

## Summary

This writing sample, formatted using APA Style, focuses closely on nuances of the English language. It demonstrates deeply researched, error free copy that discusses the English 'th' sound. The English 'th' sound is pronounced two slightly different ways that can be indistinguishable to non-native English speakers. The advanced content is presented in a way that is understandable to non-experts, a pillar of technical communication.

This writing sample is an effective example of technical communication. Linguistics and technical communication intersect naturally. Linguistics encapsulates the study of language variation. Technical communicators must be aware of language variation to communicate effectively with diverse audiences.

**Teaching the 'th' Sound in a K-4 ESL Classroom**

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## Teaching the ‘th’ Sound in a K-4 ESL Classroom

One of the most frequently used sounds in English is the ‘th’ sound, but many other languages do not use the ‘th’ sound at all. Therefore, many ESL/EFL students and/or emergent bilinguals struggle producing it. For clarity, I will henceforth be referring to ESL/EFL students and/or emergent bilinguals as ELLs, which stands for English Language Learners. Through extensive research, I created a lesson plan that is designed to be used in future academic studies composed of ELLs grades K-4. The lesson plan employs researched learning strategies that seek to engage students while conditioning muscles in their mouths they have never used before. The lesson plan should be used over a nine-week period with two sessions of 45 minutes each week. When the nine weeks conclude, the students will have made improvement in the physical production of the ‘th’ sound. The purpose is not for students to pronounce ‘th’ perfectly by the end of the course, but to have made improvement in pronunciation from the beginning of the course.

There are two ‘th’ sounds in the English language. Because English is not a phonetic language, The International Phonetic Alphabet must be consulted to differentiate between the two ‘th’ sounds. The Phonetic Alphabet is an indispensable tool that was created because the same spelling can produce different sounds, and different spellings can produce the same sound. The Phonetic Alphabet pairs one sound to one symbol and vice versa. The ‘th’ sound in English is not a combination of a /t/ and an /h/. It is a separate and distinct consonant sound (Woods, 1976, p. 1). English features the voiceless interdental fricative [θ] sound, which is called “theta,” as in “thick /θɪk/, ethnic /ɛθnɪk/ and sheath /ʃiθ/” and the voiced interdental fricative [ð] sound, which is called “eth,” as in “thus /ðʌs/, within /wɪðɪn/ and lathe /leɪð/” (Karakaş & Sönmez, 2011, p. 74). When a sound is interdental, it is produced by lightly placing the tongue against the backs of the upper front teeth so that the tip touches the cutting surface of the upper teeth

(Woods, 1976, p. 2). When a sound is fricative, it means the sound continues for longer than many other consonants. The [θ] sound can be pronounced for as long as the speaker's breath upholds. Because of the difficulties that ELLs face when trying to pronounce the 'th' sound(s), extensive research has been conducted to uncover whether there is a genetic component that allows speakers to produce the interdental fricative or hinders them from doing so. C.D.

Darlington used maps to track the areas of past and present occurrence of the dental fricative in Europe and other areas that showed frequencies of the O blood gene (Brosnahan, 1959, p. 183).

R.W. Thompson rejects the idea that there is a genetic component involved in creating the dental fricative sound that inhibits ELLs from achieving native or near native pronunciation of the 'th' sound and takes the stance that phonetic preference of the individual and the collective depends on cultural background, not racial background (Thompson, 1958, p. 184). Furthermore, when a sound is voiceless, the speaker's vocal cords do not vibrate. Therefore, when a sound is voiced, the vocal cords vibrate. [θ] is produced by placing the tongue on, or very close to, the cutting edge of the front teeth and passing an unvoiced stream of air through the small gap between the tongue and the teeth. The lower teeth touch the underside of the tongue, and velopharyngeal closure is complete, or almost complete. The sound that is emitted comes from the friction created by the passage of air (Carr, 1967, p. 9). [ð] is pronounced by placing the tip of the tongue in soft contact with the backs of the front teeth and passing a voiced stream of air through the small space between the tongue and the teeth. Moreover, the velum is closed, and the sides of the tongue touch the upper molars (Carr, 1967, p. 9). Both [θ] and [ð] are used frequently in English. The word "the" is used approximately every 11 words (Carr, 1967, p. 7). Moreover, the words "that, they, this, there, them, these, thing, think and with" contribute to the extraordinarily high frequency of 'th' (Carr 1967, p. 7).

ESL instructors have difficulty pointing their students to helpful materials because most popular American phonetics books cater toward the native English speaker and are used to train teachers, not to teach students. The books incorrectly assume the reader already knows how to make the ‘th’ sound. They are also confusing because writers with the native English speaker in mind describe the tongue placement for the post-dental tongue-tip position, that we will not discuss, as well as the interdental one earlier described, and allow the reader to choose between the two. However, for ELLs it is important to present only the interdental placement because the post-dental placement leads directly to the substitution of /t/, /d/, /s/, or /z/ for the English ‘th’ sounds (Carr, 1967, p. 8). ESL instructors must get creative when teaching pronunciation. They have to be extremely hands-on when explaining how to produce and differentiate between [θ] and [ð]. The ultimate objective in teaching correct pronunciation in ESL classes is to improve students’ communication through suprasegmentals, “a group which continues over more than one sound using stress, intonation, etc.” (Gillette, 1994, p. 12). Teaching the ‘th’ sound(s) independently from other words is necessary at first to train young students how to position their mouths correctly, but students’ pronunciation of ‘th’ in close juncture with other sounds, especially consonant sounds, i.e., consonant clusters, is of utmost interest to researchers. Learning strategies, broadly defined as sets of operations that facilitate acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information, enhance development of oral skills (O’Malley, et al., 1985, p. 578). The lesson plan utilizes numerous different learning strategies to improve students’ pronunciation. The lesson plan will first focus on the isolated ‘th’ sound(s) and gradually move toward the ‘th’ sound(s) in relation to other sounds.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This study will be conducted at the elementary school level, with participants grades K-4. The ideal classroom size for this study is 8-10 students. This lesson plan is designed for a pull-out ESL class that meets twice a week for 45 minutes each session. After conducting research on the ‘th’ sound(s) and subsequent learning strategies, I compiled different activities for a lesson plan to teach the ‘th’ sound to participants of various linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. This study is not designed for a specific racial or ethnic demographic. It is designed for all non-native English speakers grades K-4. The study will take place over a nine-week period, 18 classes total, and will closely monitor participants’ improvements in the pronunciation of [θ] and [ð] and evaluate the implications of using specific learning strategies.

### **Procedure**

ESL instructors have to plan learning strategies, facilitate classroom participation, solve problems that arise, and evaluate students’ progress. Learning strategies, defined broadly as goal-directed tasks with a metacognitive component that involve learner responsibility, are a vital component of ESL instruction. Instructors must select appropriate strategies that are conscious of students’ needs. Furthermore, instructors must model the strategies and provide students with adequate practice opportunities to render positive results (Gunning & Oxford, 2014). A common obstacle involved in elementary ESL classes versus higher-level ESL classes is that students lack English proficiency, so they cannot understand instructions given in English. However, young students cannot wait until they are proficient in English to begin learning strategies. Because of

the language barrier, the elementary ESL classroom implements props and visual stimuli that are not always used in higher education.

### *Week 1*

To learn to pronounce both [θ] and [ð], students must practice again and again in different ways. Nowadays, it is not important to achieve native pronunciation. Insistence on native or near native pronunciation is an example of linguistic imperialism. Educators must avoid perpetuating linguistic imperialism because it has a negative impact on students' cultural identities (Nair, et al., 2017, p. 32). However, students' pronunciation still has to be intelligible for other English speakers. The consonant and vowel sounds that students have trouble with are related to their L1. Many languages do not use 'th' sound at all, so the students have to condition their mouth muscles to form the new sound. The first step to teaching the 'th' sound is to show students the tongue sticking out. It is common for instructors to stick their tongue out exaggeratedly in an elementary ESL class since the directions cannot be explained in words. Protruding the tongue dramatically is not ideal in an adult ESL classroom, but it is necessary when teaching children. The instructor should point to their tongue to help students understand what they should be doing. Students with various cultural backgrounds may feel uncomfortable doing this because their tongues feel awkward in the unfamiliar position. Furthermore, sticking the tongue out does not look nice, and they fear losing face (Soulliere, 2005). The students' discomfort may contribute to heightened emotions in the classroom. The instructor must continually reassure the students that what they are doing is right by clapping or smiling when the students stick out their tongues. Moreover, implementing a reward system will help students understand when they are doing things correctly. A popular reward system is giving students stickers when they do a task correctly, but instructors can get creative with their reward systems and do whatever they want.

Children feel more confident when encouraged that what they are doing is correct. This beginning task should not take up more than 15 minutes of the first session.

After the students each stick out their tongues confidently, the instructor will start puffing air through the minute gap between the tongue and the cutting edge of the upper teeth, creating the [θ] sound. Again, the instructor should point their finger at their tongue to emphasize what they are doing. The instructor should repeat the sound over and over until the students catch on and join in. The teacher should walk around to each student individually, show the student a close-up of their mouth repeating the [θ] sound, and praise the student when they repeat after the teacher correctly, implementing the reward system. Teachers should not draw attention to flaws in students' pronunciation because it will discourage the students (Nair, et al., 2017, p. 31). This activity should take approximately 20 minutes for the teacher to assess and assist each individual student. At this time, the teacher must be extremely conscious of students substituting other sounds for the [θ] sound. Moreover, the teacher needs to make sure that the students are not yet producing the [ð] sound. For the remaining 10 minutes of the first class, the instructor will read a story they wrote prior to the class. The instructor can write about anything that would be entertaining for children. The story should implement as many words with the [θ] sound as possible. The teacher will read the story enthusiastically, emphasizing each [θ] sound. The students will most likely not understand the story, so this is a good time to implement props such as puppets, pictures, or other visual stimuli to represent elements of the story. The point of reading the story, however, is not for the children to know exactly what the instructor is talking about, but to hear the instructor repeat the target sound over and over. The children do not have to repeat the sounds after the short story. They can leave the classroom after the reading is complete and return to their regularly scheduled class.



When the students return for the second 45-minute session of the study, they will repeat exactly what they did during the first session. During the first 15 minutes, the instructor should remind students of proper tongue placement by putting their tongue between their teeth and pointing to their tongue. Again, the instructor is training the students' mouth muscles that are not used to this tongue motion. Like any muscle, the students have to practice to build muscle memory. When the students mimic the correct mouth position, the teacher will administer rewards. The teacher can change reward systems every class to further engage the students, or they can use the same reward system for each session. The next 20 minutes, the teacher will walk around to each student to assist their pronunciation of the [θ] sound as needed. Like in the first session, the teacher will spend the last 10 minutes of class reading from a different short story they created that features numerous [θ] sounds. To reiterate, the short story should be creative, and the teacher should read it animatedly while utilizing visual stimuli. The story presentation should be fun and engaging for the students even if they do not completely understand it.

### ***Week Two***

For the first session of week two, the third session overall, the students will come in the classroom and do their regular warm up with the teacher. The teacher will stick their tongue between their teeth, and the children will mimic the teacher for the first 15 minutes of the class. This week, the students will be given hand mirrors to aid in their pronunciation. For the next 20 minutes of the session, the students will practice pronouncing the isolated [θ] sound while watching their mouths move in the mirrors. The teacher should walk around the classroom at this time to assist each individual student as needed. For the remaining 10 minutes of the first session of the second week, the teacher will compile a list of approximately five simple words that feature the [θ] sound: thin, thanks, think, etc. The teacher will say each word while pointing to

their mouths to emphasize the correct mouth movement. After each word, the teacher will prompt the students to repeat the word by pointing to the students. Photo cards that illustrate each word will be helpful at this point. The children do not have to see the written word yet. The second session of the second week will follow this exact schedule. The only thing that will change is the teacher will compile a different set of five simple words that feature the [θ] sound.

### ***Week Three***

For the first session of the third week, the students will perform a different warm up. The isolated [θ] sound should be the focus of the first 15 minutes of class. The students will use the hand mirrors to watch themselves pronounce the isolated sound. The teacher will walk around the classroom and help the students with pronunciation as needed. Before this session, the instructor should make a slow, close-up video of their mouth pronouncing each of the 10 words featuring the [θ] sound that they used in week two. For the remaining 30 minutes, the instructor should play the video on the smart board or television as many times as they deem necessary. Then the instructor should repeat what they did in week two by reading each of the ten words again, using visual stimuli to illustrate each word's meaning. After saying each word, the teacher will prompt the students to repeat the word. The students will use their hand mirrors to watch their own mouths while they do this. The instructor should remember to implement rewards when appropriate and to avoid overtly pointing out mistakes to boost students' confidence. The second session of the week will mimic the first session exactly.

### ***Week Four - Six***

For the next three sessions, the teacher should repeat the first three sessions exactly, substituting [θ] with [ð]. The teacher can get the students to compare both sounds when appropriate, so they can hear and feel the difference. It is important for the teacher to incorporate

the [θ] sound when they can, so students do not lose the progress they made in the first three weeks.

### ***Week Seven***

At this point, the students have had six weeks experience producing both isolated ‘th’ sounds. They must now begin to produce the [θ] and [ð] sounds in relation to each other and other sounds. Some people argue that drilling the isolated sound is futile, and this could be correct for adult ELLs, but it is necessary for young ELLs to be introduced to the isolated sound repeatedly before using it in a sentence. ‘Th’ sounds are made with the tongue placed further toward the front of the mouth than any other sounds, naturally requiring a physical adjustment to other sounds in the flow of speech (Carr, 1967, p. 8). The first session of week seven will focus on minimal pairs. The minimal pairs method is used to teach pronunciation in ESL classrooms. Because students tend to substitute the ‘th’ sounds with sounds they have in their L1, it is important to pair words together that sound similar, so the students can differentiate between the sounds. For example, good pairs are zen/then, breeze/breathe, close/clothes, etc. The teacher can create as many minimal pairs as desired. In an elementary ESL classroom, it is important to implement games. Children will easily lose focus if the teacher turns around to write minimal pairs on the board. Instead, the instructor should stay facing the students. Tamara Jones suggests playing the minimal pairs flyswatter game (Jones, 2015, p. 39). The game can be modified to suit classroom needs, and it has been modified for this study. The children will line up facing the teacher and take turns playing the game one at a time. When they finish their turn, they go to the back of the line and wait for their next turn. The first student will get the flyswatter from the teacher, and each student will pass it to the student behind them when their turn is finished. The instructor should prepare note cards before class. Two note cards will make a minimal pair. The

instructor will hold one card in the left hand and one card in the right hand (For example, “zen” in left hand and “then” in right hand). Depending on the age level and/or education experience, the children may or may not be able to read the note cards, but that is okay. The teacher will emphasize each card by reading it out loud and drawing attention to it by shaking it or holding it up. For instance, the instructor will read the left card “zen,” shake it or hold it up, and return the card to its original position. Then the instructor will read the right card, “zen,” shake it or hold it up, and return the card to its original position. The student whose turn it is will swat the card with the “th” sound. The instructor will have to repeat the cards and the motions a few times to help children understand how to play the game. Filming a short demonstration video before class and playing it on the smartboard at the beginning of class could also help students understand how to play the game. The teacher should continually switch the hand that holds the card with the ‘th’ sound to make students think. The game should be completed within 30 minutes of class time. For the remaining 15 minutes, the instructor should read each minimal pair that was discussed that day and get students to repeat the minimal pairs. The second session of week seven should mimic the first session exactly, but the teacher should come up with different minimal pairs.

### ***Week Eight***

Because students practiced saying the two ‘th’ sounds in relation to other sounds in the previous week, the students will start to repeat simple sentences during the first session of the eighth week. The first session of the eighth week will focus solely on sentences with the [θ] sound. Some example sentences are “A thousand people think,” “I throw a third pitch,” “There’s nothing in his mouth,” etc. The teacher can come up with their own sentences, but they must make sure that the sentences do not yet feature the [ð] sound. The students should use their hand

mirrors when repeating the sentences. This should take the entire session. For the second session of week eight, the students will repeat simple sentences with the [ð] sound such as, “This is their cat,” “That is her brother,” “The father is worthy.” Again, the teacher can create their own sentences, but they must refrain from using words with the [θ] sound. The instructor should remember to use photo cards or other visual stimuli to illustrate the sentences in both week eight sessions.

### ***Week Nine***

Week nine is the last week of the study. During week nine, the students will repeat simple sentences that feature words with both the [θ] and [ð] sound while using their hand mirrors to watch themselves. Some sentences that could be used are, “I think the thing is broken,” “Thank you for the thought.” “The north weather is cold,” etc. Like in week eight, the instructor should come up with enough sentences to take up the entire 45 minutes of the class. Again, the instructor should use visual stimuli to engage the students and help them understand what the teacher is talking about even if the students do not totally understand the sentences. The goal is not for them to completely understand the sentences, but to practice adjusting their mouths when using the [θ] and [ð] sounds in a sentence. The second session of week nine will mimic the first session exactly, but the instructor should prepare different sentences that feature both the [θ] and [ð] sound than the sentences used in the first session of week nine.

### **Implications**

The research used to create this lesson plan implies that repetitive drills on both isolated ‘th’ sounds condition students’ mouth muscles which later makes it easier for the students to produce the sounds in relation to other sounds in a sentence. Non-native English-speaking students that do not have the ‘th’ sound(s) in their L1 vocabulary have to train the muscles in their mouths just

like athletes train their bodies. The repetition used in this study seems tedious at times, but it is necessary. Moreover, the study explores the notion that when students use hand mirrors to watch themselves produce, or attempt to produce, the target sound, rather than only watching their teacher produce the target sound, it is beneficial in getting the students to efficiently adjust their mouths to form the correct sound (Jones, 2015, p. 45). Because the study is designed for students K-4, it is important to incorporate fun things into the curriculum like stories, games, and visual stimuli. When conducting this study in the classroom, teachers should not misunderstand the purpose of visual stimuli. The visual stimuli such as pictures or puppets used to illustrate sentences are not meant to teach vocabulary words. If the students naturally learn vocabulary words, that is just a bonus. The visual stimuli are just to help students get a general idea of what the instructor is talking about, but they do not have to know the exact meaning of the sentences. At the end of the study, students are probably not going to be producing sentences, or possibly even words, that feature the 'th' sound without assistance, but that is not the intended result. Research shows that the students' production of both the [θ] and [ð] sounds will improve throughout the study. A nine-week course is not an adequate amount of time to achieve significant results, but it will provide a foundation for students without prior experience producing the 'th' sound.

### **Conclusion**

English frequently uses the phonetic sounds, [θ] and [ð]. Many ELLs do not have prior experience producing the 'th' sound because their L1 does not include the sound at all. Without proper training, they physically cannot produce the sound or hear the difference between [θ] and [ð]. Because the lesson plan is designed for elementary ELLs ages K-4, it commands teachers to

use age-appropriate learning strategies. ESL studies before, and they have been successful in  
Further studies that replicate this lesson plan efficiently will render positive results.

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