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Teaching Knowledge Test Preparation course

Module 1



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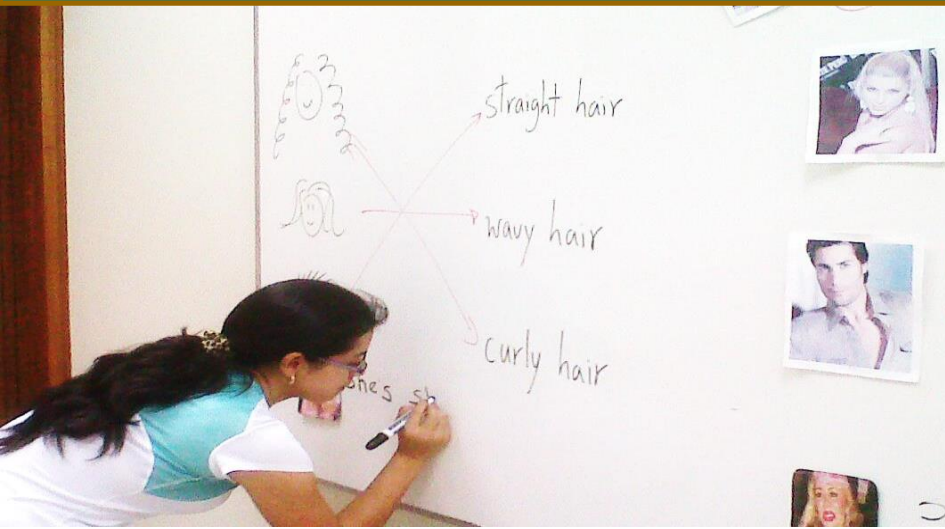
TKT Module 1

Language and background to language learning and teaching





TKT Module 1 – part 1



Describing language and language skills



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Phonology

■ What is phonology?

Phonology is the study of the sound **features** used in a language to communicate meaning. In English these features include **phonemes, word stress, sentence stress** and **intonation**.



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Key concepts

Do you know what these symbols represent?

/dʒ/ /æ/ /ð/ /ɪ/



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Phonology

/dʒ/ /æ/ /ð/ /ɪ/

All these symbols represent phonemes. A **phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound that can make a difference to meaning in a language. For example, the *s* in *books* in English shows that something is plural, so the sound /s/ has meaning and is a phoneme. Different languages use a different range of sounds and not all of them have meaning in other languages. For example, the distinction between /s/ and /sh/ is an important one in English, where it helps **distinguish** (notice or understand the difference between two things) between words such as *so* and *show*, *sock* and *shock*, *sore* and *shore*, etc. But in Cantonese, you can use either the /s/ or /sh/ sound in words without changing their meaning, i.e. in Cantonese these sounds are not two separate phonemes.



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The phonemes of a language are represented in writing by phonemic symbols, such as /i:/, /aɪ/ and /ʃ/. Each phonemic symbol represents only one phoneme, unlike the letters of the alphabet in English where, for example, the letter *a* in written English can represent the /æ/ sound in *hat*, the /eɪ/ sound in *made* and the /ə/ sound in *usually*. Phonemic symbols help the reader know exactly what the correct pronunciation is. The phonemic script is a set of phonemic symbols which show in writing how words or sounds are pronounced, e.g. *beautiful* is written /'bjʊ:tɪfʌl/, *television* is /'telɪvɪʒn/ and *yellow* is /'jeləʊ/. When the symbols are written one after the other to represent a word or group of words they make a phonemic transcription. The phonemes of English are often shown in a chart, called the **phonemic chart**.



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Phonology

i:	ɪ	ʊ	u:	ɪə	eɪ		
leave	sit	put	pool	ear	play		
e	ə	ɜ:	ɔ:	ʊə	ɔɪ	əʊ	
bed	about	bird	door	tourist	boy	go	
æ	ʌ	ɑ:	ɒ	eə	aɪ	aʊ	
cat	fun	far	dog	air	life	now	



p	b	t	d	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
pen	bill	two	do	cheese	joke	car	got
f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ
for	voice	think	then	sun	zoo	shoe	usual
m	n	ŋ	h	l	r	w	j
man	no	sing	hat	leg	read	watch	yes

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Phonology

The chart groups the sounds into **vowels** (sounds made with the mouth partly open and where the air is not stopped by the tongue, lips or teeth, e.g. /e/) in the top left-hand corner, **diphthongs** (a movement from one vowel sound to another within a single syllable, e.g. the vowel sound in *make* /meɪk/ or in *so* /səʊ/) in the top right-hand corner and **consonants** (the flow of air is partly blocked by the tongue, lips or teeth when these sounds are made, e.g. /b/) in the bottom three rows. The consonants are arranged in an order according to how and where in the mouth they are pronounced and whether they are **voiced sounds** (spoken using the vibration of our voice, e.g. /b/, /d/, /dʒ/, /g/) or **unvoiced sounds** (spoken without using our voice, e.g. /p/, /t/, /tʃ/, /k/).

Dictionaries always give phonemic transcriptions of words to show their pronunciation. They usually have a list of all the phonemic symbols at the beginning or end of the book, together with an example of the sound each symbol represents. There are several phonemic scripts with some small differences in the symbols they use. TKT and most learner dictionaries use symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), as does the chart above.



Phonology

In the transcription of the word /'stju:dənt/ you can see phonemic symbols and also another sign ' . Dictionary entries for words also use this symbol. The symbol is used to show **word stress**. Sometimes you see word stress marked in other ways, e.g. /stju:dənt/. When we give word stress to a **syllable** we say it with greater energy and usually higher, i.e. with more length and sound on its vowel sound. Compare the **stress** in the vowel sounds in the underlined stressed syllables with the other syllables in these words: *pencil, children, important*. We pronounce the other syllables with less energy, especially the unstressed or weak syllables, whose vowels get shortened or sometimes even disappear, e.g. the vowel sound in the last syllable of *important*, which is pronounced as a **schwa** /ə/. There are many languages which, like English, give especially strong stress to one syllable in a word, e.g. the Portuguese spoken in Portugal. Other languages give equal length to all the syllables.





Phonology

In English, stress also influences how sentences and groups of words are pronounced. We say different parts of the sentence with more or less stress, i.e. slower and louder, or quicker and more softly. This is called **sentence stress**. Normally one word in the sentence has **primary** or **main stress**. This is the word which the speaker thinks is most important to the meaning of the sentence. Other words can have **secondary stress**. This is not so strong as main stress and falls on words which are not so important to the meaning of the sentence as the word with main stress. Other words in the sentence are unstressed. For example, in 'She came home late last night' or 'I can't understand a word he says', the words with the main stress would probably be the underlined ones, the words with secondary stress would probably be *came, home, last, night* and *can't, understand, says*, and the unstressed words *she, I, a* and *he*.

Main and secondary stress usually occur on content words which carry meaning rather than structural words. Content words are nouns, verbs, adverbs or adjectives, i.e. words that give information. Structural words are prepositions, articles, pronouns or determiners, i.e. words we use to build the grammar of the sentence. For example, in the sentence 'The girl ran to the sea and jumped in quickly' the content words are: *girl, ran, sea, jumped, quickly*. The others are grammatical words. You can see that normally these would not be stressed. Of course, there are exceptions to this. It is possible to stress any word in a sentence if the speaker thinks it is important. Putting the stress on an unexpected word in a sentence is called **contrastive stress**.

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Phonology

For example, 'The girl ran to the sea and jumped in quickly.' This stresses that she ran towards the sea and not, for example, away from it. Changing the stress of a sentence changes its meaning. Look at these examples:

The girl ran to the sea and jumped in quickly. (i.e. not another person)

The girl ran to the sea and jumped in quickly. (i.e. not to any other place)

The girl ran to the sea and jumped in quickly. (i.e. not in any other way)

Sentence stress is a characteristic of **connected speech**, i.e. spoken language in which all the words join to make a connected stream of sounds. Some other characteristics of connected speech are **contractions**, e.g. *don't*, *haven't*, vowel shortening in unstressed words and syllables, e.g. the schwa sound /ə/ in *at home* /ət həʊm/ or *London* /lʌndən/ and **weak forms** (unstressed forms of words, e.g. /kən/ for *can*). These characteristics help to keep the **rhythm** (pattern of stress) of speech regular. The regular beat falls on the main stress, while the weaker syllables and words are made shorter to keep to the rhythm. Try saying the sentences above and beating out a regular rhythm on your hand as you say them.



Phonology

Another feature of connected speech which helps to keep it smooth is **linking**. In connected speech we join (i.e. link) words together at the **word boundaries** (where one word ends and the next one begins) rather than saying them separately. This happens particularly when one word ends in a consonant sound and the next one starts with a vowel sound, e.g. *up above* /ʌp əbʌv/, *he did it* /hi: dɪd ɪt/, or when one ends with a vowel sound and the next starts with a vowel sound, e.g. *her English* /hɜ:r ɪŋɡlɪʃ/, *go away* /gəʊəweɪ/. Linking is often represented in a phonemic transcription as ̣.



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Intonation is another important feature of connected speech. It is the way a speaker changes the level of their voice to show meaning, i.e. the meaningful tune of a sentence or a group of words. Through it we can show emotions and attitudes, **emphasise** (i.e. give special force to a word) or make less important particular things we say, and signal to other people the **function** of what we are saying, e.g. that we are stopping speaking, asking a question or making a statement.

To hear some of these uses, try saying 'School's just finished' with these meanings:

- as a statement of fact
- with surprise
- with happiness
- as a question
- to emphasise 'just'.



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You should hear the level of your voice rising and falling in different patterns. For example, when you say the sentence as a statement of fact, your intonation has a falling tone as follows: '↘ school's just finished'. When you say it as a question, it has a rising tone, as follows: '↗ school's just finished', and when you say it with surprise, you will probably say it with a fall-rise tone, as '↘↗ school's just finished'. Different intonation patterns can show many different meanings, but there is no short and simple way of describing how the patterns relate to meanings.

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Phonology

■ Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

Read these tips and tick the ones which are most important for you.

- English has become a global language. This means learners need to understand a wide variety of accents in English and be understood by people from many different places. Listening to recordings of speakers from a range of countries helps them with this. They can also, of course, try to listen to TV, radio programmes, and some websites in English.
- Learners need practice in hearing and recognising sound features before they are asked to produce those features themselves.
- A regular focus in lessons on different aspects of pronunciation helps to make learners aware of its importance. This can be done as we teach new language by asking learners to repeat **models** of the new language. We can also encourage clear pronunciation by correcting or asking learners to correct their pronunciation mistakes. We can use activities, too, which focus just on e.g. word stress, sentence stress or **minimal pairs**, i.e. words distinguished by only one phoneme, *ship* and *sheep*, *hut* and *hat*, *thing* and *think*, *chip* and *ship*.



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Phonology



- Teachers can find out which phonemes are problematic for their learners and focus on them.
- Many classrooms have a copy of the phonemic chart on the wall. This can help direct learners' attention to particular sounds when they learn new language or for correction. Learners may not need to learn all the symbols on the chart but just the sounds that are problematic for them.
- Teachers often introduce phonemic symbols to their classes a few at a time rather than all at once. This can help them remember them better.

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- It is the teacher's decision whether to use (some of the) phonemic symbols with their classes or not. Some learners, e.g. 5-year-olds or learners unfamiliar with English script, may not find these symbols useful at all. Older learners may appreciate them, particularly as they help them to make good use of dictionaries.
- Teachers themselves will probably find it very useful to know all the symbols in the phonemic script as it helps them use dictionaries with **confidence** and in the preparation of their lessons.



Taken from: *"The TKT Coursebook" 2nd edition. Cambridge University Press.*

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