

The *ESL Telephone Alphabet* is the Pilot/ Radio/Spelling Alphabet for English as a Second Language

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The Pilot's Alphabet is a set of 26 words that represent each of the letters in the ABC's. Also called the Radio Alphabet or Spelling Alphabet, it is used to spell important information in situations when people cannot see each other. *Alpha Bravo Charlie...* is the alphabet used by airplane pilots for two-way radio communication where clarity and quickness are essential. The familiar ABC alphabet that is used for writing English does not work over the radio or telephone because the names of many letters sound alike.

A, J, K

B, C, D, E, G, P, T, V, Z (USA)

M, N

S, X

I, Y

U, W

When native English speakers need to give specific information such as the correct spelling of their name or address, they spell the words out in a kind of cipher. In Canada, relaying a postal code is the perfect example. The structure of postal codes is standard, six units in the order: letter/number/letter (LNL) followed by a number/letter/number (NLN). Anticipating letters or numbers helps a little – but not much. Everyone in Canada has a postal code and no one can understand them over the phone.

Real Life Example

My postal code is L7J 1G5. The 'L' and the '7' are clear enough but the 'J' might sound like an 'A' or a 'K' so I usually say "John" instead of that letter. The 'G' is a homonym train wreck. For 'G' I just say "George". When I dictate my postal code, I say, "L7John 1George5" Which is understood as **L7J 1G5**.

There are many circumstances where spelling in code is useful. In a noisy environment, on the telephone, or in a situation compounded by pronunciation issues, using whole words to indicate individual letters is an effective strategy for spelling short pieces of information.

ESL's Longstanding Dread of the Phone

If English speakers have difficulty making themselves understood, imagine how frustrating communication must be for non-native speakers? To complicate the issue, telephone and cell phones transmit sound with varying degrees of integrity. ESL learners have enough difficulty with pronunciation without similar sounding letters and poor sound quality compounding the situation. Many non-native English speakers simply will not use a phone.

Jackie Chan was a talk show guest on Ellen Degeneres in January 2010. Jackie is one of the best loved, most accomplished action stars of all time. Whatever Jackie Chan has had to overcome to achieve his superstar status, his worst nightmare might be the telephone. In good fun, Ellen handed him a receiver and asked him to get the number for 'Pink Berry' while the whole world watched. Jackie was a good sport about the request and made a noble attempt – but he was unsuccessful. He could neither understand the voice recording on the end of the line nor make himself understood to the machine. The gag was intended as entertainment but for the hundreds of thousands of non native speakers who will not pick up a telephone for any reason the prank hit close to home.

The pilot's alphabet is not a solution for ESL. Although it works well for pilots, 'Delta', 'Sierra' and 'Whiskey' are too unfamiliar and difficult for English learners. Students need a fool-proof alphabet of their own to properly spell out names, addresses and other important information when necessary.

Here is an alphabet designed by Thompson Language Center that is suitable for English learners when circumstances require it.

ESL Telephone Alphabet

a	apple	j	job	s	summer
b	boy	k	king	t	time
c	car	l	lemon	u	union
d	dog	m	money	v	visa
e	east	n	never	w	work
f	five	o	open	x	x-ray
g	good	p	people	y	yellow
h	house	q	queen	z	zero

i ice cream r red

Pink becomes - **P**eople, **I**ce cream, **N**ever, **K**ing

Berry becomes - **B**oy, **E**ast, **R**ed, **R**ed, **Y**ellow

Summary

Talking in code is a coping-mechanism native-speakers take for granted but the skill can be a lifeline to someone struggling to survive in a new culture. Users don't have to be recent arrivals to find the Telephone Alphabet a useful survival tool.

Jackie, never mind stupid answering machines; just press '0' for an operator and spell it out with the ESL Telephone Alphabet.

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