

Making the English “r” sound

(Symbols in brackets refer to sounds and are written in the international phonetic alphabet.)

Sound description:

When you say the English “r” sound [ɹ], you lift the back of your tongue toward the back of the palate. A groove forms down the center of the tongue as the sides slide up and touch the inside of the top molars. The tip of the tongue may be up or down. Voiced air flows over the tongue in a continuous stream.*

Teaching hints:

The tongue needs to be tense, not relaxed. Have the student produce [l] while pulling the tongue back to produce [ɹ]. When [w] is substituted for [ɹ], emphasize that [ɹ] is not produced with the lips, but with the tongue. When [l] is substituted, explain that the tip is too far forward; it does not touch the alveolar ridge when making [ɹ], and the back of the tongue is raised. The sides of the tongue should be touching the upper molars.*

Instructions for the student:

Pull the back of the tongue to the back of the mouth.

Do not touch anything with the tip of the tongue.

The tongue is tense, not relaxed.

Notes:

The lips are slightly pursed when making the English r sound. Watch your student’s lips. Have your student watch your lips while he watches his own in a mirror.

Many students have a trilled r [r] (alveolar trill) in their language. (If you are familiar with Spanish, you should know this sound.) To transition to an English r, they need to pull the tongue down. A trilled r can only be made if the tongue is hitting the top of the mouth. These students will find it easier to pronounce an English r if it is the first sound in a word. Start with those words to gain practice and proficiency. Some languages that have a trilled r: Somali, Tigrinya, Kirundi, Bosnian, Arabic.

Some languages do not differentiate between the [l] sound and the [ɹ] sound. For these students, it is helpful to begin with listening activities. Make both sounds, pointing at the letter while you make the sound. Do this over and over. Then make two sounds and have your student tell you if it is the same sound (you made two [l] sounds or two [ɹ] sounds) or different sounds (you made an [l] sound and an [ɹ] sound). This will help the student train his ear to hear the difference in the sounds and will aid him in being able to make the sounds himself. When choosing r words to practice with, choose words with sounds that are easy for the student to make so he has only one difficult sound to deal with.

*section author unknown