

The consonants

Plosives

Perhaps plosives are the easiest sounds to teach and learn in an English-Spanish 2LL course. Plosives are defined as consonant sounds which involve, first, a stricture of the mouth that allows no air to escape from the vocal tract and, second, the compression and release of the air. So, there are four phases in the production of plosives: closure, hold, release and post-release.

English has six plosive consonants, p, t, k, b, d, g. /p/ and /b/ are bilabial, that is, the lips are pressed together. /t/ and /d/ are alveolar, so the tongue is pressed against the alveolar ridge. /k/ and /g/ are velar; the back of the tongue is pressed against an intermediate area between the hard and the soft palate.

/p/, /t/ and /k/ are voiceless. /b/, /d/ and /g/ are normally voiced. The release of the voiceless plosives is followed by audible plosion and, in the post-release phase, by an aspiration. So, the most noticeable difference between the voiceless and the voiced plosives is this aspiration. In VC position, the vowels preceding the voiceless plosives are much shorter.

Place of articulation			
	bilabial	alveolar	Velar
Voiceless	p	t	K
Voiced	b	d	G

Fricatives and Affricates

Fricatives are characterised by a “hissing” sound which is produced by the air escaping through a small passage in the mouth. Affricates begin as plosives and end as fricatives. These are homorganic sounds, that is, the same articulator produces both sound, the plosive and the fricative.

Place of articulation					
	labiodental	dental	alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Glottal
Voiceless	F	θ	s	ʃ	h
Voiced	V	ð	z	ʒ	

Fricatives

Voiceless fricatives have the effect of shortening the preceding vowel, in the same way as voiceless plosives.

Place of articulation	
	Palato-alveolar
Voiceless	tʃ
Voiced	dʒ

Affricates

Nasals

The basic feature of a nasal is that the air escapes through the nose and the main difference between the three types of nasals is the point where the air is stopped in the mouth. In this sense, there are three types of nasals: bilabial /m/, alveolar /n/ and velar /ŋ/. This last velar sound never occurs in initial position; in medial position, it may appear with or without a /g/ sound, depending on whether it occurs at the end of a morpheme or not. If it occurs in the middle of a morpheme it has a following /g/. In final position the preceding rule is observed.

	Nasals
Bilabial	m
Alveolar	n
Velar	ŋ

Lateral //

A lateral consonant is one in which air escapes from the mouth along the sides of the tongue. The only additional information about the lateral // is the existence of a clear // at initial position and a dark //, when it is final or medial preceding a consonant. The dark // is similar to an /u/ vowel.

Approximant /r/

The approximant /r/ is produced by the tip of the tongue approaching the alveolar area but it never touches it. Besides, the tongue is slightly curled backwards with the tip raised (this is called to be “retroflex”).

In RP this sound only occurs before vowels. However, many accents of English do pronounce /r/ after vowels. This is the difference between non-rhotic and rhotic accents.

/j/ and /w/

These two sounds are phonetically vowels but phonologically consonants. That is, phonetically they are pronounced as /i:/ and /u:/ but a little bit shorter. But, then, they only occur before vowel phonemes.