

FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

How to improve pronunciation

You improve pronunciation with short, regular practice that changes how your mouth moves, not with long sessions once a week. A good daily routine takes ten minutes: warm up, one target sound, shadowing a short clip, checking word stress, and recording yourself. Focus first on what makes you hard to understand.

What to know

Short daily practice works best

Pronunciation is a physical skill, like playing an instrument. Your tongue, lips and breath must learn new movements, and that takes many small repetitions. Ten minutes every day is better than one long session each week, because your muscles and your ears need regular practice to keep what they have learned.

Decide what to practise first

You cannot fix everything at once, and you do not need to. The aim is to be easy to understand, not to sound like a native speaker. Researchers who study this idea, such as Jenkins (2000) and Munro and Derwing (2006), suggest that some errors cause far more confusion than others. Errors that make two common words sound the same matter most, and Field (2005) found that a wrong stress pattern can make listeners hear a different word.

The 10-minute routine

You need a phone with a recorder, a short audio clip with a transcript, and a dictionary with audio. Set a timer for each step.

- Minute 1, warm up: read a minimal pair aloud, such as ship and sheep, or light and right. Exaggerate the mouth movements.
- Minutes 2 and 3, one target sound: use the mouth steps for your sound from this site, say five words, then say them in a short sentence.
- Minutes 4 to 6, shadowing: play a clip of 20 to 30 seconds and speak with it, a fraction of a second behind. Copy the rhythm and the stress, not only the sounds.
- Minutes 7 and 8, word stress: look up five new words in a dictionary with audio, mark the strong syllable and say each word three times.
- Minutes 9 and 10, record and compare: say one answer to a Part 1 question, play it back and change one thing the next day.

How to shadow

Shadowing means speaking just after a model speaker, like a shadow. First listen to the clip once and read the transcript. Then play it again and speak along, copying the rhythm and the pitch, not only the words. Do not try to be perfect on the first attempt.

How to check your own voice

Recording is the part that most learners skip, and it is the most useful. Your mouth feels different from the sound that other people hear. When you listen to a recording, you hear what a listener hears.

- Record the same answer on day 1 and day 7 and compare the two.
- Mark three words you want to improve and look them up in a dictionary.
- Ask a friend or teacher which word they could not understand, then practise that word.

Exercises

1. Which is the better plan?
 - a. Ten minutes every day
 - b. Two hours once a month
2. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): just after / speaker. / Shadowing / means / speaking / to / a / model
3. Which syllable is stressed in **routine**? rou · tine
4. What should you practise first?
 - a. The rarest sounds in English
 - b. Sounds and stress that make you hard to understand
5. How many minutes does the whole daily routine take? Write a number.
6. When you record yourself and listen back, change _____ at a time.
 - a. one thing
 - b. five things
7. Which step takes the most time in the routine?
 - a. Shadowing
 - b. The stress check
 - c. The warm up
8. Which word is stressed on the second syllable?
 - a. routine
 - b. listen
 - c. practice
9. Which stress pattern is natural? *I practise before breakfast.*
 - a. I prac **TISE BE** fore break **FAST**
 - b. I **PRAC** tise be fore **BREAK** fast

Listening items (1) are online only and are not included in this list.

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/how-to-improve-pronunciation/practice/

IELTS tip. Pronunciation is one of the four criteria in the Speaking test, so it deserves a regular place in your study plan. Record yourself answering Part 1 questions about your hometown, work and study, and listen for the sounds and the stress you have been practising. Clear, steady speech is easier for a listener to follow than fast speech.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

How to improve pronunciation

AIM	Learners build a realistic ten-minute daily pronunciation routine based on their own priorities.
TIME	25 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 which words people often ask them to repeat. Write three on the board.

Lesson steps

1. Show the five-part routine and time each part with a visible timer.
2. Model shadowing with a 20-second clip. Learners then shadow in pairs and give one comment.
3. Learners record a 30-second answer and choose one feature to change.
4. Each learner writes their own plan: the sound, the clip and the time of day.

Extension

Learners keep a weekly log and compare their first and last recordings after a few weeks of practice.

Answer key

1. a) Ten minutes every day. Pronunciation is a physical habit. Short, regular practice builds it better than a long session that is rarely repeated.
2. Shadowing means speaking just after a model speaker. Shadowing means speaking just after a model speaker, like a shadow following you.
3. rou**TINE**. rou-**TINE**. The strong syllable is the second one, and it rhymes with *seen*.
4. b) Sounds and stress that make you hard to understand. Start with the errors that change the meaning or make a listener work hard. Rare sounds can wait.
5. 10. The steps are 1 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 minutes, which makes ten.
6. a) one thing. Changing one thing at a time is easier to control and lets you hear what worked.
7. a) Shadowing. Shadowing takes three minutes. The warm up takes one and the stress check takes two.
8. a) routine. *Routine* is rou-**TINE**. *Practice* and *listen* are both stressed on the first syllable.
9. b) I **PRAC**tise be fore **BREAK** fast. The strong syllables are **PRAC** and **BREAK**. *I* and *before* are small words and stay weak.

Questions learners often ask

How long does it take to improve pronunciation? It depends on the person, but regular short practice is more effective than occasional long practice. Notice small changes from week to week.

Can I improve my pronunciation without a teacher? Yes. A model to copy, a recorder and a dictionary with audio let you work alone, although a teacher can tell you what to focus on.

Should I try to lose my accent? No. The aim is to be clear and easy to understand. Your accent can stay, as long as the sounds, stress and rhythm are clear.

What is shadowing? Speaking along with a recording just after the speaker, copying the rhythm, stress and pitch.

Sources

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- Field, J. (2005). Intelligibility and the listener: the role of lexical stress. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 399-423.
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