

# Making the English “th” sounds

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

There are two th sounds in English, and they are the same except that one is voiced and one is unvoiced. I will refer to the voiced sound [ð] as TH; it is the sound in “this” and “that”. I will refer to the unvoiced sound [θ] as th; it is the sound in “think” and “thing”.

Sound description:

To make these sounds, the lips are parted, the teeth are slightly parted, the tongue is placed between the teeth, and voiced or unvoiced air passes over the tongue. The tongue does not touch the roof of the mouth. The tongue is slightly more forward in the unvoiced sound. Many people have trouble with these sounds.

Teaching hints:

Use a mirror. Most people are not completely aware of the shape and position of their lips and tongue unless they see it. I carry a hand mirror and have the student hold it. Then I model the sound while the student makes it and uses the mirror to assess her tongue position. I will hold the pose for quite a while to allow the student to practice. Sometimes I have to touch my tongue to point out the position. Most will revert to a position in which the tongue is inside the mouth; this sound takes a lot of practice.

Many students have trouble sticking out their tongues because it is culturally inappropriate. If a student will not look at your mouth, position yourself so that they are behind you and to the side; then make the sound while looking into a mirror and have them look at your mouth in the mirror.

Make the sound very loudly while practicing. th [θ] can be difficult for students to hear unless it is exaggerated.

Watch the student’s lips. Many students will want to round their lips or pull the corners of the mouth back. Lips should be relaxed. If you hear a [s] or hissing sound, the tongue needs to move away from the roof of the mouth.

Show the student how to put her hand on her neck to feel the difference between voiced and unvoiced sounds. In voiced sounds, the vocal folds are vibrating and a vibration can be felt in the throat. When making the TH [ð] sound, the vibration can also be felt in the tip of the tongue. Telling a student to look for the vibration in the tongue tip really helps.

It is possible to make passable TH and th sounds with the tongue inside the teeth, but only if the tongue does not touch the roof of the mouth. Most students who do this make a [d] sound or sometimes a [t] sound; most Americans are used to these errors and can still easily understand.