

12 Voicing

Unit overview

The following is a true story. At an engineering conference in Kansas City, two Americans took a colleague from Zurich to dinner. The Swiss engineer had rented a car and driven around the area the day before. Their conversation at dinner included the following exchange:

- First American: So, what have you found most interesting about Kansas City?
- Swiss: The most interesting? It is the mice.
- First American: (*thinking of the hotel where they were all staying*) Mice???!!!
- Swiss: Yes, that is clear. Here are much mice.
- Second American: You mean . . . rodents?!
- Swiss: (*unfamiliar with the term “rodents,” does not respond*)
- First American: You’ve seen them?
- Swiss: Oh yes, I saw them myself, all around the city.
- Second American: (*trying a different approach, holds hands a mouse-length apart and then a rat-length apart*) Would you say they were this big or this big?
- Swiss: (*holding one hand high above his head*) No, this big.

The two Americans only then realized that their Swiss colleague meant “corn.” The term “maize” (which rhymes with “days”) is used in British English but is not commonly used in North America. When a word like “maize” is pronounced in a Swiss German way, the letters **-ai-** sound like /aʏ/ and the final consonant is *voiceless*. As a result, the word sounds like “mice.” This conversation was only temporarily derailed because the

goodwill among the colleagues encouraged them to make the effort to get the discussion back on track. Oftentimes, however, a mistake like this can lead to a complete breakdown in communication.

The main point of this unit (and this story) is for students to learn that two contrasting sounds can be made with the tongue in exactly the same position, but with a contrast in *voicing*. Although many languages use voicing contrasts, the concept needs to be taught because it does not always transfer easily to a new language. In fact, this lesson may take extra time because so many sound problems can be traced back to the voicing distinction.

In a study of sound errors made by English language learners (Leahy, 1980), it was found that the two most common types of errors are based on continuancy (i.e., “bus” vs. “but”) and voicing (i.e., “buzz” vs. “bus”). Interestingly, voicing errors with stop sounds (e.g., /d/ vs. /t/ and /b/ vs. /p/) were most often found to occur in the final position of a word. This particular type of voicing problem is addressed in Unit 13. Voicing errors with continuant sounds, however, were found to commonly occur in every position within a word.



A Introducing voicing

When learning to hear the difference between voiced and voiceless sounds, students are often told to cover their ears while producing a voiced sound such as /z/, and then contrast it with the corresponding voiceless sound /s/. This technique, however, is often not adequate. Instead, you should tell students to press their fingers firmly against their ears, closing the openings, in order to get the full effect of the contrast. Furthermore, the sound /z/ should not be pronounced “zee” (like the name of the letter **-z-**) but should be continued as “zzzz.” That is why this task

has students say the word “buzz” with a final extended /z/ sound. Similarly, the sound /s/ should first be said as the final part of a word, like “hiss.”

Since the contrast between voiced and voiceless sounds is caused by the presence or absence of vocal cord vibration, another way to help students notice the difference is by asking them to lightly press a hand to the throat while alternating between /z/ and /s/. It is possible to feel the vibration or lack of vibration this way, but the distinction tends to be more subtle than the sound difference created by tightly closing the ears. Try both of these demonstration methods yourself first to determine which one works best for you.



Teaching Tip

Practicing to hear and produce contrasting voiced and voiceless sounds will help students learn the pronunciation of new or difficult words more easily. For example, present an unfamiliar word like “grisly” (pronounced with the voiced sound /z/). Ask students if the letter “s” is voiced or voiceless. Despite the spelling, the sound is voiced. You may want to use a word that students are more likely to use in daily conversation, but this word was chosen because it is almost certain to be unknown. When students have learned to recognize the difference between voiced and voiceless sounds, this feature becomes an analytical tool for clearly hearing and mentally recording the pronunciation of a new word.



B Which word is different? ©

Audio Script

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| 1. eyes, eyes, ice | /a ^y z/, /a ^y z/, /a ^y s/ |
| 2. buzz, bus, buzz | /bʌz/, /bʌs/, /bʌz/ |
| 3. fuss, fuss, fuzz | /fʌs/, /fʌs/, /fʌz/ |
| 4. phase, face, face | /fe ^y z/, /fe ^y s/, /fe ^y s/ |
| 5. Sue, zoo, Sue | /su ^w /, /zu ^w /, /su ^w / |
| 6. seal, seal, zeal | /si ^y l/, /si ^y l/, /zi ^y l/ |
| 7. sink, zinc, zinc | /sɪnk/, /zɪnk/, /zɪnk/ |
| 8. zip, sip, sip | /zɪp/, /sɪp/, /sɪp/ |

Answer Key

	X	Y	Z
1.			✓.....
2.		✓.....	
3.			✓.....
4.	✓.....		
5.		✓.....	
6.			✓.....
7.	✓.....		
8.	✓.....		



C Saying words with /s/ and /z/ ©

Students often ask if there is some kind of rule to determine whether the letter **-s** should be pronounced as /s/ or as /z/ in a particular word. Unfortunately, the rules that have been developed are too complicated to be of practical use for English learners. However, the better students get at hearing the difference between the two sounds, despite the spelling, the better they will also get at memorizing the pronunciation of common words that contain the letter **-s**.



Teaching Tip

This may be a good place to discuss the terms “Miss,” “Ms.,” and “Mrs.,” which are all commonly used to address women. Considering the contrasts between these terms can make for an interesting analytical exercise.

Explain that:

- “Miss,” pronounced /mɪs/, is a title for a woman who is unmarried. The word ends in a voiceless sound.
- “Ms.,” pronounced /mɪz/, is a title for a woman who is either married or unmarried. This word ends in a voiced sound.
- “Mrs.,” pronounced /mɪs-əz/, is a title for a married woman. It contains both a voiceless sound and a voiced sound. Furthermore, while “Mrs.” is a short three-letter abbreviation, it contains two syllables, while the other two terms only contain one.

By explaining the differences in meaning between these terms, you can reinforce in students' minds the importance of learning not only the distinction between voiced and voiceless sounds, but also the importance of using correct rhythm and syllable number.

Note: The pair “please / police” can also be used to analyze voicing contrasts while at the same time reviewing syllable number and rhythm.

F Music of English

This Music of English box contrasts the voiced and voiceless sounds /s/ and /z/ and also introduces a common pitch pattern for English tag questions (e.g., “Isn’t it?”).

H The sounds /f/ and /v/

For students who have difficulty with the contrast between /v/ and /b/ or /f/ and /p/, it might be useful to review the continuant stop difference (e.g., “rove / robe,” “leaf / leap”) before going into the voicing difference between /v/ and /f/. For work on the contrast between /v/ and /b/, see Appendix C, Part 4 in the Student’s Book. For work on the contrast between /f/ and /p/, see Appendix C, Part 5 in the Student’s Book.

I Saying words with /f/ and /v/

Before students listen and repeat, direct them to practice the position of the lips and teeth for /f/ and /v/. Practicing this mouth position is especially important for students who have difficulty distinguishing between the sounds /v/ and /w/. For work on this particular problem area, see Appendix C, Part 3 in the Student’s Book.

You can also help your students build confidence for this speaking task by encouraging them to whisper the words “leaf” and “leave” several times, until they become comfortable with the contrast.

L Voiced and voiceless sounds for the spelling -th-

Many languages do not have the sounds /θ/ and /ð/, so learners tend to substitute another sound for each of these (e.g., /s/ and /z/, /t/ and /d/, or, in some cases, /f/ and /v/). For work on the contrast between /θ/ and the stop sound /t/, see Appendix C, Part 6 in the Student’s Book.

While /θ/ and /ð/ are technically called *interdentals*, they are not actually said with the tongue between the teeth. It is generally not a good idea to urge students to put the tip of their tongues between the front teeth to pronounce these sounds because in many cultures it is considered impolite, or even disgusting, to show one’s tongue.

The most important aspect of the tongue position for /θ/ and /ð/ is that it is relaxed and flat, so that air can flow out of the mouth without any hissing or buzzing noise. The tip of the tongue may briefly touch the back of the upper or lower teeth, depending on what kind of sound follows, but it rarely sticks out between the teeth.

Understanding the distinctive feature of *sibilance* (covered in Unit 14) will help clarify how these sounds are made, but in the meantime you may direct students to look at the mouth pictures for /θ/ and /ð/ in Appendix B of the Student’s Book. Also, mirrors can be used to help students watch their tongue placement. Another advantage of a mirror is that it covers the mouth and thus gives the student some privacy. Self-consciousness is an enemy to pronunciation accuracy. If your students seem especially self-conscious, they may even benefit from practicing behind a sheet of paper held up in front of the face.

N Voiced -th-

If students have difficulty thinking about tongue position and voicing at the same time, direct them to stop their ears as they did for Task A. This will help direct their attention to the presence or absence of voicing in the word list.

 P *Linking continuants*

Encourage students not to pause between the linked continuant sounds. For more work on this topic, see Appendix C, Part 9 in the Student's Book.

 R *Pair work: Nouns and verbs*

This task shows how the presence or absence of voicing in a final sound can sometimes change a word's part of speech. You may want to explain to your students that the noun "safe," used in the word list, means a strong box for valuables, like the ones used in banks.

 T *Dictation*
Audio Script

1. Fall leaves are bright red.
2. Please call the police.
3. Does she call herself "Ms." or "Miss"?
4. I say the glass is half full.
5. That's a fine prize.

 Teaching Tip

If more voicing work is needed, have students dictate to each other from the lists of words in Task C, J, or R, choosing the voiced or unvoiced version at random. This will enable them to give each other immediate feedback on the clarity of the distinction.

VOWEL WORK
 U *The vowel sound /ɔ^y/ as in "boy" and "coin"*

Since the sound /ɔ^y/ only occurs in a stressed syllable, encourage students to make the sound long and extra clear for each word in the lists.