

Teaching Dakelh Pronunciation

These are some notes on how best to teach the pronunciation of Dakelh. They are intended in the first instance for teachers but most of them should also be useful to students.

1 Issues

1.1 Unfamiliar Consonants

The Dakelh vowels are not hard for English speakers to learn but there are quite a few consonants not found in English. The **ny** sound is easy for English speakers to learn because, although it is not a speech sound in most dialects of English, it is nonetheless familiar to English speakers from the expression **nyaah-nyaah**. English speakers also find the **kh** and **gh** sounds easy to learn. The **wh** sound, which is found on some dialects of English in words like “where” and “when”, is also not hard to learn.

A sound that often takes some effort is the **lh** sound. The **ts dz tl** and **dl** sounds involve familiar sequences of consonants that in English not part of the same syllable. What English speakers have to learn is to pronounce these sequences at the beginning of a syllable and to hear the difference between **s** and **ts**, and **z** and **dz**, at the beginning of words.

Among the least familiar sounds for English speakers are the glottalized consonants: **t' k' ch' ts' tl'** and **kw'**. These involve an unfamiliar airstream mechanism (means of generating air pressure).

The lamino-dental (“fronted”) consonants **s z ts dz** and **ts'** are very difficult for English speakers to learn to hear and to produce. However, it is arguably not worth putting the effort in to learn them as very few if any living speakers still have them. For virtually all speakers, they are now pronounced the same as their apico-alveolar (“non-fronted”) counterparts **s z ts dz** and **ts'**.

1.2 Syllable-final H

Although English has the **h** sound, it appears only at the beginning of syllables, not at the end.¹ English speakers need to learn to pronounce syllable-final **h** and to recognize its presence. It may help for students to start out by pronouncing the **kh** sound at the end of syllables instead of **h**, then softening it to **h**.

1.3 Syllable-final KW

Although English has the **kw** sound in words like “queen” and “quick”, it does not have it at the end of syllables. English speakers need to learn to pronounce syllable-final **kw** and to recognize its presence.

1.4 Glottal stop

One of the hardest sounds for English speakers to learn is the glottal stop. The problem is that English has this sound but not as a meaningful speech sound. English does not have words that begin with vowels. It has words that seem to begin with vowels, and are written without any consonant letters at the beginning, but all such words actually begin with a glottal stop. Whenever there is no other consonant at the beginning of a syllable, English fills the gap with a glottal stop. This makes it very difficult for English speakers to hear whether a syllable begins with a glottal stop or not, and it makes it very difficult for English speakers to suppress pronouncing a glottal stop at the beginning of a syllable that doesn't begin with another consonant. Syllable-final glottal stops are generally not so hard for

1 English has the letter **h** at the end of syllables in words like **cheetah** and **pharaoh**, no **h** sound is pronounced.

English speakers to hear and to learn to produce.

2 Tools

Here are a few tools for teaching the sounds of Dakelh.

2.1 Minimal Pairs

A minimal pair is a pair of words that differ only in one place, for example “tip” and “dip”, which differ only in whether the first sound is **t** or **d**. Listening to minimal pairs can help students to learn unfamiliar sounds. In Dakelh, for example, **dutai** “it is thick” is the same as **dut’ai** “duck” except for the fact that the second syllable in “it is thick” begins with a plain **t**, like an English **t**, whereas the second syllable in “duck” begins with a glottalized **t’**. Listening to such pairs brings out the difference between the two sounds, which the student can try to reproduce by saying the words him or herself.

2.2 Getting in Touch With Your Glottis

English speakers can learn to feel when they close their glottis to make a glottal stop by saying things like “uh-oh” quickly and emphatically and directing their attention to what happens at the boundary of the two syllables. Once they learn to feel this, they can extend that perception to glottal stops in word-initial and word-final position, and to the closure of the glottis that is part of the production of glottalized consonants.

2.3 Shifting Syllable Boundaries

English speakers can already make sequences of consonants like **t+s**, **d+z**, **t+l**, and **d+l**, but only with the first consonant at the end of one syllable and the second consonant at the beginning of the second syllable. They can learn to make the corresponding affricates, in which the stop and fricative are part of the same syllable, by first pronouncing the sequences separated by syllable-boundary and then trying to shift the first consonant into the following syllable. For example, they can start with “our cat sings” and try to say “our ca tsings”.

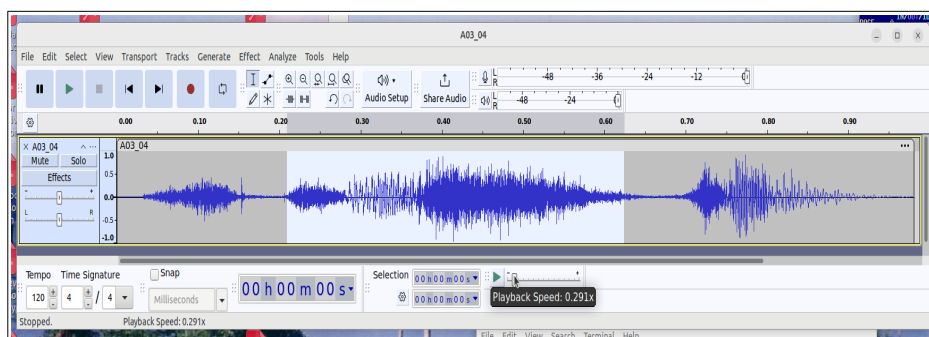
2.4 Slowing Down Examples

It is often helpful for students to play back recorded examples slowly and/or to focus on just one part. They can do this easily using an audio editor if you make the examples available for them to download. They can select the portion they want to focus on by selecting it with their mouse, and most audio editors provide a slider for setting the playback speed.

In the screenshot below of the Audacity² audio editor (<https://www.audacityteam.org/>), pressing the play button will result in only the highlighted section being played. The playback speed slider at bottom centre has been set to play it at just under 1/3 of the original speed.³

² Audacity is free and is available for Microsoft Windows, macOS, and Linux.

³ The location of the playback speed slider varies with the version of Audacity, and depending on the configuration installed, it may not be visible at all. If it is not visible, go to the “View” menu, select “Toolbars”, and check the box for “Play-at-Speed Toolbar”.



3 Caveats

3.1 Evaluation

It is impossible to evaluate student's pronunciation in group recitations since you can't tell what most of the students are saying. To evaluate students' pronunciation, you must either call on students individually or, to avoid embarrassment, arrange to meet individually with each student. If you are teaching remotely, you can give the students a list of things to record themselves saying and ask them to upload the resulting audio file for you to listen to. Course management systems like Moodle allow audio files to be uploaded just like text files as assignment submissions. You can also make a Dropbox folder available to students to upload to.

3.2 Songs

Songs are enjoyable and easy to memorize but they are terrible for teaching pronunciation. Even when sung by a single, musically talented, fluent native speaker, singing distorts the sounds. Singing in groups is worse since the combination of voices smudges the sounds. Similarly, instrumental accompaniment makes the lyrics harder to hear. Furthermore, these days most groups consist mostly of people who are not fluent in the language, meaning that many of the singers do not pronounce everything correctly.

This means that you should first teach the lyrics of songs as plain speech, without singing it and without instrumental accompaniment. This will allow students to model their speech on correct, undistorted pronunciation. Once you have done this, you can move on to singing the song.