

# Languages of Burmese Refugees:

- **Kayah Li (Karenni)**
- **S’gaw Karen**
- **Hakha-Chin**

Notes on the languages and tips for teaching ELL students.

Spoken by those from Burma/Myanmar

## **Kayah Li (Karenni)**

1. Kayah Li speakers have a lot of trouble pronouncing final consonants because all syllables in the language end in vowels. They commonly add a vowel on the end of an English word that ends in a consonant.

Make a list of short words that end in a consonant and rhyme. Use vowels that are easy for them like ee, ay, and oh ([i e o]). Nasals seem to be easier, so start with words that end in [m] or [n]. Then move on to other voiced consonants like [d] and [b].

2. Multisyllabic words are uncommon. The most common syllable structure is CV, one consonant and one vowel. Their largest words are three syllables. They do have compound words though.

Keep this in mind when choosing words to work on. When teaching a new word, break it down into syllables or parts. Teach the last part of the word first. Endings of words and sentences frequently get dropped; teaching the end first seems to help. For example: I was teaching the word “children”. I covered up the first syllable and just taught “drin” over and over. Then I taught just “chil”. Then we put it together. This is a difficult word for several reasons: Kayah Li does not have the ch (tʃ) sound nor the short i (ɪ) sound, and both syllables have final consonants.

3. Kayah Li only has a few consonant clusters, which are consonants next to each other. In Kayah Li, only a few sounds can be in the second or third position in a cluster: l, r, y, w ([l ɹ j w]). Only the [k] and [p] sounds can come before [l] and r [ɹ] sounds. English has a lot more variety in consonant clusters.

This just takes a lot of practice. Students usually make two long sounds instead of two shorter sounds to make the cluster. Or they put a vowel between the consonants. It helps to show them to not change the mouth position between the two sounds. For example, when making the st cluster, only the tongue moves. There is a tendency to open the mouth a bit between the sounds and that makes it sound like two separate sounds instead of one cluster. Start with clusters of two before moving to clusters of three.

4. Kayah Li does not have a regular [s] sound. (Burmese does, so a student might not have trouble with this sound.) The Kayah Li s sound is aspirated, which means that there is a burst of

air that is released with the sound. (Put your hand in front of your lips. Say “put” and “spit” and note the burst of air. Only the [p] in “put” is aspirated.) The aspirated [s] makes it a little difficult to say the [s] sound in a consonant cluster.

This is difficult to overcome. Try to get your student to make a long [s] sound, like hissing. This helps train them to hold the sound without releasing a burst of air. Then add a second consonant sound, like [t] or [p], to the long, hissing [s].

5. The th sounds are very difficult for Kayah Li speakers. The language has an unvoiced th sound [θ] (the sound in think), but that sound and the sh [ʃ] are in free variation. That means they can use either sound in words and the meaning does not change. There is another sound in Kayah Li that sounds much like the sh sound, the retroflex s. If your student’s sh is not very clear, he might be making this sound.

The th sounds take consistent practice. They are very common sounds in English. Remember to teach both of them, the unvoiced [θ] sound in “think” and the voiced [ð] sound in “that” or “the”. If the tongue is sticking out between the teeth and not touching the roof of the mouth, a th sound should result. Have the student look at her mouth in mirror to see tongue placement.

6. Kayah Li speakers also have trouble with the [f], [v], and r [ɹ] sounds. Refer to pronunciation guides for those sounds. [f] and [v] are easy to model. r is more difficult, so it is helpful to use an interpreter to explain that sound.

7. Nasals are sounds in which the air partly flows out through the nasal cavity. Nasals are common sounds and generally easy for people to make. English has three nasals [m], [n], and [ŋ] (the velar nasal, made in the back of the mouth; the sound in sing). Kayah Li has those sounds and a fourth nasal [ɲ], which is made with the middle of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth. The [ɲ] sound is frequently heard when Kayah Li speakers are speaking English words.

If you hear this sound, the student usually needs to lower her tongue.

8. To recap, English consonants missing in Kayah Li are:

f, g, s, r, tʃ (the ch sound), ʒ (the sound in usual and measure), and ð (voiced th). Additional difficult sounds are: θ (unvoiced th), v.

See separate documents on teaching consonant sounds.

9. English vowels missing in Kayah Li:

[ɪ]: This is the short i, the sound in bit and kid.

[æ]: This is the short a, the sound in bat and cad.

[ʊ]: This is the sound in put and could.

[ʌ]: This is the sound in but and oven.

When helping a student learn a new vowel sound, model the sound and note two things: how far open the mouth is and the shape of the lips (use a mirror). For some vowels, like [ʊ], the lips are

rounded. To make the [ɪ] sound (as in bit), the student can make the [e] (as in late) and then bring the lips closer together until the [ɪ] is heard. For the [æ] sound, make the [e] (as in late) sound and then open the lips up a bit farther. For all vowel practice, take some time doing listening activities to help the student hear the difference between vowels.

PDFs on the Karenni language (Burma/Myanmar)  
<http://www.karennirefugees.com/learn-kayah.html>

## S'gaw Karen

S'gaw Karen is very similar to Kayah Li, so most of the above is relevant. Differences are noted below.

1. A sole consonant is always followed by an [a] sound, so Karen speakers might add that sound at times.

To make the [a] sound, the mouth has to be open pretty wide. To eliminate it, show your student to keep his mouth in place after making the consonant sound.

2. English adds the suffix -s or -es to denote the plural. Some languages only show number with words, and S'gaw Karen uses words like “two” or “some” to show the plural.

Because of this and because S'gaw Karen speakers have trouble with final consonants, forgetting or not pronouncing the plural -s or -es will be very common. Practice helps.

3. S'gaw Karen speakers might also have trouble with the following sounds:

[z]: The z sound.

[dʒ]: This is the sound in judge.

Both of these sounds are not difficult to learn. They just need some practice to add them to speech.

[ɹ]: This is the English r sound. S'gaw Karen has a trill r. To make the English r, the tongue needs to be a little lower. See separate document on making this sound; it's a difficult one.

Karen-English dictionaries (Burma/Myanmar):  
<http://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php>

## Hakha-Chin

Also known as: Lai, Haka, Baung-she

1. Hakha-Chin has closed syllables, so speakers might have less difficulty pronouncing final consonant sounds.

2. Negation follows the verb. In English, negation precedes the verb (not going; not eating), so Chin speakers might need some practice with word order.

3. In addition to the difficult consonants noted in the other languages, Hakha-Chin speakers might have difficulty with the sh [ʃ] sound, but this is usually an easy sound to learn.

4. The [d] sound in Hakha-Chin is made with the tongue tip on the teeth, a dental [d]. It is easy for dental [d] speakers to mix up that sound with the th sounds. The tongue has to be between the teeth for the th sounds.

Chin-English dictionary (Burma/Myanmar):

<https://chin-dictionary.com/>