

# The English Phonetic Alphabet for English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners

By: Judy M. Thompson

Ordinary spoken English is made up of forty individual sounds including twenty four consonant sounds and sixteen vowel sounds. With only twenty six letters in the ABC's, the Latin alphabet has never accurately represented English speaking.

While the ABC's have worked adequately for written English since 1476, there hadn't been a suitable phonetic alphabet to indicate the sounds of the language until 2001.

## The English Phonetic Alphabet

24 Consonants

*/b/, /d/, /f/, /g/, /h/, /j/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, /s/, /t/, /v/, /w/, /y/, /z/*

*/CH/, /SH/, /TH/, /th/, /ng/, /zh/*

16 Vowels

*/Ay/, /a/, /Ey/, /e/, /iy/, /i/, /ow/, /o/, /Uw/, /u/, /ʌ/, /oy/, /Aw/, /Er/, /Ar/, /Or/*

## The Impact of ABC's on ESL - Ling Chan's Story

The secretary burst into my classroom. "Can you come - now" she pleaded and disappeared back into the hall. I motioned to my class to work on their own and followed her. From the computer lab at the far end of the school, I could hear the sound of a man shouting. When we entered the lab, he stopped "I can't understand what she's saying", the repairman snapped as he backed away from a young Chinese woman.

The computer lab in our midtown adult community school was lined with second-hand office computers. Ling Chan, a graduate of our school was employed there as an assistant. It was her job to load the appropriate software into the computers for each class. That day she stood alone pointing to a bulky old unit. A single tear rolled down her cheek. In my experience, Chinese people are model students: they are proud, quiet people. I had never seen a Chinese student cry and it broke my heart. Ling Chan pointed to the monitor and whispered, "To soun. Eyychoo. To soun."

She was ashamed of her Chinese accent and the rude technician humiliated her. I asked her what was wrong and she repeated, "To soun. Eyychoo. To soun." But I couldn't understand her answer. "Can you write it down?" I asked, and gave her a pen.

E C H O, she printed, and it all made sense. The computer was sending two sounds; it had an echo. She knew the right word, but in English knowing the right word doesn't always help. What Ling Chan did not understand was English letters don't represent sounds. The connection between English letters and sounds is so weak, no one can speak English from reading it.

## The Lesson: Spelling is Random

Ling Chan was making the classic ESL learner's mistake of pronouncing a word the way it looks. English doesn't work like that. Understanding the differences between written English and spoken English is the key. The alphabet, spelling, grammar and punctuation are all about *writing* and have nothing whatsoever to do with *speaking*. In English, spelling is random and speaking isn't writing said out loud.

When a student's ability to read and write English far outstrips their ability to speak it, *writing it down* is a great strategy for communication hiccoughs (pronounced /hik ups/ - case in point). Something ESL students are surprised to learn is that native English speakers don't know how to pronounce words from reading them, either. English spelling has been hopeless for a long, long time.

## The Age-Old Problem

English as a spoken language has been developing since 450 AD and commonly uses **40 sounds**. The Latin alphabet (or ABCs) with its **26 symbols** has only been used by the general public to print the English language since 1476 AD when William Caxton set up his printing press in London. English uses more sounds than it has letters! The Latin alphabet has never accurately represented *spoken* English.

For example, what is the sound of the letter 'g' in beige, garage and genre? What is the sound of the letter 's' in Asia, usual and television? /zh/ is a French sound and there is no specific letter for it in English.

## The Solution that Didn't Work

Dictionaries often use a set of symbols known as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Unfortunately, that alphabet doesn't work well for English. The origin of IPA is French where the letter 'e' is known as 'i:'; 'i' is known as 'ai'; 'y' is known as 'j' and so on. In spite of the inherent confusion, the IPA had a good run and survived for more than one hundred and twenty years. Today there is little tolerance for the system, because the obscure IPA symbols have no representation on the standard computer keyboard.

## The Solution that Worked

In 2001, English finally got its own 40-symbol, computer-friendly phonetic alphabet where each symbol represents one and only one sound in the English language.

Students need to learn their ABC's for reading and writing and the **English Phonetic Alphabet** /inglish funedik alfabet/ for speaking. When learners can see how words sound, they pronounce them with confidence!

## Summary

- *Write it down* is an acceptable strategy if speaking isn't working
- English *writing* and English *speaking* are different languages

- The Latin alphabet doesn't represent English sounds
- The English Phonetic Alphabet (EPA) is a phonetic system that works

And be sure to fire the bastards that make your students cry.

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