111 Self-evaluation Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

Forum Unit 1 Sounds

Go to the forum "**Activity 12. LAS 112 Unit 1 Sounds**" when indicated to share you insights on the issues of this unit. Feel free to focus on what you found the most interesting, or any aspects that caught your attention the most.

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