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**Course title:** English consonants

**The definition of consonants:**

Consonants are sounds made with partial or full constriction made by articulators at some level in the vocal tract during their production. Unlike vowels which are characterized with tongue-height, frontness/backness and lip position, consonants are described and classified on the basis of three aspects:

1. **Place of Articulation:** it refers to the point where the constriction occurs (as two speech organs come close to each other to form this constriction). Following the place articulation, the 24 English consonants are classified into eight types:

**-Bilabial:** the lips are pressed together: /p/, /b/, /m/, /w/.

**-Labio-dental**: the lower lip is in contact with the upper teeth: /f/, /v/

**-Dental:** the tip of the tongue is raised against the upper teeth: /Ɵ/, /ð/

**-Alveolar:** the tip of the tongue is raised against the alveolar ridge: /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /n/, /l/.

**- Palato-alveolar**: the front of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge and the front of the hard palate: /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /r/.

**- Palatal**: the front of the tongue is raised against the hard palate: /j/

**- Velar**: the back of the tongue is in contact with the soft palate (velum): /k/, /g/, /ŋ/.

**- Glottal**: constriction behind the glottis (opening between the vocal cords): /h/, plus the glottal stop [Ɂ] as an allophonic realization.

**2. Manner of Articulation**: it refers to the manner of constriction (i.e., whether there is a complete or a slight closure of the air passage). In other words, it is the way in which consonants are produced. Taking this aspect into consideration, the English consonants are classified into six types:

**- Plosives** (also called stops): they are sounds produced with a complete closure of the airstream behind the glottis, then a sudden release of air with a plosion: /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/.

**- Fricatives**: they are sounds produced with a partial blocking of air, as it continues to flow through a narrow passage between the articulators making an audible kind of friction: /f/, /v/, /Ɵ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/,/ʃ/, /ʒ/, /h/

**- Affricates**: just like plosives, the air is blocked at the beginning of their production, then, like fricatives, they are released with friction through a narrow passage; there are two affricates in English: /tʃ/ and /dʒ/.

**- Nasals**: these sounds are particular because during their production, the air escapes through the nasal cavity and nostrils while the velum is lowered, and there is a complete closure in the oral cavity: /m/, /n/, /ŋ/.

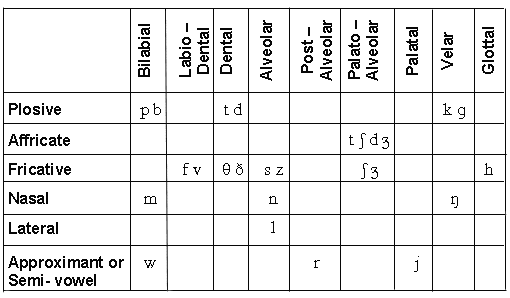
**-Lateral**: in English there is only one lateral sound /l/. It is called so, because during its production the air does not flow the usual way along the tongue as for other consonants, but through the two sides of the tongue which are pulled down while the tip of the tongue is against the alveolar ridge.

**- Approximants**: during the production of these sounds, the articulators approach each other without making a real contact, allowing the air to pass without a real constriction: /w/, /j/, /r/.

**3. Voicing:** this aspect denotes whether the sound is voiced or voiceless. The quality of voicing is the result of the different positions the vocal cords take when articulating sounds. a- When they are wide apart without any vibration, the sounds produced are voiceless. English has the following voiceless sounds: /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, /Ɵ/, /s/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/. b- When the space between the vocal cords is narrowed, the result is the voiceless fricative sound /h/. c-When there is a rapid closing and opening of the vocal cords, the air passing through the glottis causes vibration and the sounds produced are voiced. Besides the English vowel sounds which are all voiced, the voiced consonants are: /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /z/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, /m, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /w/, /j/, /r/.

The following table summarizes the classification of the English consonant sounds on the basis of the three aforementioned aspects.

**Table 1.1** The English consonants



\* The glottal stop [Ɂ] only occurs as an onset to vowels, as in [(Ɂ)ǝʊld], or as an allophonic realisation of /p, t, k/ in certain phonetic contexts or certain dialects, e.g., [ˋpʰɪɁtʃə] instead of [ˋpʰɪktʃə].

**Differentiation between Vowels and Consonants**

Given the different nature of these two speech sound classes, vowels and consonants are described in different terms: 1. Vowels are described in terms of tongue position > close/open, front/back, length and lip position, e.g. /i:/ is a long close/front vowel with rounded lips. 2. Consonants are described in terms of articulation > place and manner + voicing, e.g. /m/ is a voiced bilabial nasal consonant. 3. Another distinction is in the passage of air: during the production of vowels, there is no real obstruction to the flow of air from the glottis to the outside; but in consonantal production, the speech organs make an obstruction to the flow of air which can be partial, as in fricatives like /s/, or total in plosives like /b/. However, in the case of /h/ and /w/ (traditionally regarded as semivowels), it is their consonantal distribution which classifies them as 9 consonants. Roach (1991: 51) says that “phonetically h is a voiceless vowel with the quality of the voiced sound that follows it.” But phonologically, it is a consonant as it is followed by a vowel as in ‘head’ or ‘ahead’.