

# Perception exercises in pronunciation training

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Perception practice is essential for learning unfamiliar pronunciation features in a second language, especially phonemic contrasts and the ways the phonemes are actually pronounced in different linguistic environments by native speakers. Perceiving new sounds may be easy for sounds that are very different from the sounds of the native language. For example, if you were learning a language with a click sound, you would be likely to hear it in the new language. If you learned a language with multiple click sounds, the perception task would become more difficult because you would have to distinguish different types of clicks.

But the most challenging perception task in a new language is hearing distinctions that are very similar to, but still different from, sound contrasts in your native language. English speakers learning Spanish, for example, may struggle to hear the difference between Spanish [p] and [b] because English uses different clues to distinguish /p/ and /b/ than those used in Spanish.

Perception training is important because if you can't hear a distinction in the new language, you will never be able to produce it consistently. It is possible to hear distinctions and still not be able to produce it (for example, I still can't trill my /r/ like a Spanish speaker, but I can hear the sound easily). But to have a chance of producing a new sound accurately, you have to be able to hear the sound consistently.

Perception exercises are carefully-designed practice in learning to hear new sound contrasts. Many perception exercises make use of minimal pairs (two words that are distinguished only by a single **sound**, such as *light-right* or *cup-cuff*). Minimal pairs may be spelled similarly or differently. But the two words have all the same sounds except one.

Finally, the minimal pairs should include the sound that is difficult for a learner next to the sound that is easier for the learner. (It makes no sense to use minimal pairs that are not difficult for a learner to distinguish!) The example *cup-cuff* is meant for a learner (e.g., a Korean learner) who has trouble distinguishing /p/ from /f/.

A word about using different voices in perception exercises – There is compelling evidence that using multiple voices in perception exercises is more effective in promoting learning than using one voice. Multiple voices give learners better chances to hear the normal range of variation of speech, and that variation allows learners to create a better internal model of how the sound varies in normal speech.

## Basic perception exercises

Although it is possible to use other types of perception exercises (e.g., dictation or gapped dictation), the exercises below are meant to primarily demonstrate how perception exercises are created and used for vowel and consonants. There is no reason similar exercises cannot be used for prosody in features such as intonation or prominence. The key is to find areas of contrast that are likely to be confused by learners. The ways the following exercises are put together are examples that could be adapted for varied types of contrasts and could be used in a tutoring or a classroom context or for self-study.

The difficult sound in each example exercise is /θ/. The easier sound could be either /s/, /f/ or /t/ because learners from different language backgrounds have different difficulties distinguishing /θ/ from other sounds.

Most perception exercises use minimal pairs (for vowels or consonants) or contrast pairs of sentences that have some kind of minimal contrast. For problematic sound contrasts, you can create your own exercises following the patterns in each exercise. It is also possible to use contrasts that distinguish meaning as perception practice for other pronunciation features,

### 1. **Listening to the target sound** (this can also be used for repetition)

Directions: "Listen to the words I read. What sound do they all have in common?" (Read them with some quickness, then elicit the answer from the learners.)

Think	Birthday	North
Thin	Author	South
Thank	Method	Teeth
Thief	Anything	Fourth
Thumb	Kathy	Bath
Theater		Smith
Thirty		
Thursday		

Reason for exercise: Giving multiple examples of the target sound in a row gives learners a chance to begin to hear the sound. The words here show the /θ/ in different linguistic environments: at the beginning, middle and end of a word. Needs: Around 20 words divided into around 3 groups depending on where the sound occurs.

## 2. Listening to a range of similar sounds

Review of listening practice after a set of front vowels lessons (From A. Baker & S. Goldstein, 1990, *Pronunciation Pairs*. Cambridge University Press)

<u>1: i:</u>	<u>2: I</u>	<u>3: ey</u>	<u>4: ε</u>	<u>5: æ</u>
lead	lid	laid	led	lad
beat	bit	bait	bet	bat
seal	sill	sail	sell	Sal
dean	din	Dane	den	Dan

Reason for exercise: This type of exercise is challenging and is meant to give a picture of the range of similar sounds. In *Pronunciation Pairs*, this is a review exercise after all possible contrasts have been practiced in pairs.

## 3. Listening after being told what to listen for

Directions: Listen to the difference between *can* and *can't*. In normal speech *can* is pronounced /kən/. *Can't* has a different vowel sound, /kæn/. (Often, the /t/ in *can't* is not pronounced, especially if the next word begins with a consonant sound.)

John can go.	John can't go.
Jim can play golf.	Jim can't play golf.
Lisa can swim	Lisa can't swim
Joan can dance.	Joan can't dance.
Ed can cook.	Ed can't cook.
Ann can travel.	Ann can't travel.

## Discriminating minimal pairs

### 4. Same or different?

Directions: I will read two words. Are they the same or are they different?  
You say “same” or “different”.

For example:     sink            think            (“Different”)  
                          thought        thought        (“Same”)

thin/sin	D
faith/faith	S
bath/bath	S
thing/sing	D
force/force	S
(n) use/youth	D
thaw/saw	D
throw/throw	S
three/three	S
some/thumb	D
boat/boat	S
tick/thick	D
math/math	S

Reason for exercise: Same or Different exercises are the easiest of all discrimination exercises and thus a good place to start. Learners usually hear two words in isolation, and simply have to identify whether they are the same. Needs: Around 12 minimal pairs with the sound in varied linguistic environments, at the beginning, middle and end of words..

## 5. Word 1 or Word 2?

Directions: You will hear 2 words. Tell me which one has the /θ/ sound, Word 1 or Word 2. For example:

think	sink	1
moss	moth	2

truth/truce	1
sink/think	2
thin/sin	1
thank/sank	1
sought/thought	2
thick/sick	1
face/faith	2
worth/worse	1
force/forth	2
saw/thaw	2
bath/bass	1
use/youth	2

Reason for exercise: In Word 1/Word 2 exercises, both sounds are always included. Word 1/Word 2 discrimination exercises demand that learners identify the target sound from two choices. Learners usually hear two words in isolation, and have to identify which is the target. Needs: Around 12 minimal pairs.

**6. Which word is different? Word 1, 2, or 3?**

Directions: You will hear three words. One is different from the other two. Tell which word is different, 1, 2, or 3. For example,

fink	think	fink	2
thought	sought	sought	1
thigh	thigh	tie	3

think-sink-think	2
thank- tank-thank	2
sink-think-think	1
mass-mass-math	3
sing-sing-thing	3
worth-worse-worth	2
tenth-tent-tent	1
thin-sin-thin	2
face-faith-face	2
sick-thick-thick	1

Reason for exercise: Which is different? increases the difficulty of discrimination because the learner has to hear which of three choices is different. This kind of task is often used in pronunciation research, where it is call an AXB or ABX task (A is the 1<sup>st</sup> sound, B is the 2<sup>nd</sup> sound, and X is the sound that matches either A or B). Needs: Around 12 minimal pairs.

**7. Yes or No?**

Directions: You will hear a word. Tell me whether it has the /θ/. Say Yes if you hear /θ/ and No if you don't. For example

Mass                      No

Youthful                Yes

sick	N
thin	Y
thank	Y
tick	N
worse	N
math	Y
pat	N
thigh	Y
death	Y
thumb	y
face	N
teeth	Y
sing	N

Reason for exercise: Yes or No perception exercises remove the possibility of comparison. Learners who do not have a solid perceptual category for the target sound will find this type of exercise a guessing game. Although the exercise above is based on minimal pairs, this is not a requirement.

8. Bingo

Directions: Listen to the words that are read aloud. Check the word on your “Bingo” card. When you have five in a row, call out “Bingo”.

th/s bingo

<b>think</b>	<b>useful</b>	<b>wits</b>	<b>sing</b>	<b>thought</b>
<b>theme</b>	<b>mass</b>	<b>thank</b>	<b>thin</b>	<b>Siri</b>
<b>width</b>	<b>sin</b>	<b>BINGO</b>	<b>truce</b>	<b>sink</b>
<b>theory</b>	<b>seem</b>	<b>Norse</b>	<b>sank</b>	<b>youthful</b>
<b>truth</b>	<b>thing</b>	<b>sought</b>	<b>north</b>	<b>math</b>

Reason for exercise: Bingo adds a game-like element to the listening discrimination. The game can be done with the teacher reading, on a recording, or with a student reading.



## 9. Minimal pairs in sentences.

Direction: Circle the word that you hear. Each sentence will be said twice.

1. That's an old *myth* / *mitt*.
2. The story is about *faith* / *fate*.
3. What's wrong with your *tie* / *thigh*?
4. I need a *bath* / *bat*.
5. The *theme* / *team* is old.
6. She *thought* / *taught* for a long time.
7. The child found an old *tin* / *thin* box.
8. The *booth* / *boot* is much too small.
9. Mrs. Jones wants some clothes that are very *youthful* / *useful*.
10. He has quite a strong *faith* / *face*.
11. The researchers want to examine the *theorem* / *serum*.
12. We're waiting for the *truth* / *truce*.
13. The man is *sinking* / *thinking*.
14. The exact *thickness* / *sickness* is unknown.

Reason for exercise: In this exercise, the minimal pairs based on /θ/ and /t/ are embedded in sentences, increasing the amount of spoken language the learners have to contend with. I use a written text that they can see so that they can ask about unfamiliar vocabulary. (Minimal pairs often have at least one word that will be unfamiliar to some learners.) As a modification, learners can do this in pairs with one reading the sentence and the other circling, or they can trade between odd and even items. Needs: at least 10 minimal pairs that are logical or at least possible in the same sentence context. This means the words that are minimal pairs must be in the same word category, that is, they must both be nouns, or they must both be verbs, etc. These pairs are hard to write. If the answer is wrong, either the speaker wasn't making it clear or the listener misheard. The breakdown mimics what actually happens in actual conversation.

## 10. Bowen technique

Directions: One student chooses a sentence from each pair on the left. The second student responds with the best response to the sentence they heard. The first student decides if the response was correct. If not, students discuss what went wrong. After finishing, switch roles and do the sentences again.

Student 1	Student 2
A: I need a <i>bath</i> .	B: How'd you get so dirty?
A: I need a <i>bat</i> .	B: Are you playing baseball?
A: The <i>theme</i> is old.	B: It's part of many stories.
A: The <i>team</i> is old.	B: That's why they lose so often.
A: She <i>thought</i> for a long time.	B: What was she thinking about?
A: She <i>taught</i> for a long time.	B: Is she still teaching?
A: Mrs. Jones wants some clothes that are very <i>youthful</i> .	B: But she's not very young!
A: Mrs. Jones wants some clothes that are very <i>useful</i> .	B: Are they for work or something else?
A: The man is <i>sinking</i> .	B: Help him!
A: The man is <i>thinking</i> .	B: Let him think.
A: The exact <i>thickness</i> is unknown.	B: Can't they measure it?
A: The exact <i>sickness</i> is unknown.	B: How long has he been ill?

Reason for exercise: In the Bowen technique, learners have to negotiate the issues involved in pronouncing correctly versus hearing correctly. Sometimes the wrong response is given because the speaker mispronounced, sometimes because the hearer misperceived, and sometimes for other reason. The best thing about this is that the learners are the ones modeling the pronunciation and confronting whether they hear and produce well enough. The exercise is also quite fun. Needs: As in Perception Exercise 6. You need sentences with minimal pairs where both members of the pair are the same type of word. You also need logical responses that cannot be used for the other statement.

Minimal pairs are meant to show contrasting meanings for vowel and consonant phonemes. However, sometimes other features of pronunciation have contrasts that can use similar exercise formats. The following exercises are from Linda Grant's book *Well Said* (2001, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

11. Word Stress (2001, p. 57, *Well Said*) – This exercise is the beginning of a section calling attention to how stress patterns vary between noun and verb forms (e.g., to print OUT vs. a PRINTout)

### Rule 5-6



Listen to the stress patterns in these two-word phrasal verbs. Which word has stronger stress?

- |           |                        |
|-----------|------------------------|
| print out | print out the document |
| put off   | put off the meeting    |
| brush up  | brush up on my Spanish |

12. The next exercise calls attention to how variations in thought groups (e.g., pausing placement) can change meaning. (from *Well Said*, 2001, p. 116)

### Exercise 7



Listen as your teacher or the speaker on tape reads sentence a or b. Circle the one you hear.

Example: a. Are you bathing children? (One focus word; children are being spoken *about*)

b. Are you bathing, children? (Two focus words; children are being spoken *to*)

1. a. We have to pay John.  
b. We have to pay, John.
2. a. I don't understand Dr. White.  
b. I don't understand, Dr. White.
3. a. Are you hiring Jane?  
b. Are you hiring, Jane?
4. a. I need to see Dr. White.  
b. I need to see, Dr. White.
5. a. I didn't call Lee.  
b. I didn't call, Lee.

13. The last exercise calls attention to the differences between complete intonation (in this exercise, falling intonation) and incomplete intonation (in this case, a half fall) communicate different types of pragmatic meanings (*Well Said*, 2001, p. 123)

### Listening Activity 3



Listen to the half pitch fall marking nonfinal thought groups and the full pitch fall marking final thought groups. Your teacher or the speakers on tape will say the statements and responses below. Circle response *a* if the speaker seems to be finished. Circle response *b* if the speaker seems to have more to say.

1. What did your teacher do after class?
  - a. He passed out.
  - b. He passed out . . . (our exam grades.)
2. Did you register for biology?
  - a. No. I registered for chemistry.
  - b. No. I registered for chemistry . . . (because . . .)
3. What did John say?
  - a. He said / he doesn't like his children.
  - b. He said / he doesn't like his children . . . (going to a school like that.)
4. John has a new part-time job.
  - a. But he doesn't want it.
  - b. But he doesn't want it . . . (to affect his studies.)
5. Could you give me your credit card number please?
  - a. 4307 / 3198 / 4010
  - b. 4307 / 3198 / 4010 . . . (8238)

## Other perception exercises

Minimal pairs are not required for perception exercises, although they are among the most common. Here are some examples of other exercises for perception.

### 14. Repeat the word with a particular sound.

Directions: Listen to the phrase. Repeat the word with /θ/.

The seventh time	Seventh
In sickness and in health	Health
You're right, I think.	Think
He teaches math.	Math
A sore throat.	Throat
The famous author.	Author
South and east.	South
Lightning and thunder.	Thunder

Reason for exercise: This exercise embeds the target and contrast sounds in a phrase that could be said in normal speech. Learners have to say the word with the target sound. They may mispronounce the target sound but still have heard it correctly. This is why the exercise should never use minimal pairs. With minimal pairs, the teacher has no idea whether they heard wrongly or pronounced wrongly. Needs: Phrases that have both sounds that are hard to distinguish. The phrases should sound like natural language, but the phrases should not contain minimal pairs, for example, *The boat belongs to both of us.*

15. **Gapped dictation**

**Directions:** Listen to the dialogue and fill in the missing words.

Jim: Did you hear about Al?

Joe: No. What \_\_\_\_\_ done now?

Jim: He totaled \_\_\_\_\_ car. He ended up in \_\_\_\_\_ hospital.

Joe: The hospital? How bad \_\_\_\_\_?

Jim: How bad? I'm not sure. I think he's \_\_\_\_\_ cast. He might be laid up \_\_\_\_\_ couple \_\_\_\_\_ months.

Reason for exercise: Gapped dictations are meant to call attention to particular features of speech that are targeted and/or are being introduced. In this dialogue, for example, the listening task highlights the deletion of [h] in function words such as *has*, *he*, *him* and in other function words that are reduced in form. These are difficult to hear for learners in normal speech (but are easier to guess with sufficient grammar knowledge). Answers are below.

Jim: Did you hear about Al?

Joe: No. What **has he** done now?

Jim: He totaled **his** car. He ended up in **the** hospital.

Joe: The hospital? How bad **is he**?

Jim: How bad? I'm not sure. I think he's **in a** cast. He might be laid up **for a** couple **of** months.

The next exercises ask learners to listen for the weak forms of function words and for prominent words. Both exercises are from Pronunciation Plus (Hewings & Goldstein, 2001, Cambridge University Press). Both types of perception practice focus on features that learners may not even be aware of in English.

16. **Listening for weak forms** – The most common and frequent words in spoken English are function words. These words have strong forms and weak forms. The weak forms are normal in speech, while the strong forms are rarer and are only used when emphasis is needed. For example, *and* has a strong form [ænd] but its weak form sounds more like [n], as in *bread n' butter*. The mismatch between the spelling and the normal pronunciation means that learners often miss hearing these function words in speech. (Hewings & Goldstein, 2001, p. 75)

1 Some very common words have WEAK forms that are normally used in connected speech. (For more on weak forms, see Unit 28 and Part 7.) Read the sentences and decide what word might be missing from each one.



Listen and write the word you hear.

- |                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Two _____ three.       | 6. It's a container _____ ice cream.    |
| 2. Call _____ ambulance.  | 7. _____ they coming?                   |
| 3. On _____ off.          | 8. Is that a picture _____ your sister? |
| 4. Saturday _____ Sunday. | 9. He wants _____ computer.             |
| 5. Some _____ over here.  | 10. Some _____ already paid.            |

17. **Listening for prominence** – English phrases/sentences have at least one word that is more prominent than the others. This prominence is signaled by a combination of syllable length, pitch changes, and clarity of the vowel and consonant sounds. Learners need to pay attention to these prominent syllables because they carry pragmatic meaning. (Hewings & Goldstein, 2001, p. 89)

In Part 4, you learned about stress in words. In this unit, you will learn about stress in sentences, called PROMINENCE. Words that are prominent are usually the words that the speaker thinks are the most important in the sentence.



1 In these sentences, one word is prominent, or stands out from the rest. Listen and circle the prominent word in each sentence.

- |                       |                              |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. <u>Thank</u> you.  | 6. He's my uncle.            |
| 2. I'm tired.         | 7. He's an accountant.       |
| 3. Chris did.         | 8. It's raining again.       |
| 4. It's getting late. | 9. She's in the living room. |
| 5. I'm sure she will. | 10. She told me about it.    |