



FREE RESOURCE · PRONUNCIATION

Voiced and voiceless sounds

Voiced sounds use your vocal cords, so your throat vibrates, as in /b/, /d/, /z/ and /v/.

Voiceless sounds use only air, as in /p/, /t/, /s/ and /f/. Many English consonants come in pairs that differ only in voice, so the difference changes words such as bag and back.

What to know

What voice means

When you speak, the vocal cords in your throat can vibrate or stay still. If they vibrate, the sound is voiced. If they stay still and only air passes, the sound is voiceless.

The pairs

Most English consonants that use a stream of air or a sudden release come in pairs. The mouth movement is the same inside each pair. The voiceless sound comes first below.

- /p/ and /b/: pan and ban.
- /t/ and /d/: tie and die.
- /k/ and /g/: cap and gap.
- /f/ and /v/: fan and van.
- /s/ and /z/: sip and zip.

Other sounds are voiced too

All vowels are voiced. So are the nasal sounds /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/, and /l/, /r/, /w/ and /j/ (the first sound in yes). The sound /h/ is voiceless. This means that when you say a whole sentence, your voice is on almost all the time and goes off only for the voiceless consonants.

Why this changes meaning

A voice difference can turn one word into another. Pan becomes ban, tie becomes die, and back becomes bag. At the end of a word, the voice difference is also shown by the length of the vowel before it. The vowel is longer before a voiced consonant: the vowel in bad is longer than in bat, and the vowel in seed is longer than in seat. English listeners use this length to decide which word they heard.

Voice in word endings: -s and -ed

The endings -s and -ed are said in three ways, and voice decides which. After a voiceless sound the ending is voiceless. After a voiced sound it is voiced. This is natural, because a quick change in voice is hard to do.

How to make the sound

1. Put two fingers on your throat. Say 'sss': no buzz. Say 'zzz': buzz.
2. For /p/ and /b/, close your lips. For /p/ release a puff of air; for /b/ keep your voice on and open the lips softly.
3. Say the pairs in a row: p-b, t-d, k-g, f-v, s-z. Feel the buzz come and go.
4. Check the vowel before a final consonant: make it longer before the voiced one.

Exercises

1. Which sound is voiced?
 - a. /f/
 - b. /z/
 - c. /s/
2. Which verb ends with a /t/ sound?
 - a. played
 - b. worked
 - c. wanted
3. Which plural ends with a /z/ sound?
 - a. cats
 - b. buses
 - c. dogs
4. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) To check voice, (2) put your fingers on your throat. (3) A voiceless sound (4) makes a strong buzz.
5. Write the word that has the same sounds as *back*, but ends with the voiced /g/.
6. A vowel is longer before a _____ consonant.
 - a. voiced
 - b. voiceless

Listening items (4) 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/voiced-and-voiceless-sounds/practice/

IELTS tip. In the Speaking test, wrong voicing can turn a word into another, such as bag into back or leave into leaf. The -s and -ed endings also show voice. Choose five verbs in the past tense from your own topics, such as worked, played, wanted, helped and lived, and read them aloud to check the ending each time.

FOR TEACHERS · PRONUNCIATION

Voiced and voiceless sounds

AIM	Learners will feel and hear the difference between voiced and voiceless consonants and use it to say pairs, -s endings and -ed endings correctly.
TIME	30 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 'sss' and 'zzz' with their fingers on their throats and describe the difference.

Lesson steps

1. Present the eight pairs on the board in two columns. Learners say each pair and check the buzz.
2. Listening: say words at random and learners choose the voiced or voiceless word on cards.
3. Teach the -s and -ed rules with a sorting activity: learners place verbs and plural nouns into /t/, /d/, /ɪd/ or /s/, /z/, /ɪz/ columns.
4. Practise in sentences and then record a short Part 1 answer to check endings.

Extension

Add the vowel length effect before voiced and voiceless endings, using bad/bat and seed/seat.

Answer key

1. b) /z/. /z/ is the voiced partner of /s/. You can feel a buzz in your throat when you say it. /s/ and /f/ are voiceless.
2. b) worked. Worked ends in /t/ after the voiceless /k/. Played ends in /d/ and wanted ends in /ɪd/.
3. c) dogs. Dogs ends in /z/ after the voiced /g/. Cats ends in /s/, and buses ends in /ɪz/.
4. Part 4: *makes a strong buzz*. → **makes no buzz**. Voiceless sounds use only air, so there is no buzz. Voiced sounds make the buzz.
5. bag. Bag is /bæg/. Back ends in voiceless /k/.
6. a) voiced. The vowel in bad or seed is longer than in bat or seat, because the final consonant is voiced.

Questions learners often ask

What are voiced and voiceless sounds? Voiced sounds use the vocal cords, so the throat vibrates, as in /b/ and /z/. Voiceless sounds use only air, as in /p/ and /s/.

How can I tell if a sound is voiced? Put your fingers on your throat. If you feel a buzz, the sound is voiced. You can also cover your ears and listen for the buzz in your head.

Are all vowels voiced? Yes. All English vowels are voiced. Some consonants are voiced and some are voiceless, and many come in pairs.

Why does the -ed ending sound different in different verbs? It follows the voice of the sound before it. After a voiceless sound it is /t/, after a voiced sound it is /d/, and after /t/ or /d/ it is /ɪd/.

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.

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