

# Common Pronunciation Problems for Cantonese Speakers

P7

## The aim of this leaflet

This leaflet provides information on why pronunciation problems may occur and specific sounds in English that Cantonese speakers may have difficulty with.

## Why problems occur

Pronunciation problems happen when speaking a second language because most people are used to hearing and making sounds which only exist in their mother tongue.

There are many sounds in Cantonese and English that are similar. Some however, are only partially similar and others are totally different. When you hear or are trying to say the partially similar or totally different sounds, it's easy to make mistakes because you are used to hearing and making sounds in your mother tongue. It is important therefore, to make yourself aware of how sounds in a different language are made and practise listening to them and saying them as much as possible.

To make language sounds we move our jaw, tongue, lips, and the vocal cords in our throat in a number of different ways. If, for example, your brain is not used to telling your tongue to move into a certain position in your mouth in order to make a particular sound, then you may have difficulty saying that sound clearly.

## How do you solve the problems?

Here are a few suggestions on how to train your brain:

1. Learn to recognise that there are differences between some English sounds and some Cantonese sounds.
2. Learn to hear clearly and think about how sounds are made when you are listening.
3. Discover how these sounds are made. Find out for example:
  - ◆ how far open your jaw should be
  - ◆ whether the tip of your tongue should be touching the inside of your upper teeth or whether it should be lying flat
  - ◆ if your lips should be 'rounded' like when you are going to kiss someone or 'spread', like when you smile
  - ◆ whether the vocal cords in your throat should be vibrating or not (we talk about this in terms of 'voiced' or 'voiceless' sounds)
4. Practise moving your jaw, tongue, lips etc. as correctly as possible so that you are able to make the problematic English sounds clearly.

Many of the materials listed on **P3** give explanations and show pictures of where to put your tongue or how to move your lips etc. These materials help you understand how English is spoken and help you practise your English pronunciation. You can find more ideas on how to practice from **P1** to **P4**.

## English sounds, which can cause problems for Cantonese speakers

Below is an explanation of which English sounds Cantonese speakers tend to have difficulty pronouncing:

### Vowels: (see **P5 & P3**)

According to some researchers, Cantonese speakers tend to say only 7 of the 11 vowel sounds in English clearly. The main reason for this is that in English there is a difference between what are called 'long' and 'short' vowel sounds. Cantonese speakers tend not to make a difference between 'long' and 'short' sounds but instead, produce something in between. Another reason for making mistakes when saying English vowel sounds, may be related to understanding how to move the jaw, tongue, lips etc. into the correct position. Below is a list of 'long' and 'short' English vowel sounds, which can cause problems for Cantonese speakers:

### Examples:

<b>/i:/</b> as in 'heed' is a long vowel sound and you need to spread your lips tightly to make the sound.	<b>But</b>	<b>/ɪ/</b> as in 'hid' is a short vowel sound and your lips are more relaxed and less tightly spread.
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<b>/e/</b> as in 'bet' is a short vowel and you need to lower your jaw slightly to make the sound.	<b>But</b>	<b>/æ/</b> as in 'bat' is slightly longer. More importantly, for this sound you need to lower your jaw even more
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<b>/u:/</b> as in 'hoot' is a long vowel sound and you need to push the back of your tongue close to the back of your mouth. You also need to round your lips tightly and feel them push forward as you make the sound.	<b>But</b>	<b>/ʊ/</b> as in 'hood' is a short vowel sound. Compared with <b>/u:/</b> , your tongue doesn't need to be so high up at the back of your mouth and you don't need to round your lips as much.
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<b>/ɔ:/</b> as in 'caught' is a long vowel and you need to lower your jaw very slightly and round your lips.. Your tongue should be pulled back.	<b>But</b>	<b>/ɒ/</b> as in 'cot' (British English) is a short vowel sound. Compared with <b>/ɔ:/</b> , you need to lower your jaw more and keep your lips more open and less round. Your tongue should be pulled back and
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		lowered.
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<sup>1</sup>NB: identified sounds above from: Hung (forthcoming))

**Consonants: (see P5 & P3)**

To understand how problems occur with consonant sounds, it's important to understand how the vocal cords in your throat work. When you say any vowel sound and some consonant sounds your vocal cords should vibrate. Sounds produced this way are known as **'voiced'** sounds. The consonant sounds that do not cause your vocal cords to vibrate are known as **'voiceless'** sounds. All vowel sounds are 'voiced' so don't worry, you already know how to do this.

Try feeling how your vocal cords vibrate to make a voiced sound. Place two fingers lightly across your throat. Say one of the vowel sounds listed above. You'll notice that the vibration of your vocal cords can be felt in your fingers.

For Cantonese speakers, the main problem with English consonant sounds is how to say voiced consonants and make them different to voiceless ones. The reason this is often problematic is that consonants in Cantonese are voiceless. To get a feel for voiced consonants, place your fingers on your throat and try saying /z/ as in the word **'zoo'**. If you can feel vibrations in your vocal cords, then you are producing the voiced consonant /z/ correctly; if you can't, then you're producing a voiceless consonant, /s/ as in the word **'Sue'**. To learn to make your vocal cords vibrate, try 'singing' the /z/ sound (to any tune you like, e.g. 'Happy Birthday'). This time, you should feel the vibrations, and this is how a voiced sound should feel like. In time, you should be able to make a voiced sound without actually singing.

Other problems can also occur with some English consonant sounds. Below is a list of sounds that can cause problems for Cantonese speakers.

**Examples:**

<p>/v/ as in 'van', is a voiced sound. Your upper teeth rest lightly on your lower lip and you can feel the air forcing its way through them. Your vocal cords should vibrate.</p>	<p><b>But</b></p>	<p>/f/ as in 'fan' is voiceless. your teeth and lips are in the same position as with /v/ but there is no vibration of the vocal cords.</p>
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<p>/v/ as in 'vet' (see description above)</p>	<p><b>But</b></p>	<p>/w/ as in 'wet' is also a voiced sound but your lips must be round and your teeth don't touch your lips</p>
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<sup>1</sup> Hung, T.T.N., (forthcoming) Towards a Phonology of Hong Kong English. *World Englishes*. October 2000 issue.

<p>/s/ as in 'Sue' is a voiceless sound. Open your mouth very slightly and feel the sides of your tongue touch the sides of your teeth. As the air flows through and out of your mouth it sounds like the hissing sound a snake makes.</p>	<p><b>But</b></p>	<p>/z/ as in 'zoo' is a voiced sound. You do the same as for the /s/ sound but you also make your vocal cords vibrate.</p>
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<p>/θ/ as in 'thin' is voiceless. Keep your teeth slightly apart, and let the tip of your tongue stick out slightly between them.</p>	<p><b>But</b></p>	<p>/t/ as in 'tin' is often said instead</p>
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<p>/θ/ as in 'three'(see description above)</p>	<p><b>But</b></p>	<p>/f/ as in 'fee' is often said instead, esp. by Cantonese speakers.</p>
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<p>/θ/ as in 'think'(see description above)</p>	<p><b>But</b></p>	<p>/s/ as in 'sink' is often said instead, esp. by mainland Chinese learners.</p>
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<p>/ð/ as in 'those' is voiced. Otherwise, it is like /θ/</p>	<p><b>But</b></p>	<p>/d/ as in 'dose' often said instead</p>
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/l/ and /n/ both exist in Cantonese at the beginning of words but in Cantonese you can use both sounds for the same word without changing the meaning. You can, for example, say the word for 'you' in Cantonese using either the /l/ sound or the /n/ sound. If you do this to English words you get a different meaning. If you change the word: 'light' to 'night', the meaning is quite different. It's important therefore to be careful of this when you speak English. The main difference between /l/ and /n/ is that, in making /l/, air escapes through the mouth, but in making /n/, air escapes through the nose.

**/l/** and **/r/** can also cause problems for Cantonese speakers. Again you need to be careful because if you say ‘**right**’ instead of ‘**light**’, you change the meaning of what you want to say. The main difference between **l/** and **/r/** is that in making **l/**, the tip of the tongue touches the roof of the mouth (just above the upper teeth), but in making **/r/**, the tip of the tongue is slightly curled back and does not touch any part of the roof of the mouth.

**/S/** as in **see** instead of **/ʃ/** as in **she** can sometimes cause problems. The difference between these two sounds is worth learning not only for English but also because they exist in Putonghua. In making **/s/**, only the tip of the tongue is raised and almost touches the roof of the mouth just above the upper teeth, but in making **/ʃ/**, not only the tip but the whole front portion of the tongue is raised.

(<sup>2</sup>NB: identified sounds above from: Hung (forthcoming))

### Clusters (See **P5 & P3**)

Consonant Clusters don’t exist in Cantonese and can therefore cause problems. A common mistake for Cantonese speakers is to leave out some of the consonants in a cluster. This can be dangerous because people may think you are saying a different word altogether. For example:

‘**pray**’ has a cluster of two consonants **/p/** and **/r/** at the beginning of the word. If you leave out the **/r/**, the word changes meaning to ‘**pay**’ and if you leave off the **/p/**, the word changes meaning to ‘**ray**’.

Clusters are not all that easy so it’s a good idea to spend a lot of time practising them.

### Endings

Consonant sounds at the ends of words often cause problems. It is important in English to pronounce these clearly. Below are some common errors:

- ◆ Leaving the ending off as in:
  1. ‘mo’ instead of ‘**most**’
  2. ‘po-corn’ instead of **pop-corn**
  3. ‘migh’ instead of ‘**might**’
  4. ‘ki’ instead of ‘**kick**’
  
- ◆ ‘- **ed**’ endings. There are 3 ways to say ‘- ed’ endings:
  1. **/d/** as in ‘**claimed**’
  2. **/t/** as in ‘**checked**’
  3. **/ɪd/** as in ‘**commented**’
  
- ◆ ‘**s**’ endings: Be very careful not to leave it off! Often, it should be pronounced **/z/**. A common mistake is to say ‘need’ **/ni:d/** instead of ‘needs’ **/ni:dz/** which could be grammatically wrong, or even **/ni:/** which would sound like ‘**knee**’ and

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<sup>2</sup> Hung, T.T.N., (forthcoming) Towards a Phonology of Hong Kong English. *World Englishes*. October 2000 issue

has a different meaning altogether. As with the –ed endings above, there are 3 ways to say the ‘s’ ending:

1. /s/ as in ‘lets’
2. /z/ as in ‘beds’
3. /ɪz/ as in ‘boxes’

## Learning Tip

The best way to check the pronunciation of words, is to be aware of the way sounds are written to show correct pronunciation and to use a dictionary. Refer to **P3** and **P5**.

**Other areas to be aware of:(see P6 & P3)**

- ◆ Word stress
- ◆ Sentence stress
- ◆ Linking

Improving your English pronunciation is not just about understanding and practising the differences between vowel sounds and consonant sounds, it is also very important to be aware of how all the different elements that create speech are put together. Understanding and practising English word stress and sentence stress, linking etc. will help you enormously in hearing connected speech clearly and in being able to speak English with confidence and more fluency.

### Note:

This leaflet is part of the Self-Access Pronunciation Advice Sheets supporting independent learning, produced by the HKUST Language Centre. This leaflet was written by Sarah Toogood 2000, and edited by Dr Tony Hung of Hong Kong Baptist University. If you copy from this leaflet, please acknowledge the source. Thanks.