



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Tongue twisters

Tongue twisters are short phrases that repeat similar sounds, so they make your mouth practise one difficult contrast again and again. They help most when you choose a twister for the sound you need, start slowly and clearly, and speed up only while every sound stays accurate.

What to know

Why tongue twisters help

A tongue twister puts the same sounds close together. Normal speech spreads a hard sound across many words, so you meet it only now and then. A twister gives you ten chances in one sentence. That is why it is a good exercise for the muscles of your tongue, lips and jaw, and for your ears.

How to practise a tongue twister

Choose one for the sound you want to improve. Read it, then say it very slowly, and check each hard sound against the mouth steps. Say it three times slowly, then a little faster, and stop when you start to make mistakes.

- Say it slowly three times, with every sound clear.
- Say it at a medium speed three times.
- Say it at normal speed once. If you make a mistake, slow down.
- Record yourself and listen for the target sound.
- Finish by saying a normal sentence with the same sound.

s and sh

For /s/ the tongue tip is close to the ridge behind your top teeth and your lips are spread. For /ʃ/ the tongue is a little further back and your lips are rounded.

- Sam's short shop sells six shiny shirts.
- The shy sailor shared his sandwich on the sunny shore.
- Sue sees seven sheep sitting on the ship's steps.

th, t and s

For /θ/ and /ð/ touch the back of your top front teeth with the tip of your tongue. Blow air for /θ/ and add voice for /ð/. Do not turn them into /s/ or /t/.

- Beth thanked three thin thieves.
- That brother of theirs gathers these other feathers.
- Thirty thoughtful thinkers thought through the third theory.

r and l

For /r/ the tongue is pulled back and up, with the tip near the roof of the mouth but not touching it. For /l/ the tongue tip touches the ridge behind your top teeth. Check that the tip touches for l and does not touch for r.

- Larry's lorry rolled lazily along the long, rainy road.

- Red lorry, yellow lorry. (traditional)
- Round the rugged rock the ragged rascal ran. (traditional)

How to make the sound

1. For /s/: tongue tip near the ridge, lips spread, air hissing.
2. For /ʃ/: pull the tongue back a little and round your lips, like asking someone to be quiet.
3. For /r/: pull the tongue back and up, and keep the tip from touching the roof of your mouth.
4. For /l/: touch the tongue tip to the ridge behind your top teeth and let the voice pass round it.

Exercises

1. Which sound do you train in *Bob's big brown bag*?
 - a. /v/
 - b. /p/
 - c. /b/
2. Which pair of sounds does *Sam's short shop sells six shiny shirts* train?
 - a. /r/ and /l/
 - b. /s/ and /ʃ/
 - c. /θ/ and /ð/
3. When you practise a tongue twister, start _____.
 - a. slowly and clearly
 - b. as fast as you can
4. Complete the traditional twister: *Red lorry, yellow ___*
5. Which sound is repeated in *Beth thanked three thin thieves*?
 - a. /ð/
 - b. /s/
 - c. /θ/
6. Why do tongue twisters help pronunciation?
 - a. They repeat one sound, so you notice and practise it
 - b. They teach grammar
7. In *Harry helps his happy horse hop home*, which sound is made by pushing soft air from the throat?
 - a. /r/
 - b. /h/
 - c. /p/

Listening items (3) 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/tongue-twisters/practice/

IELTS tip. Do not use tongue twisters in the test. Use them in practice to train a sound, then say a normal sentence with the same sound. Aim for clear sounds at a steady speed in your Part 2 answer: fast speech is not the goal.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Tongue twisters

AIM	Learners use tongue twisters as a short, accuracy-first drill for one target sound.
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 'red lorry, yellow lorry' three times fast. Discuss why it is hard.

Lesson steps

1. Select a sound that the class finds hard and teach the mouth steps for it.
2. Model the twister slowly. Learners repeat line by line with exaggerated mouth movements.
3. Pairs practise with a speed ladder: slow, medium, normal. The partner counts clear sounds and gives one comment.
4. Learners write their own short twister for the sound, using words from their topics.

Extension

Learners record their own twister at normal speed and select the best attempt for a class listening round.

Answer key

1. c) /b/. Every word starts with /b/, a voiced sound made by closing the lips.
2. b) /s/ and /ʃ/. The words alternate between /s/ (Sam's, sells, six) and /ʃ/ (short, shop, shiny, shirts).
3. a) slowly and clearly. Accuracy comes first. Speed will follow when the sounds are right.
4. lorry. The traditional twister is *Red lorry, yellow lorry*. It trains /r/, /l/ and /j/.
5. c) /θ/. Beth, thanked, three, thin and thieves all start or end with the voiceless /θ/, with the tongue tip touching the back of the top teeth.
6. a) They repeat one sound, so you notice and practise it. A twister repeats the same sounds, which gives your mouth and ears focused practice.
7. b) /h/. /h/ is a breath of air from the throat with no tongue or lip movement.

Questions learners often ask

Do tongue twisters improve pronunciation? They give focused practice on one sound or contrast, so they help when you choose the right twister and keep the sounds accurate.

Should I say tongue twisters fast? No. Start slowly. Speed is useful only if every sound stays clear.

Which tongue twister should I choose? Choose one for the sound you find hardest, such as r and l, th or v and w, and learn the mouth steps for it first.

Are tongue twisters used in IELTS? No. They are a training tool only. Use them to practise a sound and then say a normal sentence with the same sound.

Sources

- Roach, P. (2009). English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Levis, J. (2018). Intelligibility, Oral Communication, and the Teaching of Pronunciation. Cambridge University Press.

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