

Speak Easy #011 – Pronouncing and hearing R and L

Episode description

In this episode, Suzanne and Andrew teach you some important tips for perfecting two really difficult aspects of English pronunciation, R and L! Study with this episode and make your English sound clearer and more understandable.

Fun fact

The English Accent Coach is an interactive game that can help you improve your English accent. Check it out at <https://englishaccentcoach.com/>.

Material included in the study guide

- Transcript
- Practice exercises
- Bonus audio



Transcript

Andrew: Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Suzanne: And I'm Suzanne.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Hello, friends. Welcome back to another episode in our Speak Easy series. This is the series where we teach you some great tips to help your English pronunciation sound more natural, more comprehensible, and more understandable. And today I'm joined by the resident pronunciation expert here at Culips, Suzanne.

Suzanne, how are you?

Suzanne: Thanks so much, Andrew, for that lovely introduction. I'm good, I'm good. I'm excited to talk about our topic today. How are you doing?

Andrew: I'm doing great, thank you for asking. And, yeah, Suzanne, we have a really, I think, important lesson here today for many of our learners, especially learners from Asia, maybe from Japan and Korea and maybe from some other countries, too. But today's topic is how to differentiate between R and L, OK? R and L. And I know many English learners say that this is one of the most difficult things to do in English, one of the most difficult pronunciation aspects of English, so I'm happy that we're covering this topic today.

Suzanne: Yeah, me too, and I hope that it at least gives people a little motivation, you know? Some quick tools that you can use and apply. And don't be worried that it doesn't work right away, it's a process.

Andrew: Yeah. So this is kind of a first step into how to both hear and pronounce the differences between R and L.

Suzanne: Yeah. But before we jump into our topic, the R and the L, we'd like to remind you guys that the best way to study with Culips and this episode is to download the study guide for this episode. So you can go to Culips.com and download the study guide for this episode. It will have a lot of great information and exercise for you to practice.

Andrew: OK. Perfect. So, Sue, I know through my experience learning Korean and also learning French a little bit that when you're learning a new language you're going to encounter sounds that are not in your native language. You have to learn a whole new phonological system. There's new and novel ways to pronounce certain sounds that your mouth and your ears are just not used to, right?

Suzanne: Absolutely. It's just like learning new vocabulary words, we also have a kind of sound vocabulary. And sometimes those sounds are not the same in every language. So like, for example, when I was first learning French, it was confusing to differentiate the sounds "u" (/y/) as in "tu" or "rue," like the street, "rue," and "oo," as in like the, you know, the English "oo" (/u/). I thought it was all "ohh." I didn't realize there was another sound. And I took me a while to understand that those are two different sounds in French.

Andrew: Yeah, I have a similar experience with Korean, some vowel sounds that are just not in English. For example, there's this kind of weird diphthong vowel "ui" in Korean and that's just not in English at all. So trying to hear that at first was really strange for me and the pronunciation for it, too, very strange. So, yeah, I've run into this as well.

Suzanne: Yeah, because you're trying to make it work in what you know in your first language, so it's hard.

Andrew: Yeah, you're just trying to map these onto, like, what you already know in English, right? And I'm sure that, you know, if you're a Japanese learner of English and you're trying to differentiate between R and L, you're just going to put R and L onto what you already know in Japanese that's close to these sounds.

Suzanne: Exactly. And the thing about R and L that we need to remember is that, unlike TH, where TH sound, or like /θ/ or /ð/ like "the," it's the TH sound doesn't really carry a big functional load, meaning if you say a different sound, like "DUH" instead of "THE," it's OK. We understand what you're saying, so comprehension and communication does not break down. However, R and L do carry a high, they have a high functional load and they can really change words into other words if they're mismatched or if it's confused. And so you can actually have some communication breakdown.

Andrew: Totally. And what you mean here, Sue, by functional load is that these sounds just have a lot of meaning, right? The meaning can change greatly. And one of the classic examples that I joke about with my students all the time, because I live in Korea, I teach Korean students, and this is an area of pronunciation that's very difficult for many beginner-level Korean students. And so one of the things that we joke about all the time is the difference between rice and lice.

Suzanne: Yes, yes.

Andrew: If you say, "Ah, I would like some rice," then this means you that want some food, right? If you say, "I want some lice," then the person you're talking to is going to look at you very strangely and with horror on their face, because lice is an insect and usually an insect that we consider to be very dirty because it lives on humans in their hair, right?

Suzanne: Yeah, they're gross. Yeah, you don't want that.

Andrew: Right, so here's an example of this one sound, the difference between rice and lice, this can vastly change the meaning of the sentence.

Suzanne: Yes, so one reason why R and L are difficult is also because R, for example is what we call an approximate, because it doesn't have one place of articulation. Your tongue is kind of hanging out in the middle of your mouth and sort of ambiguous place, kind of just the middle of nowhere in the middle of your mouth in a shape, and it's not really touching anything. It's not really vibrating anywhere; it's just sort of standing up straight inside your mouth. So it kind of has, it's kind of almost like you're sort of approximating a position. So not everybody's R position is exactly the same, because it doesn't have a fixed point, right? It doesn't have anything that it's gonna, like, push up against, like a "BB" or something like that, like a B, right, has the two lips are just hitting up against each other. It's a little trickier, I would say, in that regard.

Andrew: Yeah, that's a great point. I would also add that R is very difficult to physically see. Even if you're looking at someone's mouth while they're talking, it's really hard to see where their tongue is because the mouth is kind of closed and you can't really see the shape of the tongue and the tongue is in an awkward, strange shape, too, as opposed to some other sounds that are really easy to get a visual on, right? So that's another element that makes it difficult, is the visual aspect is taken away when learning how to make an R.

Suzanne: Absolutely. It's actually one of the last sounds that kids learn, because it is hard when they're learning their first language as English, because it's hard to see. So one of the things that I think can be very helpful, because most—I'm sure you guys out there have trouble perceiving, perceiving the R and L sound in pronunciation that you hear. It can be hard to distinguish it when you hear English spoken. You could probably distinguish it when you're reading, because they are letters that look different. They don't look the same, and you're reading the words. So I'm going to walk you through how to feel the difference in your vocal tract. And, Andrew, I'm going to make a video of this, as well, to accompany this episode so that you guys will actually be able to see what I'm doing with my mouth, not just talk on the podcast.

Andrew: OK. So, guys, if you wanna check that video out, we'll post it onto our YouTube account, so just head on over to YouTube, search for The Culips English Podcast. You'll be able to find our channel and watch that video.

Suzanne: Awesome. Yeah, so I find that when you can feel and know, sort of like a dance step, what kind of movements you need to make with your mouth. It can help you know, OK, when I make an R or when I see R when I'm reading out loud, I know that my mouth goes in this pose. And when I see an L in my reading, I know my mouth goes in this pose. Just to help you start to see and feel and make the difference, OK?

Andrew: Yeah, it's almost like you're learning a new yoga pose or the proper movement for lifting weights or something, right? It's really a physical action.

Suzanne: Yeah, it really is. It's, like, maybe you were trained in ballet and now we're asking you to do hip hop. So it's confusing, it can be hard, because you're used to standing in one pose, you know. You're used to standing with your neck stretched high and your chest out and your spine straight. But with hip hop, we know you need to be a little more loose, a little more relaxed.

Andrew: Totally. I'm thinking of when I used to play in a band. I played guitar and I'm kind of a self-taught guitarist, I never took lessons. But some of the other guys in the band, they studied guitar and they learned, you know, the quote, unquote correct way to play. And then they'd be showing me, "Oh, Andrew, you should play this at this point," and then I'd say, "OK, show me how do you play that?" And they'd play it a different way than I would naturally wanna play it. And so trying to learn that new style to play is just so difficult, because you're so accustomed to doing something one way, then when you have to switch your thinking, switch your way of moving your fingers. It's very confusing. That's a great analogy here, I think, for how to learn these new sounds in English. But, Sue, I'm rambling. Let's get to some practice ones.

Suzanne: Let's get to it, of course.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: So, Andrew, I want you to repeat after me. I'm going to take you through—and you guys out there do the same—I'm going to take you through a series of sounds that will help lead your tongue to the correct area. Again, remember R are kind of made and everyone kind of makes them a little bit differently. But in the general area of where your tongue needs to be for an R sound, OK?

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: Now, I want you to think that your lips for this whole exercise are going to be in like a rectangle position, like if you had a noisy kid next to you and you were like, "Hey, shhh." And you tell them to "shh," your lips kinda splay out, they're kind of, you know, energized, have muscularity in them, and they're kind of in a square or rectangle.

Andrew: Exactly, they're pushed out and it's almost like a kiss shape, right?

Suzanne: Yeah, like a duck, like an open duck lips.

Andrew: Yeah, like duck lips, that's a good way to put it, yeah.

Suzanne: Selfie lips. OK, so even though we're gonna make some sounds that normally you would not put your lips in this position, just do that for now, just to have as an exercise. OK, so first we're gonna start with, we're gonna go D-D-D-D-EEE.

Andrew: D-D-D-D-EEEE.

Suzanne: Great. Now, we're gonna add a Z sound after the D, so we have our tongue is tapping on the top of our palate. And now we're going to bring it down and back just a bit.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: So we're gonna go D-D-D-ZZZZ-EE.

Andrew: OK. D-D-D-ZZZZ-EEE.

Suzanne: Good. And just make sure that you elongate the Z sound. So you're gonna go D-D-D-ZZZZ-EEE.

Andrew: OK. D-D-D-ZZZZ-EEE.

Suzanne: Good, just 'cause you wanna make sure you get each element in there. OK.

Andrew: Sure, OK.

Suzanne: Now, we're gonna add after the Z sound, we're gonna add an /dʒ/ so just like you would say "SHH" (/ʃ/) now we're just adding voice like a /dʒ/ like garage the sound in garage.

Andrew: /dʒ/

Suzanne: OK. So we're gonna go D-D-D-ZZZZZ-dʒ-EEE.

Andrew: OK, getting hard here.

Suzanne: It's getting a little difficult.

Andrew: D-D-D-ZZZZZZ-dʒ-EEE.

Suzanne: Awesome. That's it. Excellent. I hope you guys are following along.

Andrew: Guys, if I can do it, you can do it too.

Suzanne: Yes. This is why you need the study guide, it's really important to have the study guide. OK, so now on our next step, we're going to forget about the D and the Z, the D and the Z, and we're just gonna start with the /d̃/ sound. But after the /d̃/ think about moving your tongue back to float in the middle of your mouth, and we're gonna add the R (/r/) sound. So it'll sound like this: d̃ - RRRRRRRR-EEEEEE.

Andrew: d̃- RRRRRRRR - EEEE.

Suzanne: Good. Do you feel that you're moving your tongue? That's kind of vibrating on the top of your palate just a bit for the /d̃/? Just barely. And then it pulls back a bit and it's sort of floating in the middle of your mouth, in a reflexed way?

Andrew: Yeah, you can absolutely feel your tongue moving throughout that exercise.

Suzanne: Good. Good. So now we're just gonna stick here with the d̃- RRR-EE, but we're gonna take away the E and just go right into the R, OK?

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: So we'll go d̃- RRRRRR.

Andrew: d̃ -RRRR.

Suzanne: Good. Now stay in that position, don't move out of that position, and continue with the R. RRRR.

Andrew: RRRR.

Suzanne: Good. Now where do you feel your tongue in your mouth? Just from that exercise, where do you feel your tongue placed?

Andrew: It feels like it is folded in the middle of my mouth. So it's not touching the top of my mouth, it's not touching the bottom. It's hovering, floating in the middle, and there's bend to it. It's not straight.

Suzanne: That's the perfect spot. Are you a native speaker? You must be a native speaker.

Andrew: Maybe I have an advantage with the English R but, believe you me, French R, Spanish R, not easy at all. Even, like, even some dialects of English, like the Scottish R, can't do it, can't do it.

Suzanne: Right. I know, it's crazy, isn't it?

Andrew: You can do it. Good job, Sue.

Suzanne: What if we try just a few phrases to see if we can really get the R in different environments? So in different positions of the word.

Andrew: OK, yeah, let's practice that.

Suzanne: OK. So I'll say them and then if you guys just repeat them. What do you think?

Andrew: Yeah, OK. I will repeat after you. And, listeners, why don't you repeat along with me?

Suzanne: Now just for exercises purposes, I'm going to start each phrases with a $\widehat{d_3}$ -RR just to get into it, OK?

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: So we'll go $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR read the words.

Andrew: $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR read the words.

Suzanne: Yeah. Great. $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR wrote the wrong words.

Andrew: $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR wrote the wrong words.

Suzanne: Good. $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR the author of the article.

Andrew: $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR the author of the article.

Suzanne: Yeah. Let's try one more. $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR order another round.

Andrew: $\widehat{d_3}$ -RRR order another round.

Suzanne: Awesome. Now, just a quick thing, you might notice, Andrew, that the D that you just said in order is actually a lot further back than a normal D. Do you feel that?

Andrew: Oh, yeah.

Suzanne: Order, order.

Andrew: Yeah, order. That's a unique one.

Suzanne: It is, because R is a high-maintenance letter, it's a high-maintenance friend. It's always making you come over to their house, going over to their side of the town. R is pulling other sounds with it. So just know if it sounds or feels a little different, it's OK.

Andrew: All right, good to know, order another round. I like it.

Suzanne: Let's jump into some L quickly. It's not as complicated as the R.

Andrew: Right.

Suzanne: The thing to know about L is that there's kind of two different L sounds in English. There's a bright L sound that you hear at the beginning of syllables, and then there's also a darker L sound that you hear at the coda or the end of a syllable, like pool or school or old. Can you hear that? It's a little bit darker, my mouth is more closed.

Andrew: OK, so when we refer to a dark L sound, we mean an L that is at the end of a word, like the examples you just gave us, pool, school, old, like this?

Suzanne: Exactly, yes. It could be a word for a syllable right? It could be follow, follow, follow.

Andrew: Right, but it's at the final part of the word, follow. It's not in the beginning, it's not the word initial sound.

Suzanne: It's not the word initial sound, it's the word, it's usually at the end of a syllable. So, like, if you have fall, right? Follow, the ending of fall is gonna be a little bit of a darker L, if that makes sense.

Andrew: Gotcha, OK, syllable final.

Suzanne: So the bright L is probably the more common L, and that comes at the beginning of a word. And that's like with words like light and lift and landing.

Andrew: Light, lift, landing.

Suzanne: Yup, exactly. Now, for the purposes of your second language, if you have trouble with R and L, I suggest for right now in your practice to just do a bright L, because this is going to be the most different from an R. I just wanted you to know what those two L were just so that someone doesn't come back to me and say, yeah, but this L sounds different, so but I want you to really think of doing a bright L for the most part for now, and then you can always adjust.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: The main thing is to add a smile to your lips, because you're going to want to retract your lips or smile and get the lips out of way. You want them back, you want to open your mouth and have a brighter sound. Have more space in your mouth for the sound and air to flow. So really retract your lips into a smile.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: Then you're going to force the tip of the tongue forward, almost like it's sticking out from between your teeth. Almost like a TH, you're gonna go LLLLLL all the way forward, LLLLLL.

Andrew: LLLLLL.

Suzanne: Yes, yes. So you really want to almost, you should almost see the tip of your tongue coming out, the opposite of an R, right? The R is pulled back, your lips are kind of closed or rounded over. This, we're smiling. The tongue is coming out, so LLLLLLL, LLLLLL.

Andrew: LLLLLL.

Suzanne: Good.

Andrew: Yeah, I can feel it that you are smiling and your tongue is, yeah, in a very different position than the R, right? The tip of your tongue is really there in the crack of your teeth.

Suzanne: Yeah, and you should feel your palate, right? You should feel that alveolar ridge, or the palate on top, right behind your teeth. Your tongue is up there. Right there touching something, where the R, you don't touch anything.

Andrew: Right, the R is just floating in the middle of your mouth and the L, there's that physical contact with the mouth.

Suzanne: Yes, yeah.

Andrew: Good.

Suzanne: So why don't we practice just a few phrases with L. But this time, I want you guys to overexaggerate your pronunciation, so really smile big. Really stick the tongue forward just to feel that, you know, that kind of extra energy so that you're really hitting that form.

Andrew: OK, so big smiles, everyone.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Let's try our best to be happy here, OK. And, Suzanne let's do the same thing: you give us the example and then, listeners, we will repeat, me and the listeners together at the same time.

Suzanne: OK. We're gonna start with one of my favourite little phrases, eleven elephants.

Andrew: Eleven elephants.

Suzanne: Good. All right. We also are gonna try listen to the laughter.

Andrew: Listen to the laughter.

Suzanne: Let's just try two more. Little lady.

Andrew: Little lady.

Suzanne: My least favourite phrase, last call for alcohol. Just kidding.

Andrew: Last call for alcohol.

Suzanne: One of the main takeaways, Andrew, is that the R, when we make the R sound, the tongue is not touching anything. It's floating up, retracted in the middle of the mouth, whereas with the L sound, the tip of our tongue is touching right behind our upper front teeth. So it's really right there almost on the outside of our mouths.

Andrew: And, Sue, just one more take-home that I think is important for everybody here is to know that, as we mentioned earlier, R and L carry a lot of meaning. And this is one area that you're going to want to be very careful about, because the meaning of your sentences can change dramatically if you mispronounce one of these letters, right? Like we gave the rice/lice example. So maybe in some other aspects of English pronunciation you can be a little less cautious, you can relax a little bit, people will still be able to understand you, for example, that TH example that you gave earlier. But with this one, you may find that your listener doesn't understand you or is confused if you pronounce these two sounds incorrectly.

Suzanne: Yes, we have like deer and deal or hear and heal, right? These are all really minimal pairs here. So it's important to get those right.

I just wanna add one thing, Andrew. There's a great resource, you guys, out there that's free for you to work on your perception of different sounds. And it's called the English Accent Coach, the website, and it was created by a researcher colleague of ours. And you can go on there for free, play the game, you can pick consonants, and you can pick R and L, and you will be tested to see how well you do on discriminating between the R and the L sound in listening tasks.

Andrew: And this is one of the first steps, I think, is being able to hear the difference, because once you can hear the difference clearly, then you'll be able to notice when you make mistakes in your pronunciation. And this is one of the things driving me crazy right now in my own Korean, I can perceive differences in sounds, but I still can't nail and accurately produce some sounds. And I can hear that it's bad, which drives me nuts. I know this is wrong, but I'm also happy because I know this is the first step moving in the right direction, moving towards clear pronunciation. So, yeah, guys, check out that website. I've used it before with my students and it's fantastic. The English Accent Coach.

Awesome, Sue. Thank you for this lesson here today. I think all of our listeners will find it very helpful. And, guys, just before we go, we'll remind you one more time about the study guide on our website, and also about our social media channels. We're on Instagram, we're on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. And if you wanna stay up-to-date with all of the news here at Culips, then make sure to follow us on social media. And follow us on YouTube if you wanna check out that bonus video that Sue is going to make to accompany this episode, as well.

All right, that about wraps it up for us today. Thanks for listening. We'll be back soon with another new episode and we'll catch you then. Goodbye, everyone.

Suzanne: Bye, guys.

Practice exercises

The audio for the practice exercises is included at the end of the ad-free version of this episode. To download this file, please visit the Culips Dashboard by going to www.Culips.com and logging in to your account.

1. Let's practice making an L sound:

- a) Retract your lips into a little smile
- b) Push the tip of your tongue forward so that it is sticking out from between your teeth
- c) Inhale and feel the air on the sides—this means the tongue is nice and long and energized

2. Practice the L sound at the beginning, middle, and ends of words.

Listen and repeat. Remember to push your tongue through to the teeth for each L sound. If you need to, overdo it for now.

Listen	Lightning	Likeable
Follow	Helper	Callous
School	Magical	Falafel
Illegible	Article	Please
Applause	Empirical	Lesson

3. Let's practice making an R sound:

- a) D-D-D-D-D-EEE
- b) Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-EEE
- c) DZ-EEE
- d) DZ-R-EEE
- e) RRR-EEE

4. Practice R sounds at the beginning, middle, and ends of words.

Listen and repeat. Remember to find the retracted tongue position. It should **not** be touching the roof of the mouth.

Reading	Roses	Writer
Oration	Horrible	Borrow
Actor	Career	Floor
Repair	Tricky	Barrier
Author	Research	Prerequisite

5. Practice words with both R and L sounds. Listen and repeat.

Practical	Trial	Really
Colour	Barrel	Oral report
Orderly	Roller	Reality

Episode credits

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