

Unit 1: Introduction to English Sounds

ESL Phonetics & Pronunciation

Unit Goal

By the end of this unit, you will understand how English sounds work and why pronunciation is not the same as spelling. You will begin training your ear to hear sounds instead of letters.

Key Idea

English is a sound-based language, not a spelling-based language. To speak clearly, we must focus on sounds, not letters.

Lesson 1.1 – Sounds vs Letters

Letters are written symbols. Sounds are what we say and hear. English has 26 letters but about 44 sounds. This is why spelling is not a reliable guide for pronunciation.

Lesson 1.2 – What Is Phonetics?

Phonetics is the study of how sounds are made and heard. In this course, phonetics helps you understand pronunciation patterns and improve clarity. The goal is clear, understandable English—not accent elimination.

Lesson 1.3 – English Sound Categories

- Consonant sounds: air is blocked or controlled (b, t, s, f, r)
- Vowel sounds: air flows freely (many more sounds than vowel letters)

Lesson 1.4 – Listening Awareness

English learners often hear two different sounds as the same. Training your ear is an important step in pronunciation improvement.

- ship / sheep
- bit / beat
- fan / van
- rice / lice

Lesson 1.5 – Why Pronunciation Matters

- People understand you more easily
- You repeat yourself less
- You feel more confident speaking
- Your listening skills improve

Practice & Reflection

- Listen to English audio and notice sounds that do not match spelling
- Write or say which English words are difficult for you to pronounce
- Think about how spelling has confused your pronunciation before

Unit 1 Check

- Understand the difference between sounds and letters
- Know why English spelling is confusing
- Listen more carefully to pronunciation
- Feel ready to learn IPA in Unit 2