

Steve Norman offers some fun activities to overcome the most problematic words.

My 100 most mispronounced words in English

During an in-company oral exam recently, Jaume told me about his job in quality control. I didn't understand. His grammar was good; he used the correct vocabulary; but he stressed the first syllable in 'control' instead of the second. Since the majority of two-syllable words are stressed on the first syllable, he had made an intelligent guess, but he was still wrong and the mistake caused a breakdown in communication.

Mispronunciation of individual sounds can also obscure successful interaction – how often do you hear students pronounce 'parents' as if it rhymes with 'currants', for example? And silent letters, such as the 'l' in 'should', 'could' and 'would', can be another source of confusion.

Looking through my 'error feedback notes', dating back many years, I put together a list of 100 words that Spanish and Catalan speakers tend to mispronounce. I then asked colleagues to do the same, and they came up with very similar lists.

The list

There are various things we can do to help students pronounce problem words correctly – break words into separate syllables, teach the stress pattern of new words as a matter of course, and draw students' attention to silent letters.

Most importantly, though, I make students aware of potential problems. Every student has a copy of 'the list' and it is displayed prominently on the classroom wall. We take five minutes in each lesson to use it for pronunciation practice – and it helps with meaning too!

You may like to formulate your own list of words (or use mine) and try some of the following activities with your own classes. After a remarkably short time, you might find that you're having to create a whole new list.

The activities

- **Personal lists** Before giving students the list, ask them to write down any words they think they mispronounce. They look at the list to see if their words are on it.
- **Decoding** Give students the phonemic transcriptions of the words. They write in the correct spelling. It doesn't matter if they don't know all the symbols. They'll be able to guess a lot of them.
- **Noughts and crosses** Students work in groups of three. Two of the students compete against each other and the third is the 'question person' to ask relevant questions and judge the answer.

What's the silent letter?	How many syllables?	Where's the stress?
Say the word	True or false?	Find the rhyming words
Is the phonemic transcription correct?	Give a definition	Spell the word

- **Define the word** In pairs, A defines a word from the list. B says the word. A accepts or rejects B's pronunciation.
- **Stories** In pairs, A makes up a short story using five of the words. B listens and writes down the five words.
- **Three words** Drill three consecutive words from the list. Students repeat them all at once from memory.
- **Tapping** In pairs, A taps a stress pattern. B identifies any words with the pattern.

- **All in a line** Choose a word from the list. Students get into groups corresponding to the number of syllables in the word. If the word is 'afternoon', for example, students get into groups of three, and then line up facing the teacher. Each student is responsible for saying a different syllable in the word and those responsible for the stressed syllable have their hands in the air. The students say the word with the correct stress. The group who says it best gets a point.

- **Mouthing** Mouth a word from the list silently. Students identify the word. Then students in pairs mouth other words from the list to each other. This is particularly useful for students who tend to speak like ventriloquists, without moving their lips.

- **First one to find ...** Each student has a copy of the list. Say something like, 'First one to find a word with three syllables with the stress on the third syllable'. The first student to call out the word gets the point. Students can also play the game in groups, taking turns to define the word for their colleagues.

- **What's under the pencil?** In pairs, A covers one of the words in the list with a pencil. B tries to remember which one it is. (The words are in alphabetical order). A accepts or rejects B's pronunciation.

- **Single syllables** In pairs, A says a syllable from a word. B identifies the word.

- **Circle the word** Use an overhead projector to project the words onto the board. Students are divided into two or three teams, each with a different colour board pen. The teacher says, for example, 'a word with a silent b'. The first person in each team runs to the board and the first person to circle the word gets a point for the team. A variation is that non-competing students call out words for the competing teams to circle.



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MY 100 MOST MISPRONOUNCED WORDS IN ENGLISH

	favourite	'feiv ri:t	photographer	fə 'tə grə fə	
	foreign	'fo rən	picture	'pɪk tʃə	
afternoon	ɑ:f tə 'nu:n	Friday	'fraɪ deɪ	police	pə 'li:s
although	ɔ:l 'ðəʊ	friend	frend	politician	pəl ɪ 'tɪʃən
answer	'ɑ:n sə	furniture	'fɜ:nɪ tʃə	quiet	'kwəɪ jət
anybody	'en i: bə di:	guarantee	gə rən 'ti:	rarely	'reə li:
architecture	'ɑ: kɪ tek tʃə	guitar	ɡɪ 'tɑ:	Russia	'rʌʃə
aren't	ɑ:nt	hair	heə	sentences	'sen tən sɪz
Asia	'eɪ zə	half	hɑ:f	science	'saɪ jəns
Australia	os 'treɪ lɪ:ʃə	headache	'he deɪk	serious	'sɪə ri: jəs
being	'bi: ɪŋ	heart	hɑ:t	should	ʃʊd
biology	bai 'o lə dʒi:	height	haɪt	since	sɪns
birthday	'bɜ:θ deɪ	hotel	həʊ 'tel	sixth	sɪksθ
biscuits	'bɪs kɪts	image	'ɪm ɪdʒ	skirt	skɜ:t
bookcase	'bʊ keɪs	independent	ɪn dɪ 'pen dənt	society	sə 'saɪ jə ti:
Brazil	brə 'zɪl	interesting	'ɪn tres tɪŋ	sometimes	'sʌm taɪmz
building	'bɪl dɪŋ	island	'aɪ lənd	south	sauθ
busy	'bi: zɪ:	Japan	dʒə 'pæn	suit	su:t
castle	'kɑ: səl	key	ki:	supermarket	'su: pə mɑ: kɪt
comfortable	'kʌmf tə bəl	killed	kɪld	talk	tɔ:k
communication	'kə mjʊ: nɪ 'keɪʃən	language	'læŋ gwɪdʒ	temperature	'tem pərɪ tʃə
component	kəm 'pəʊ nənt	laugh	lɑ:f	these	ði:z
cupboard	'kʌ bəd	literature	'lɪt ərɪ tʃə	thirsty	'θɜ:s ti:
dangerous	'deɪn dʒə rəs	manufacture	mæ nʃu: 'fæk tʃə	Thursday	'θɜ:z deɪ
daughter	'dɔ: tə	many	'me ni:	Tuesday	'tʃu:z deɪ
depends	dɪ 'penz	minute	'mɪn ɪt	understand	ʌn də 'stænd
dining room	'daɪ nɪŋ ru:m	month	mʌnθ	usually	'ju: zə li:
early	'ɜ: li:	mountain	'maʊn tɪn	vegetable	'vedʒ tə bəl
Egyptian	ɪ 'dʒɪp jən	museum	mju: 'zi: jəm	village	'vɪ lɪdʒ
electrician	ɪ lek 'trɪ jən	occasionally	ə 'keɪ zən li:	we're	wɪə
engineer	en dʒɪn 'ɪə	once	wʌns	weren't	wɜ:nt
equipment	ɪ 'kwɪp mənt	opposites	'o pə zɪts	woman	'wʊ mən
everybody	'ev ri: bə di:	oranges	'o rɪn dʒɪz	women	'wɪ mɪn
famous	'feɪ məs	parents	'peə rənts	would	wʊd