

Lesson 11 Using a Dictionary: English Pronunciation & Sound Symbols

Material planned and prepared by
PROFESSOR SHAHEEN KABIR

Teachers and students of English often come across many new words. Looking at the spelling of many new words does not always help one to pronounce them correctly. A single letter in English can represent several different sounds. For example, the letter 'a' sounds different in 'sad' and 'car'.

Again, take the words cat, kite and chemistry.

The initial sound for each of these words is the same, /k/, although they are spelled with three different letters c-, k- and ch-.

What can teachers or students then do when they do not know how to pronounce or say a new word? They can look the word up in a dictionary.

All the words that a dictionary contains are

known as **entries**. For each entry, immediately after the word comes the information about how to pronounce that word. To understand that one needs to know the English sound symbols.

Each symbol stands for a sound you hear in English. Each sound is known as a phoneme. In phonemic transcription, a word is written

according to its basic sounds within two slashes / /.

For example /pɪn/ consists of three phonemes: /p/, /ɪ/, /n/. Thus, cat in phonemic transcription would be /kæt/.

Learn the symbols for English sounds from the **sound symbol chart** given below.

English Sound Symbol Chart

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

Notice that the chart is divided into four colours.

The **blue** section contains symbols of some consonant sounds that correspond to the sound of the letters as we know them. Two example words for each symbol are given below.

p	pet, pink	v	village, visit
t	tin, two	z	zebra, zoo
k	king, cap	h	hill, hen
f	fish, fan	l	little, lamp
s	sun, sand	r	road, rich
b	ball, bus	w	we, with
d	dish, doll	m	men, many
g	get, gun	n	net, needle

The one sound in this section that speakers of Bangla usually have a problem with is represented by the symbol /z/ as in **zoo** or **zebra**, since this sound is not there in Bangla language, speakers of Bangla need to learn this sound. Otherwise, they may pronounce the initial sound in **zoo** as the initial sound in **Jew**.

The **purple** section contains sound symbols which are not possible to recognize unless one learns them. Two example words for each sound symbol are given below.

θ	think, thanks	ʒ	measure, treasure
ʃ	shoe, shop	dʒ	june, joy
tʃ	chair, chicken	ŋ	sing, wrong
ð	this, their	j	you, yellow

Notice that in Bangla, there is no sound like the one represented by the symbol /ʒ/ as in **pleasure** or **treasure**. So, a speaker of Bangla would very often replace the actual /ʒ/ sound in English with the sound symbolized by /dʒ/ as in **jam** or **june**.

One has to practice a lot to learn this sound represented by the symbol, /ʒ/.

The **yellow** section of the chart contains the vowel sounds in English.

The symbols for the sounds and example words with those sounds are given below:

ɪ	hill, mill	ɔ:	floor, port
i:	heel, meal	ɒ	clock, pot
u:	two, pool	e	pen, red
ʊ	pull, bull	æ	pan, sad
ə	the, above	ɑ:	car, park
ɜ:	bird, first	ʌ	jump, hut

Some of the above vowel sounds are not used in speaking Bangla. For example,

i:	tea, meal	ə	letter, mother
u:	cool, food	ɑ:	car, park

The **green** section of the chart contains symbols of sounds which have two vowel sounds together. These are called 'diphthongs'.

Example words for the **diphthongs** or the two vowel sounds together are given below.

eɪ	hate, wait	eə	chair, pair
ɪə	ear, tear	aʊ	cow, plough
əʊ	blow, go	ɔɪ	toy, enjoy
aɪ	eye, sky	ʊə	tour

We need to learn and practise saying these sounds carefully.

Activity-1

A. Match the **first sound** in these words with their **phonemic transcription**.

- Example: **three** /θ/, **cold** /k/
- sugar /θ/
 - jug /k/
 - thin /ʃ/
 - class /dʒ/
 - there /n/
 - physics /tʃ/
 - know /ð/
 - chalk /f/

B. Match the **last sound** in these words with their **phonemic transcription**.

- Example: **boy** /oi/, **mat** /t/
- health /m/
 - rose /θ/
 - thumb /f/
 - rough /z/
 - sea /s/
 - buy /ŋ/
 - rice /i:/
 - ring /aɪ/

C. Match the following words with their phonemic transcriptions.

- Example: sport /spɔ:t/
- sport /pɔ:l/
 - half /fu:d/
 - pull /spɔ:t/
 - food /hɑ:f/
 - although /pleɪt/
 - bird /flæt/
 - flat /ɔ:lðəʊ/
 - plate /bɜ:d/

Activity-2

Read the following list of minimal pairs. The words in the list show different vowel sounds of English. Write down the phonemic symbol for each vowel sound. The last two are done for you.

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| 1. pat / / | 7. pot / / |
| 2. pet / / | 8. port / / |
| 3. fill / / | 9. pool / / |
| 4. feel / / | 10. pull / / |
| 5. shut / / | 11. hut /ʌ/ |
| 6. shirt / / | 12. heart /ɑ:/ |

Vocabulary

Homophones

There are many words that are spelt differently but are in fact pronounced the same. For example:

- | | |
|---------------|--------------|
| male - mail | rain - reign |
| stair - stare | bored board |

Words that are pronounced the same way but are spelt differently, and have different meanings, are called **Homophones**.

There are a lot of jokes made with homophones. Here is one such joke for you. See if you can catch the play on words. Look up any word you don't know in your dictionary.



A city girl who has never been in a village goes to visit a farm in a remote village for the first time. When she sees some cows grazing in the field, she's ecstatic and cries out, "What a lovely bunch of cows!" The farmer corrects her, "Herd of cows, Miss." "Of course I've heard of cows!" she replies. "No, I mean a cow herd," explains the farmer. She ends the conversation by saying, "So, what do I care? I have no secret from a cow!"

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