Facultad de Lenguas y Educación

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English Phonics: Reading and Writing



English Phonics, Reading and Writing

UNIT 1: THE SOUNDS OF ENGLISH AND THE IPA

GLOBAL CAMPUS
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Unit 1: The sounds of English and the IPA

As you read through this unit, there will be some activities for you to do. These activities will help you hear, feel and see some of the concepts presented here. You will find the answers at the end of the unit, in section 1.5.

1.1. The History of the IPA

A phoneme is a single unit of sound. English, and in fact, all spoken languages, are made up of phonemes. Phonemes are joined together to make words and sentences, and by decoding the phonemes we hear, we can make meaning from the stream of utterances we hear.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) consists of symbols that represent the different phonemes in any language. It was first thought up at the end of the 19th century in Paris, France. It was initially intended to be a tool for writing down the sounds in English, French and German phonetically. However, its inventors, the International Phonetic Association, soon realised that it was a useful tool for anyone learning a language which had different sound and letter connections than their own language and other sounds were added, including Arabic and other non-European languages.

At first, the phonetic alphabet had different symbols for the sounds of each of the languages, but later on it was standardised. Nowadays, each symbol represents one sound, no matter what the language being transcribed is. It was also considered important that the symbols should come from the Roman Alphabet, when possible. This means that the symbols are already associated with sounds in many European languages this makes it easier for European language learners to remember the sounds and to read transcriptions.

At first the symbols were presented as a list. Later on, the symbols were organised into a chart. The chart helps people using the symbols make connection between the sounds, as we will see later on in this unit. The chart and the symbols are regularly revised and updated. The most recent revision was in 2015. Nowadays the chart is often used in dictionaries to show the pronunciation of words, and as a teaching aid to help language learners learn how to pronounce the sounds, words, expressions and entire phrases in the language they are learning accurately. Many language teachers use it, especially to teach English, which is has many conflicting pronunciation rules and can be very confusing for people learning it.

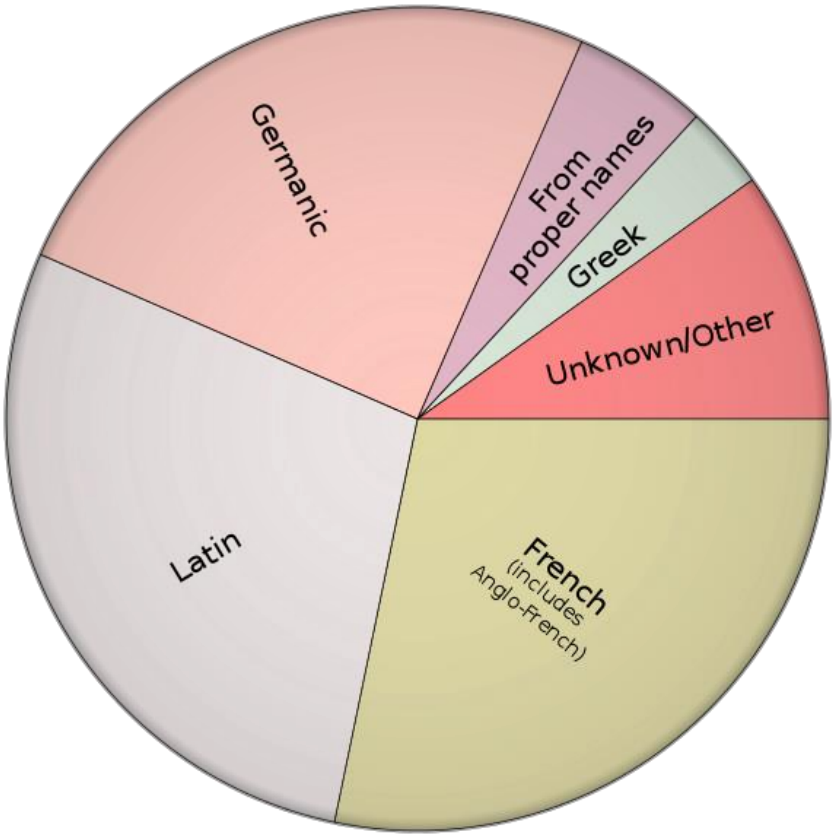
1.2. Why is the IPA important?

The IPA is an important invention for anyone who is teaching or learning a language because it allows absolutely anyone to be able to pronounce words in the target language. As a teacher, it will help you ensure you are teaching the correct pronunciation of a word to your learners. You will also be able to encourage your learners to become

more autonomous, relying less on the teacher as a source of information, as they will be able to look up a transcription of a new word in order to be able to see how the word is pronounced.

Of course, the IPA takes a little time and effort to learn. But the effort to learn the symbols and their associated sounds will help save time later on, and as a teacher you will be able to pass this knowledge on to your learners to help them become better speakers of the language they are learning. As a teacher, you should be able to hear sounds in spoken language and accurately match them to the symbol that represents them. You should also be able to read a transcription and produce an accurate pronunciation of a sound, word or utterance from its written version. Your learners will not need to have such in depth knowledge. The IPA will help improve their awareness of the sounds of the language they are learning, and it will help you to correct mispronunciation. Many learners struggle with pronunciation when they are learning English, because the letters used to write a word don't always seem to match the sounds of that word. The English language has its roots in Latin, French and Germanic languages. This mix of contributing languages mean that some words follow Latin pronunciation rules, while others follow Germanic pronunciation rules and others follow French pronunciation rules.

The roots of the English language



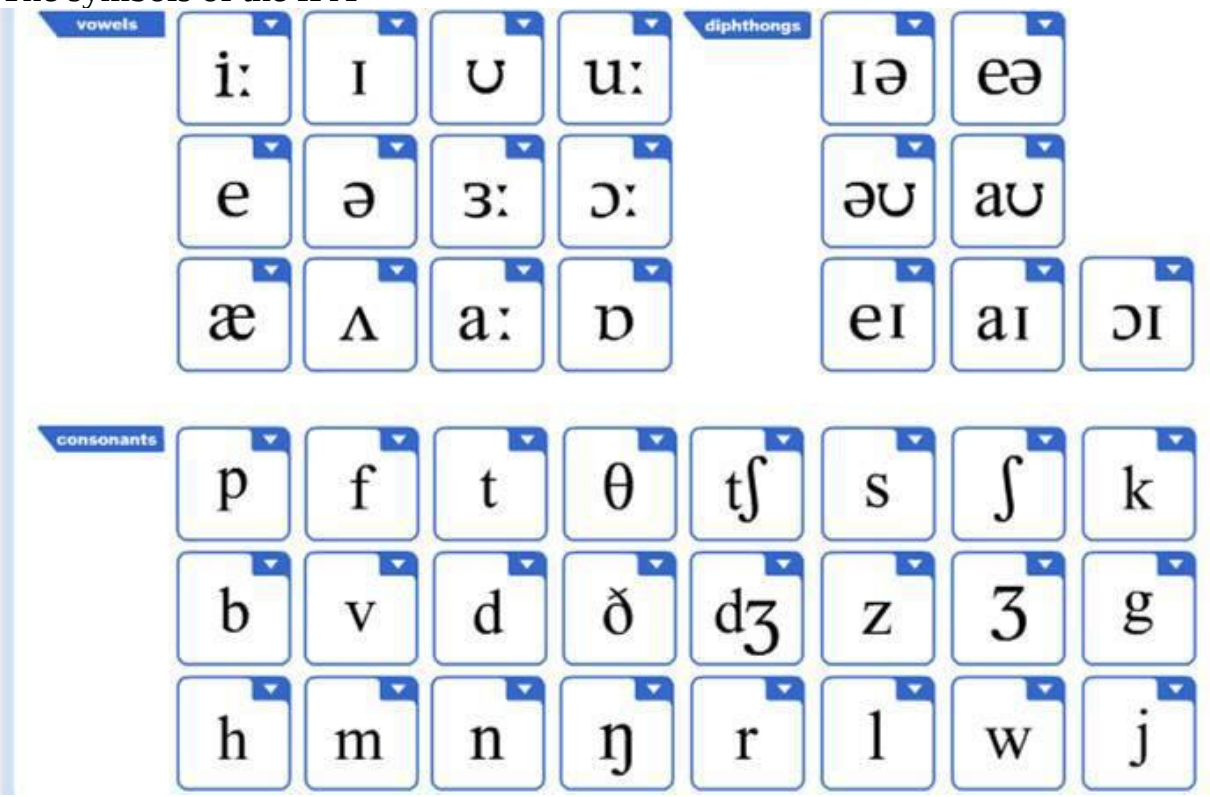
[Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Origins_of_English_PieChart_2D.svg]

The IPA is a tool that helps teachers and learners overcome this difficulty. By representing each sound in a word with a specific symbol, we can write words phonetically. We will see more about how the IPA can help both teachers and learners later in this unit.

1.3. The symbols

The symbols used in the IPA are most often shown in a chart like the one below. The symbols are grouped according to the type of sound they represent; vowels, diphthongs (two vowel sounds together) and consonants. We will examine the sounds each symbol represents later in this unit.

The symbols of the IPA



[source: https://freetalkwithforeigner.wordpress.com/2015/12/31/tip-hoc-tieng-anh-so-2-luyen-phat-am/]

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1.4. How do we make sounds?

To make sounds in any language we use various parts of the mouth and throat, including the teeth, lips, tongue, roof of the mouth, voice box and even the nose. We can classify sounds according to the position of the teeth, tongue and lips when we produce the sound, and also where exactly the sound is produced. In this section we will be looking at the sounds of standard English only. We will look at regional differences later on in the unit.

1.4.1. Vowels and consonants.

The most important categorisation of sounds, and perhaps the most well-known, is according to if the sound is a vowel or consonant. But what is the difference between a vowel and a consonant? Well, in very basic terms, a vowel is a sound made when there is nothing blocking the flow of air from the lungs, through the throat and mouth or nose. To see how this works, we can say some sounds aloud and pay attention to what is happening as we do so. Remember to say the sound each letter makes, not the name of the letter itself in each case. So, for example, the sound of the letter 'a' is the sound it makes in the word cat or in happy. Say the vowel sounds to yourself: a, e , i, o, u. Notice how the air is not blocked as it flows out of your mouth.

Now say the following consonant sounds aloud: p, s, r, k, b, f, n. Can you identify what part of your throat, mouth or nose blocks the flow of air in each case? In consonant sounds the air may be partially blocked, such as in the 's' sound, or there is a movement from blocked to unblocked, such as in the 'p' sound. There are also some sounds that are generally considered to be consonants, but that don't fit precisely with this description of what a consonant is. Say the following aloud: w, y. What do you notice? How are these sounds similar to vowels? How are they similar to consonants? We call these 'semi-vowels' because the sounds are made without blocking the flow of air, like a vowel, but within a word they don't always behave in the same way as a vowel does.

1.4.2. Long and short sounds

Another way to categorise sounds in English, especially vowel sounds, is by dividing them into long or short sounds. In the previous section, to distinguish between vowels and consonants, you made the sounds of the letters rather than saying the name of the letter. Now compare the sound of the letter 'a' with the name of the letter. The difference can be heard if we compare the sound of the 'a' in apple to its sound in

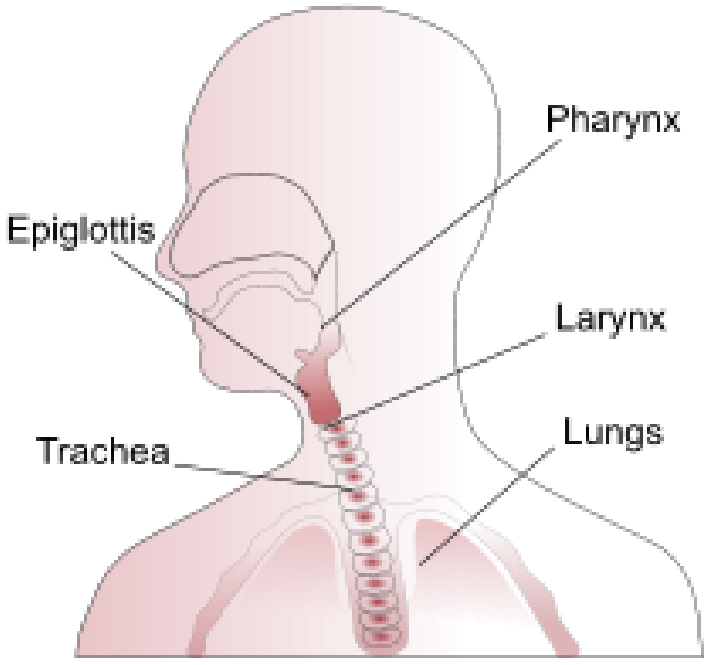
car. In 'apple', the 'a' is a short vowel sound, in 'car' the 'a' is a long vowel sound. The IPA uses a colon to show this. So the symbol for a long sound is followed by two vertical dots, like this:



1.4.3. Voiced and voiceless sounds

When we produce sounds, air passes through our lungs, along the trachea, or windpipe, and through the larynx, or voice box. From there it passes through the epiglottis and pharynx, into the mouth or nose and out through the lips or nostrils. Voiced sounds are made when the trachea vibrates as air passes through it. Voiceless sounds, on the other hand, don't cause any vibration in the trachea. The difference between voiced and voiceless sounds can sometimes be difficult to hear, but it isn't difficult to detect. We can feel the vibration in the trachea easily when we produce a voiced sound. To feel the difference, place two fingers on your neck about two thirds of the way down from your chin. Say the sounds 'b' and 'p'. Can you feel the difference between these two sounds? The 'b' sound is voiced and you will be able to feel the vibration as you make the sound. The 'p' is voiceless, however, so you shouldn't be able to feel any vibration at all.

The parts of the throat

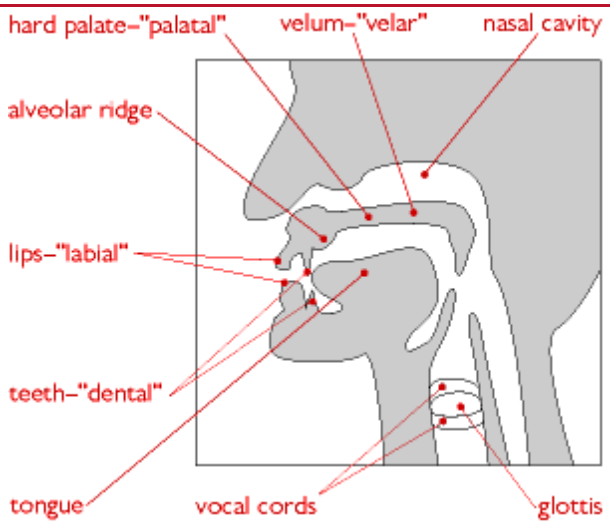


[Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Throat]

1.4.4. Place of articulation

The place of articulation of a sound refers to the part of the throat, mouth or nose where the sound is produced, or the combination of the parts. We can classify sounds according to the place of articulation. In English, consonant sounds are produced by blocking the flow of air as it flows out from the lungs. The type of sound produced is named after the parts of the throat, mouth or nose that are used to make the sound. The voice box, or trachea, is one of the places where we can produce sound, as described above, but it isn't the only place.

Parts of the mouth



[Source: http://facweb.furman.edu/~wrogers/phonemes/phono/fric.htm]

So, depending on where the air is blocked, we can use the adjectives in the diagram above to describe the sound. For example, the sound made by the letter 'f' is labiodental because the air is blocked by the top lip and the teeth.

1.4.5. Manner of articulation

The way in which we produce a sound is called the manner of articulation. Some sounds are made when the tongue, lips or jaw bone move from one position to another, but other sounds are produced without any movement of the parts of the mouth. According to what parts move, and how they move, we can classify the sounds we make.

When we make the sound 'p', at the start of the sound, both lips are closed. The flow of air is completely blocked by the lips. To make the sound we open the lips suddenly releasing the air. The air comes out quickly, almost like

a small explosion of air from our mouth. This manner of articulation is called plosive. Other plosive sounds include 't', 'g', 'b' and 'd'. In each case we make a movement from a position where the flow of air is completely blocked to an open position, releasing the air suddenly.

Nasal sounds are similar to plosives because they involve blocking the flow of air in the mouth. However, as the name suggests, air is not blocked in the nose and so there is not a build-up of air pressure in the mouth. When the air is released through the mouth, it doesn't make such a sudden, explosive sound. Nasal sounds are sounds that are made as the flow of air through the mouth is blocked but it continues to flow through the nose, for example, the sounds 'm' and 'n' are nasal.

When two parts of the mouth come into contact, but don't block the flow of air completely we produce a sound called a fricative. In fricative sounds, the air flows through a narrow space as it passes through the mouth and lips, and the sound is made as it flows through the channel. To make the sound 'f', for example, the bottom lip touches the top row of the teeth partially blocking the flow of air through the lips. Other examples of fricatives include 's', 'v', 'z' 'th' and 'sh'.

The final manner of articulation of sounds in English are called approximants. They are formed when a part of the mouth moves towards another, but the air is not blocked in any way. When we make the sound 'w' in English, for example, the lips move together but don't touch. The 'y' is produced by the middle part of the tongue moving towards the hard palate, and to make the 'r', the back and sides of the tongue move towards the hard palate. The sound 'l' is also considered to be an approximant because, although the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge, the sides of the tongue are pulled down in order to allow the flow of air to pass freely around the sides of the tongue.

You may have noticed that there are some sounds that don't fit exactly into these classifications, such as the 'ch' in the word chocolate, and the hard 'g' sound in the word Germany. These two sounds are called affricates. They are similar to plosives because they start with a blockage of the flow of air. However, instead of releasing the air in a sudden, explosive blast, the air is released slowly, similar to a fricative sound. The 'h' and 'w' sound are made using the glottis, which is located in the throat, near the voice box.

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1.6. Unit summary

The IPA

A phoneme is a single unit of sound. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) represents sounds using symbols. By learning to recognise the symbols and the sounds they represent, we can improve our pronunciation and help our learners to improve theirs.

Knowing the IPA as a teacher will help you to:

- Teach the correct pronunciation
- Encourage autonomy
- Check how a word is pronounced before teaching it
- Save time

English is a phonetically complicated language, because it comes from many different root languages, in particular Latin, German and French.

The symbols of the IPA are shown in a chart. They are grouped according to the type of sound they represent; vowels, diphthongs (two vowel sounds together) and consonants.

Making sounds

To make sounds in any language we use various parts of the mouth and throat, including the teeth, lips, tongue, roof of the mouth, voice box and even the nose.

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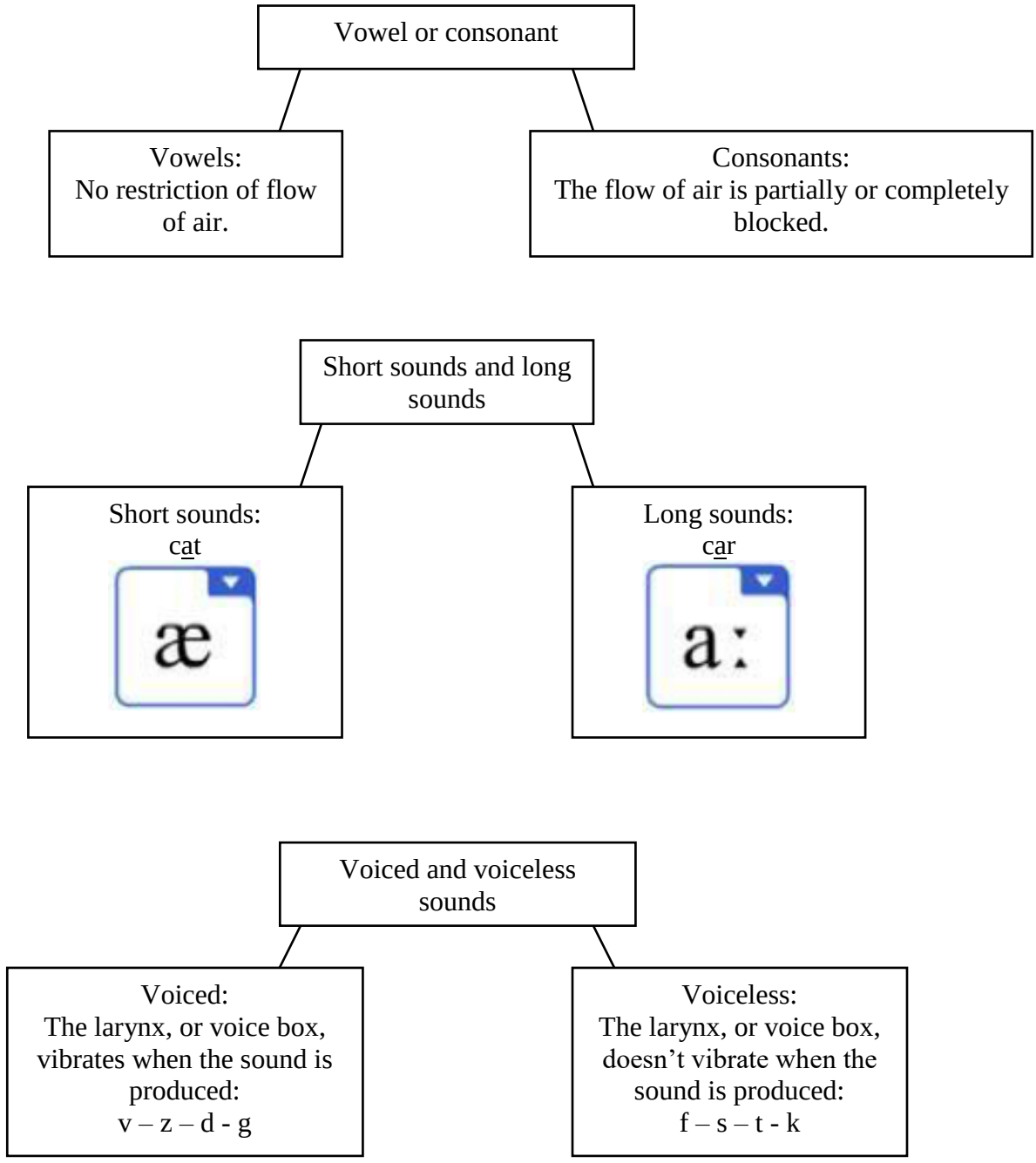
We can classify sounds according to the following criteria:



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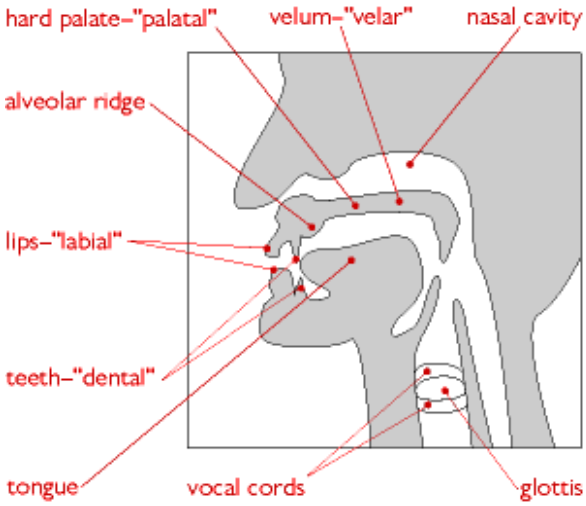
Place of articulation



alveolar (the tongue touches the alveolar ridge)

labiodental (the bottom lip touches the teeth)

alveopalatal (the tongue touches the alveolar ridge and the hard palate)

interdental (the tongue is placed between the teeth)

velar (the back of the tongue moves towards the velum)

bilabial (the lips touch)

Manner of articulation

- **Plosive** sounds are made when air is completely blocked and then is released suddenly. For example, b, p, t, g, k
- **Nasal** sounds are like plosives but the air is released through the nose. For example m, n.
- **Fricative** sounds are made when air is partially blocked. For example s, v, f, z, sh, th.
- **Approximants** are formed when two parts of the mouth move together without touching. For example w, y, l, r.
- **Affricates** are like plosives, but the air is released slowly. For example ch, (hard) g.
- G**lottal** sounds use the glottis to produce sounds like h and w.