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# *Outside the Box: A Multi-Lingual Forum*

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*Special Section:  
Lessons from OkiJALT*



# Teaching Pronunciation of the “S” Morpheme

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## Pronunciation: To Teach or Not to Teach

Much has been written about maturational constraints governing second language acquisition and a supposed critical period that governs the acquisition of native-like pronunciation (e.g. see Doughty & Long 2003). Many researchers argue that the acquisition of native-like pronunciation is impossible beyond a certain age. Moreover, some sociolinguists have argued that linguistic features such as accent are intimately related to a person’s sense of self, and that non-native speakers actually maintain such linguistic features to express their distinctive ethnic identity (Rickford, 1996). This has tempered my zeal for aspiring to have my students achieve perfect, native-like pronunciation, but I think everyone will agree that learners should strive for comprehensible pronunciation that avoids unnecessary communication breakdowns or misunderstandings.

The case of the “S” morpheme is especially problematic for many non-native speakers. Partly because it is a morpheme and not just a phoneme, it has particular salience for native speakers. In the case of its use as third person or possessive “S,” its absence can contribute to communication breakdowns. Where “S” is used to denote plural, its absence can be even more problematic, as in the utterance “I like dogs.” versus when the “S” is omitted because of pronunciation challenges and becomes “I like dog.” The illocutionary impact of the first utterance conveys the fact that the speaker enjoys the company of furry four-legged creatures known as canines whereas the second utterance indicates a gastronomic predilection for ‘man’s best friend,’ i.e., dogs. With such examples in mind, it seems clear that pronunciation should in some cases be

actively taught, especially where morphemes are concerned.

I personally believe pronunciation instruction should not be excessively prescriptive. If a student’s English is fully comprehensible and they seem to be happy with their speaking then their learning experience has been a success, regardless of whether they sound like a native speaker. Still, my experience of over twenty years teaching language has shown me that many students are able to improve their pronunciation remarkably when they focus on it. I have coached dozens of students for speech contests. Many of them were able to generalize the lessons they learned while memorizing their speeches and apply those lessons to every day speech. The students whose pronunciation improved the most were influenced by three factors: instruction that paid careful attention to their efforts, ample time for practice, and a concern for correctness on the student’s part. This can often be instilled for the most part using game-like activities.

Teaching and learning pronunciation can be fun. It does not have to be about drills and corrections. There are times when explicit instruction is helpful (especially with adults), but it is best if students have chances to model their speech based on clear pronunciation, without undue pressure from the teacher. A game environment lets everyone take part, and embeds the nature of the instruction in a less threatening context. This is important because perfect pronunciation may not be a reasonable goal for all learners, but when the game is perceived as the task, so nobody feels left out. Discretion and setting a good example is the better part of being a good pronunciation teacher.

## The Rule

Third person, possessive and plural “S” occur in three varieties: /s/ as in drinks, /z/ as in flies, and /ɪz/ as in matches.<sup>1</sup> The

MacLean, G. R. (2015). Teaching pronunciation of the “S” morpheme. *OTB Forum*, 7(1), 53-56.

Table 1. *Pronunciation of the “S” Morpheme*

Form	Category		
	/s/ unvoiced	/z/ voiced	/ɪz/ sibilant
Plural	eats	gives	wishes
Third Person	gets	buys	passes
Possessive	Eric’s	Sam’s	Chris’s

set consisting of /s/, /z/, /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. It would be good to demonstrate these sounds as well and perhaps display examples that do not occur in the activity somewhere so that the students can refer to them.

### The Activity

I have used the following activity to teach new vocabulary words, spelling and, in its best incarnation, as an aid to draw students’ attention toward their pronunciation challenges and to heighten their concern for better pronunciation.

Whatever your students’ nationality or nationalities may be, Avery and Ehrlich’s chapter on problems of selected language groups in their book *Teaching American English Pronunciation* (1995) can be especially helpful. In this case, I have selected third person “S” as the target pronunciation form for this activity.

pronunciation of “S” varies according to whether the preceding sound is voiced, unvoiced or sibilant (See Table 1).

It would be a good idea prior to any pronunciation activity featuring “S” to explain the above categories. For voiced versus voiceless sounds, have students put their fingers on their Adam’s apple and say a few of the target words from the activity, e.g., eats, or buys. Students will be able to feel their Adam’s apple vibrate because vocal cords vibrate when a sound is voiced. Where there is no vibration, the sound is voiceless. As for the English sibilants, they are a closed

Target Level: Beginner – Advanced

Objectives: Develop phonological awareness  
 Promote student-student negotiation  
 Promote a learner-centered classroom

Skills: Listening and speaking

Materials: F1 Bingo!!! A Sheet and B Sheet (See Appendix A)

Time: Approximately 20 minutes

Procedure:

1. Prepare a list of words according to your students’ pronunciation challenges, for example, third person “S” (See Appendix B). For the student handouts, do not include the phonological information about which category the words belong to.
2. Introduce the target words to the students and practice them. Divide the students into pairs. Give one student ‘A sheet’ and one student ‘B sheet’.
3. Let students dictate their words to each other. Student A has to write the words Student B says in the blanks on his/her sheet and vice versa.
4. Once students have written out all the words, correct their answers as a group using the answer sheet (Appendix B), and address any questions they might have. This is a good chance for supplementary instruction too. Alternatively, make copies of the answer sheet sheet and have the students correct their answers in their pairs.
5. There are twelve spaces in the racetracks at the top of Handouts A and B. Have the students choose three words from each of the columns at the bottom of their handout, and write the words in the blanks on the racetrack at the top of their handout.

6. Let the races begin! (play bingo). The announcer should non-sequentially read one word from each column from left to right until there is a winner. Continue and acknowledge second place and third place. Pick up the pace and finish reading all the words thereafter. It is not uncommon for some students to miss words and thus have words that are not crossed out at the end.

7. Display the target words in the three phonetic categories (voiced, unvoiced, sibilant) and have students evaluate their results (See Appendix C).

**Note**

<sup>1</sup>The phoneme shown here as /i/ is a high, front, lax, unrounded vowel as pronounced in *fit* or *win* in North American English. Depending on the notational system used, it can be written as /i/ or /ɪ/.

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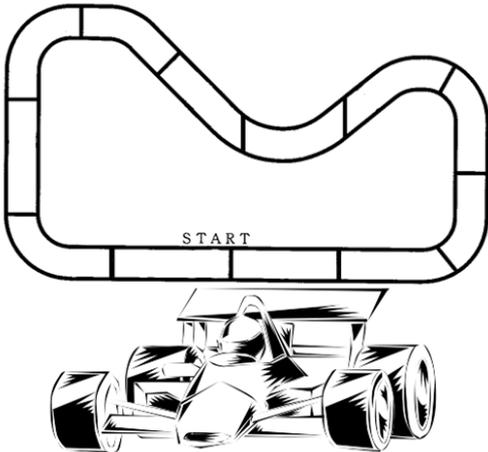
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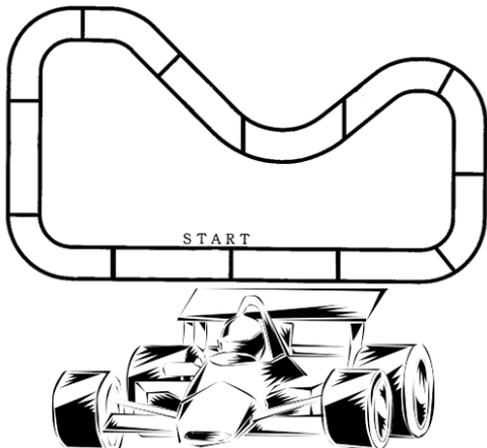
**About the author: George Robert MacLean**, professor at the University of Ryūkyūs, has taught at primary-junior high and university levels in the Japanese and the International School systems, as well as serving as an administrator. His research areas include materials development, mobile-learning, CALL, conversation analysis, and intercultural communications.

Appendix A. F1 Bingo Sheets A and B

**F1 Bingo!!! A sheet**



**F1 Bingo!!! B sheet**



gives _____	studies _____		
hatches _____	walks _____	buys _____	looks _____
hides _____	takes _____	pushes _____	loves _____
hopes _____	drives _____	drinks _____	matches _____
taxes _____	watches _____	eats _____	moves _____
supposes _____	waxes _____	expresses _____	passes _____
jumps _____	wishes _____	faxes _____	puts _____
lets _____	writes _____	flies _____	reads _____
		gets _____	runs _____

Appendix B. F1 Bingo Answers with Categories Indicated

/s/ unvoiced	/z/ voiced	/iz/ sibilant
hopes	gives	hatches
jumps	hides	taxes
lets	buys	pushes
drinks	flies	expresses
eats	studies	faxes
gets	loves	supposes
takes	moves	watches
walks	reads	waxes
writes	runs	wishes
looks	drives	matches
puts		passes

Appendix C. F1 Bingo Answers with Third-Person “S” Categorized

/s/ unvoiced	/z/ voiced	/iz/ sibilant
hopes	gives	hatches
jumps	hides	taxes
lets	buys	pushes
drinks	flies	expresses
eats	studies	faxes
gets	loves	supposes
takes	moves	watches
walks	reads	waxes
writes	runs	wishes
looks	drives	matches
puts		passes