

## Aspects of pronunciation

by Russell Whitehead

**Overview:** These practice materials are designed to help you with Module 1: Part 1: Aspects of pronunciation. In these materials you will think about phonology in terms of phonemes, word and sentence stress, intonation and connected speech.

**Note:** These practice materials are designed to focus on knowledge of phonology, not on how to set about teaching or assessing phonology – topics which are covered in several other parts of TKT.

**Time:** 30–60 mins



### Notes for teacher trainers

Provided the trainees have the confidence, it could be very useful to get the trainees to record each other. Then they can work in small groups to analyze and evaluate each other's pronunciation.

For TKT Module 1: Part 3, the focus is on knowledge and awareness of phonology, not on teaching techniques. However, giving the trainees a good pronunciation lesson or two would probably be a useful way to build their own awareness.

The phonemic chart is part of the TKT toolkit. Trainees need to be familiar with the symbols. Spend time ensuring that they do acquire this knowledge. There are lots of fun and effective ways to do this. (See materials in onestopenglish, for example.)

If you are working in a situation where all the trainees have the same mother tongue, which correlates with that of their learners, then the problematic areas of phonology may seem to constitute a fairly short and well-defined list. However, TKT has a global focus, and trainees need to be able to distinguish all sounds and think about all phonology issues.



### Think about

It's often the case that if you take two language learners and teach them with the same input and resources for the same amount of time, they will end up with different accents. For example, one of them will sound more like a native speaker and one will sound less like a native speaker. What reasons could there be for this?



## Aspects of pronunciation

by Russell Whitehead

### Answer key

#### Stage 1 C)

1. Phonology is the study of the sound system of languages, and for our purposes, is focused on looking at phonemes – the smallest sound units which carry meaning.
2. Minimal pairs are pairs of words in which the distinction is between one sound only, for example, *seat* and *heat*.
3. The phonemic chart or alphabet contains symbols of the sounds (as opposed to written letters) of a language – standard English contains 12 vowels, 8 diphthongs, and 24 consonants (as opposed to 26 written letters).
4. Diphthongs are combinations of two vowel sounds (as opposed to written letters), for example, /əʊ/, which is in *go*, *hope*, *know*, etc.
5. Words with more than one syllable have their main stress on one syllable (usually marked ' in a dictionary at the start of that syllable) and these syllables are pronounced with more force, so that the sound is longer, higher and louder.
6. Syllables that are in unstressed positions are sometimes weak syllables, and often pronounced as /ə/ – the neutral sound at the end of *mother* or the beginning of *ago*.
7. Intonation is the 'music' of a sentence, the way the speaker makes his or her voice rise or fall or both, and is connected to the intended meaning or mood of the speaker.
8. Sentence stress refers to the placing of importance on a particular word in a sentence to focus the meaning of the sentence.
9. Contractions are common in spoken English and happen when two words are joined together. For example, *he* and *is* become *he's* – but they shouldn't be confused with the possessive 's (e.g. *Pete's house*).
10. In connected speech, certain changes can take place as words connect with each other. For example, where an /n/ sound comes before a /p/ sound, the /n/ sound will become /m/, and /d/ in *and* will become /ŋ/ in certain situations, before the /g/ sound in *boys* and *girls*.

#### Stage 2 e)

1. **B.** A and C have single phoneme vowels – A is /i:/ and C is /e/ – while B contains a diphthong – /eɪ/.
2. **A.** This is actually *Anne is the best* and the *is* has been contracted; the apostrophe ' represents the missing letter(s). The apostrophes in B and C are possessive – it is the idea of Paul and the books of the students.
3. **C.** In both A and B, the vowel sound in the first word – /eə/ in A and /a:/ in B – goes before the consonant that begins the second word, and nothing gets changed. However, in C, the final sound of green – /n/ – is linked to the first sound of paper – /p/ – and so changes to /m/.

#### Stage 2 f) 1 B; 2 A; 3 B; 4 C

A good dictionary will show you where the stress falls in these words.

Aspects of pronunciation  
by Russell Whitehead

EXAMS

Stage 1: Considering

a) When non-natives learn your language, what problems do they have with pronunciation?

Think of the different mistakes they make, and make some notes here:

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Which kinds of mistakes seem most serious to you? Why?

b) Make a list of the mistakes that learners you know make in pronouncing English.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Which kinds of mistakes seem most serious to you? Why?

c) Here is a list of the basic aspects of phonology that you need to be familiar with. Can you match the two halves of the sentences together to make correct statements?

1. Phonology is the study of the sound system of languages, and for our purposes, is focused...
2. Minimal pairs are pairs of words in which the distinction...
3. The phonemic chart or alphabet contains symbols of the sounds (as opposed to written letters) of a language – standard...
4. Diphthongs are combinations of two vowel...
5. Words with more than one syllable have their main stress on one syllable (usually marked ‘ in a dictionary at the start of that syllable) and these...
6. Syllables that are in unstressed positions are sometimes weak syllables, and often pronounced...
7. Intonation is the ‘music’ of a sentence, the way the speaker makes his or her...
8. Sentence stress refers to the placing of importance on a particular...
9. Contractions are common in spoken English and happen when two words are joined together. For example, *he* and *is* become *he’s* – but...
10. In connected speech, certain changes can take place as words connect with each other. For example, where...



## Aspects of pronunciation

by Russell Whitehead

# EXAMS

- a) ... voice rise or fall or both, and is connected to the meaning or mood of the speaker.
- b) ... syllables are pronounced with more force, so that the sound is longer, higher and louder.
- c) ... as /ə/ – the neutral sound at the end of *mother* or the beginning of *ago*.
- d) ... English contains 12 vowels, 8 diphthongs, and 24 consonants (as opposed to 26 written letters).
- e) ... is between one sound only, for example, *seat* and *heat*.
- f) ... an /n/ sound goes before a /p/ sound it will become /m/, and /d/ in and will become /ŋ/ before the /g/ sound in *boys* and *girls*.
- g) ... sounds (as opposed to written letters), for example, /əʊ/, which is in *go*, *hope*, *know*, etc.
- h) ... word in a sentence to focus the meaning of the sentence.
- i) ... on looking at phonemes – the smallest sound units which carry meaning.
- j) ... they shouldn't (contraction!) be confused with possessive 's, for example, *Pete's house*.

**d) Test yourself on these terms. Cover the first part of the sentences, and try to recall the second. Work with a colleague if you can.**

### Think about

'Jon's got a new bike.' If the important thing is that it's Jon, not someone else, who's got a bike, then *Jon* will have the main stress of the sentence. But maybe we want to make it clear that the bike is a new one, not an old one – so then we put the stress on *new*. Or we might want to correct someone who had the mistaken idea that Jon had got a new car – then we'd stress *bike*. Try saying all three options. Then try the same idea with other sentences, such as, 'Kim told me Lucy is in France this week.'



## Stage 2: Experimenting

**e) Now try these sample exam multiple-choice questions about phonology.**

1. Which of these words contains a diphthong?  
**A** meat **B** mate **C** meant
2. Which of these phrases contains a contraction?  
**A** Anne's the best **B** students' books **C** Paul's idea
3. Which pair of words contains sounds that are linked in connected speech?  
**A** where to **B** far taller **C** green paper

## Aspects of pronunciation

by Russell Whitehead

f) Now try this part of a sample exam task. Match the words with the usual position of the main stress.

Main stress on...

- A First syllable
- B Second syllable
- C Third syllable

Words

- 1 Intelligent
- 2 Interesting
- 3 Intensive
- 4 Interaction

g) Now practise saying these words aloud with the correct stress. Work with a colleague if you can. Add some more to each section – think of more words with their main stress on the first syllable, and so on.

### Think about

English is becoming more and more of a world language. There is a lot of discussion about what this means for how we learn and teach it. If Germans and Koreans are learning English so that they can communicate and do business together, what kind of English they should learn? Do you think they need to have a standard British or American accent?



- h) What have you learnt from these materials? Hopefully, that there are several different aspects involved in understanding phonology. All of them may be tested in TKT Module 1: Part 1.
- i) The result of phonology work for most learners is a limited list of issues to think about. In most cases, they have a certain number of sounds that they do not create significantly distinctly (for example, *sink* and *think* are the same, or *pig* and *big*). There will be some sounds that they do not recognize as distinct very easily (the classic *ship* and *sheep*).

## Aspects of pronunciation

by Russell Whitehead

### Stage 3: Reflecting

Native speakers may regard the way they speak as being rather 'flat' – i.e. their intonation range is narrower than most natives'. Some words they say may be hard for others to understand because of misplaced word stress – e.g. try saying *comfortable* with the stress on the third syllable (it sounds like an invitation to dinner!).

j) As a teacher, you will need to understand all the aspects of phonology, not just the particular issues you yourself have. You will need to be able to help all sorts of learners to improve their pronunciation.

#### Don't forget

Good pronunciation works both ways. You need to be able to recognize sounds and their meanings as the foundation of communication. And you need to be able to make meaningful sounds, otherwise your wide vocabulary and accurate grammar will be lost to the world!



#### Set yourself this target

Choose one aspect of phonology – anything you like, for example, the 'th' sound, or recognizing diphthongs in words – and promise yourself that you will improve this aspect within one week. The focus, the communicative intent, of whole sentences may be lost because the sentence stress is misplaced.

#### Come back to this later

Make sure you feel comfortable with the various aspects of phonology.

Look through these materials again a few weeks' time, and check you feel you have enough knowledge about:

- The phonemic script
- Diphthongs
- Word stress and weak syllables
- Contractions
- Connected speech
- Sentence stress and intonation.

#### Suggestion for independent learning

Collect examples of the sounds that you as an individual find are problems. For example, if *t*, *d* and *th* are problems, listen carefully to radio extracts on the BBC website, on audios with coursebooks, in the lyrics of music you have. Make notes of examples of words and phrases containing the sounds. Then you can practice repeating them, and try to say them in the same way that you heard them.

#### Don't forget

Good pronunciation isn't about having an accent that is an exact copy of a British person from a certain school or city. Good pronunciation means that people can understand what you say easily and that you don't create confusion.

