

EAL &amp; NEW ARRIVALS · GRADES 1–6

# Pronunciation Challenges

Common patterns by first language

## Why this matters

Knowing what to expect changes how you respond. A Polish-speaking child saying 'sip' for 'ship' is not making a random mistake — it's a predictable pattern. Knowing the pattern means you can teach it explicitly. A few important points:

- These are tendencies, not rules. Every child is different.
- Accent is not a problem. Mispronunciation that affects communication might be.
- Don't make children feel ashamed of accent. Model the correct sound, but accept their voice.

## Spanish-speaking children

Common pattern	Why
'sh' merging with 's' (sip/ship)	/ʃ/ doesn't exist in Spanish
Adding 'e' before 's' clusters ('eschool' for 'school')	Spanish doesn't start words with sp/st/sc
'b' and 'v' swapped	These sounds are merged in Spanish
Vowel sounds simplified (ship/sheep merged)	Spanish has 5 vowels, English has 12+
'h' often silent	Silent letter in Spanish

## Polish-speaking children

Common pattern	Why
'th' replaced with 'f' or 't' (free/three)	/θ/ doesn't exist in Polish
'w' and 'v' swapped (wery/very)	Polish 'w' is pronounced like English 'v'
Final consonants devoiced (bik/big)	Polish devoices final consonants



Common pattern	Why
Long vowels shortened	Polish has fewer vowel distinctions
Confusion of 'i' and 'ee' (sit/seat)	Single Polish vowel covers both

## Arabic-speaking children

Common pattern	Why
'p' and 'b' swapped (pad/bad)	Arabic has no /p/ sound
Vowels added between consonants ('ispring' for 'spring')	Arabic doesn't allow consonant clusters
'th' replaced with 't' or 's'	/θ/ may exist in some dialects but not formally
Difficulty with English vowel system	Arabic has 3 vowels, English has 12+

## Mandarin/Cantonese-speaking children

Common pattern	Why
Final consonants dropped (ca/cat, do/dog)	Mandarin words mostly end in vowels
'r' and 'l' merged or swapped	These sounds are similar in Mandarin
'th' replaced with 's' or 'd'	/θ/ doesn't exist in Mandarin
Plurals dropped (one cat / two cat)	Mandarin doesn't mark plurals on nouns
Tone confusion in stressed syllables	Different prosody system

## Urdu/Hindi-speaking children

Common pattern	Why
'v' and 'w' merged (often pronounced /w/)	Single sound covers both in Urdu/Hindi
'th' often becomes 't' or 'd'	/θ/ doesn't exist
Stress patterns may sound 'off'	Different stress system
'tr' and 'dr' may be retroflexed	Hindi/Urdu has retroflex sounds

## Somali-speaking children



Common pattern	Why
'p' and 'b' may be swapped	Somali has no /p/
'sh' and 's' may merge	Less distinction in some dialects
Difficulty with English vowel length	Somali has shorter vowel system
'g' may be guttural	Somali has uvular sounds

## What to do with this information

1. **ANTICIPATE** the patterns. When teaching new vocabulary, predict where the child will struggle and address it explicitly. 2. **MODEL** the correct sound clearly. Say it slowly. Show the mouth shape. Let the child watch. 3. **PRACTICE** in low-stakes ways. Tongue twisters, songs, paired reading. 4. **ACCEPT** accent. The goal is communication, not native-like pronunciation. Children with accents become adults with accents — and that's fine. 5. **CELEBRATE** the child's first language. The fact that English is hard for them is **BECAUSE** they speak another language fluently. That's a strength.

