



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

The glottal stop

The glottal stop /ʔ/ is a very short closing of the vocal cords, the break you make in the middle of uh-oh. Many British speakers use it instead of /t/ in words like bottle, football and what time. You need to recognise it, but you do not need to copy it.

What to know

What is a glottal stop?

The glottis is the space between your vocal cords. A glottal stop is made when you close them completely for a moment and then let them open. No air escapes during the stop. It is a tiny silence made in the throat, not with the tongue or lips.

Where you hear it in British English

In many British accents, and especially in London and much of England, the sound /t/ is often replaced by a glottal stop when it comes at the end of a word before another consonant, or in the middle of a word before a weak syllable. This is called t-glottalling.

- bottle /'bɒtl/ (careful: with /t/) · bottle ['bɒʔl] (glottal stop)
- football /'fʊtbɔ:l/ (careful: with /t/) · football ['fʊʔbɔ:l] (glottal stop)
- what time /wɒt taɪm/ (careful: with /t/) · what time [wɒʔ taɪm] (glottal stop)

Where you do NOT hear it

A /t/ at the start of a word or at the start of a stressed syllable is almost always a clear /t/: tea, ten, attend, tomorrow. A glottal stop does not replace it there. A /t/ between two vowels in careful speech, as in city or later, is also normally clear, although some accents change it.

Should you use it?

No, you do not need to. For the Speaking test, a clear /t/ is easier for listeners to understand and is always acceptable. Using a glottal stop will not make your English better, and if you use it in the wrong place, it can sound strange.

The other glottal stop: a habit to avoid

Some learners, including Arabic and German speakers, put a glottal stop before every word that starts with a vowel, which can make speech sound choppy: 'an-(stop)-apple', 'I-(stop)-am'. It is better to link the words smoothly: 'an apple' sounds like 'a-napple', and 'I am' sounds like 'I-yam'.

How to make the sound

1. Say 'uh-oh' slowly and notice the catch in your throat between the two sounds.
2. Close your vocal cords and let no air through for a moment, then release them.
3. Compare with /t/: for /t/ the tongue tip touches the ridge behind your teeth and then releases a puff of air.
4. The glottal stop uses no tongue and no lips: it is made only in the throat.

Exercises

1. Where do you make a glottal stop?
 - a. With the tip of the tongue
 - b. In the throat, with the vocal cords
 - c. With the lips
2. In many British accents, the /t/ in *football* may be replaced by _____.
 - a. a glottal stop
 - b. a /k/ sound
3. In which word is a clear /t/ always used?
 - a. bottle
 - b. tea
 - c. not now
4. For an IELTS learner, a clear /t/ in *bottle* is _____.
 - a. a mistake
 - b. fully acceptable
5. How many glottal stops do you make when you say *uh-oh* naturally? Write a number.
6. When is /t/ most often replaced by a glottal stop?
 - a. Before a consonant or at the end of a phrase
 - b. At the start of a word
7. To avoid a glottal stop before a vowel, join the words together: *an apple* is said _____.
 - a. a-napple
 - b. an-(stop)-apple
8. You hear a speaker say: *I'll get back at six*. In casual British speech, which word is most likely to have a glottal stop instead of its final /t/?
 - a. six
 - b. get
 - c. back
9. Which symbol is used for the glottal stop?
 - a. /θ/
 - b. /ʃ/
 - c. /ʔ/
10. A speaker says *wo-(stop)-uh*. The (stop) is a glottal stop that replaces a /t/, and the first sound is /wɔ:/, as in *door*. Which word do they mean?
 - a. water
 - b. waiter
 - c. warmer

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/glottal-stop/practice/

IELTS tip. The IELTS Listening test uses a range of English accents, so you may hear t-glottalling. When a word seems to have a missing t, think of the whole word and use the topic. In your own Speaking test, a clear /t/ is always a safe choice.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

The glottal stop

AIM	Learners recognise t-glottalling when they hear it, and know that a clear /t/ is always acceptable in their own speech.
TIME	15 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Ask learners to say 'uh-oh' and find where the catch is. Introduce the name: the glottal stop.

Lesson steps

1. Show bottle, football and what time with a /t/ and with a glottal stop. Learners tap when they hear the stop.
2. Play a short British radio clip and ask learners to note down words with a missing t.
3. Contrast with positions where /t/ is always clear: tea, ten, attend.
4. Learners rewrite five glottalised words in standard spelling to practise recognition.

Extension

Compare a London speaker and a speaker from another part of Britain in a short clip. Which of them glottalises, and where?

Answer key

1. b) In the throat, with the vocal cords. A glottal stop is made by closing the vocal cords. It uses no tongue and no lips.
2. a) a glottal stop. Before the consonant /b/, the /t/ in *football* is often replaced by a glottal stop: ['fʊʔbɔ:l].
3. b) tea. A /t/ at the start of a word is a clear /t/. The other two are places where many speakers use a glottal stop.
4. b) fully acceptable. Careful speakers use /t/ there too. You do not have to copy the glottal stop.
5. 1. There is one catch in the throat, between *uh* and *oh*.
6. a) Before a consonant or at the end of a phrase. T-glottalling happens before a consonant, as in *what time*, and not at the start of a word.
7. a) a-napple. The n of *an* links to the vowel of *apple*, so the phrase sounds like one word.
8. b) get. *Get* ends in /t/ and comes before the consonant /b/, a typical place for a glottal stop. *Back* ends in /k/ and *six* ends in /ks/, so neither has a /t/ to replace.

9. c) /ʔ/. The glottal stop is written /ʔ/, like a question mark without the dot. /ʃ/ is the sound in *she* and /θ/ is the sound in *think*.
10. a) water. *Water* is /'wɔ:tə/, so the stop replaces its /t/. *Waiter* starts with the vowel /eɪ/, and *warmer* has an /m/, not a /t/.

Questions learners often ask

What is a glottal stop? It is a short closing of the vocal cords, written /ʔ/, as in the middle of uh-oh.

Do all British people use a glottal stop? No. It is common in many accents, but speakers differ, and most use a clear /t/ in careful speech.

Is it wrong to say /t/ in bottle? No. A clear /t/ is correct and easy to understand.

Is the glottal stop in the phonemic chart? No. It is not one of the 44 sounds, because it replaces /t/ rather than being a separate sound that changes meaning.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruttenden, A. (2014). *Gimson's Pronunciation of English* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Wells, J. C. (1982). *Accents of English* (vol. 1: An Introduction). Cambridge University Press.

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