

Fonetic English

Tutor Guide: Teaching Non-Native English Speakers

How to use the FE tools to take ESL students from no English to fluent reading

1. Why teaching ESL students is different

A native English speaker who struggles to read has one core problem: they cannot reliably connect written letters to the sounds they already know. They can speak the language fluently. They know thousands of words. They just cannot decode the written form.

An ESL student may face up to three separate problems at once:

- Sounds they cannot hear or produce. English has sounds that do not exist in many languages. A student who cannot hear the difference between two sounds cannot learn to read words that depend on that difference.
- Words whose meanings they do not know. Even if an ESL student can sound out a word perfectly, they may have no idea what it means.
- A spelling system that does not match sound. This is the same problem native speakers face — English spelling is erratic and does not give a reader enough information to decode a word reliably.

Fonetic English solves the third problem for everyone. But for ESL students, the tutor must also address the first two. This is why the ESL teaching sequence starts differently — with sounds and pronunciation — before moving to the tools that native speakers use from the beginning.

The good news: ESL students who build a solid foundation in English sounds progress very quickly. Once a student can hear and produce English sounds accurately, everything else — syllables, vocabulary, reading — builds on that foundation and accelerates.

2. Know your student before you start

The single most important thing you can do before the first session is understand where your student is starting from. ESL students arrive with vastly different backgrounds, and the right starting point varies enormously.

What to find out

Native language. This tells you immediately which English sounds will be easy, which will need practice, and which may be genuinely difficult to produce. The FE tools have analysed a large number of languages and will reorganise the English Sounds tool based on the student's language. But knowing this in advance helps you plan the first session.

Literacy in the native language. Can the student read and write in their own language? This matters more than it might seem. A student who is literate in a phonetic language — such as Spanish, Italian, or Indonesian — already understands how to sound out written words letter by letter. They will grasp the concept of progressive sounding out immediately and will likely be reading English words within the first few sessions. A student who cannot read in their own language will need to be taught the concept of decoding from scratch.

Does the native language use the Roman alphabet? Students whose language uses Roman letters — French, Spanish, German, Vietnamese, Indonesian — face a specific challenge: they already associate sounds with those letters, but some of those associations are different in English. The letter 'j' in Spanish sounds nothing like 'j' in English. The letter 'e' in French is not the same as in English. These students need to actively unlearn some associations, which requires more deliberate practice than simply learning new ones.

Does the native language use a non-Roman script? Students whose language uses a different writing system entirely — Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic, Hindi, Korean — come without any preconceptions about what Roman letters sound like. This is actually an advantage: they have nothing to unlearn. However, some of these languages have Roman phonetic systems that students may know. Mandarin speakers may know Pinyin; Japanese speakers may know Romaji. Both use Roman letters but with different sound assignments to English, so the same issue of unlearning applies, though usually to a smaller set of sounds.

Prior English education and current level. Has the student studied English formally? For how long? Some students — particularly from Asian countries where English is taught extensively in schools — have a large passive vocabulary. They know what many words mean when they read them slowly, but cannot hear or speak English well because their schooling focused on grammar and translation rather than listening and speaking. These students need pronunciation work more than vocabulary work. Others are true beginners across the board.

Goals. Most adult ESL students have a specific goal. IELTS is the most common — a high IELTS score requires strong vocabulary across all CEFR levels from A0 to B2, and the ability to read extended texts with comprehension. Other students want English for work, travel, family, or study. Goals affect which vocabulary topics to prioritise and what kind of reading material to use in the eReader.

What different backgrounds tell you

Student background	What this means for your starting point
Speaks a phonetic language (Spanish, Italian, Indonesian)	Concept of sounding out words is already understood. Focus on FE characters and missing/difficult sounds. Progress will be fast.
Speaks a language with Roman alphabet but different sounds (French, German, Vietnamese)	Must unlearn some letter-sound associations. Allow extra time on those specific sounds. Use the 'close sounds' and 'missing sounds' categories carefully.
Speaks a language with Pinyin or Romaji (Mandarin, Japanese)	Knows Roman letters with different sound values. Treat these like Roman alphabet speakers for those specific letters. Missing English sounds need full attention.
Speaks a non-Roman script language with no prior Roman exposure (Arabic, Korean, Hindi)	No preconceptions to unlearn. Learns FE characters fresh. Missing sounds are the main challenge.
Literate in own language	Understands the concept of written language. Can transfer literacy skills once sounds are established.
Not literate in own language	Must learn the concept of decoding from scratch alongside the sounds themselves. More time needed in early stages.
Studied English at school, large passive vocabulary	Focus on pronunciation and listening. May be able to move quickly through vocabulary. Get them reading early.
Heritage speaker (grew up hearing English at home)	Good auditory discrimination, possibly good pronunciation, some vocabulary. May not be able to read. Will progress very quickly through all stages.
True beginner, no prior English	Start at A0. First session is entirely sounds. Expect a slower initial pace that accelerates quickly once sounds are established.

3. What the student sees in FE text

This section is the same as for native English speakers and is worth reading if you have not seen it already.

The goal is not for a student to consciously apply rules. The goal is for recognition to become so fast and effortless that the student does not have to think at all. This is called automaticity, and it is what separates a fluent reader and speaker from a struggling one. Fluent readers can devote all their focus to understanding what they read.

The FE tools measure automaticity directly through response time. When a student responds quickly and correctly, their brain is recognising — not calculating. When they are slow, they are still thinking it through. Your job is to help them move from thinking to recognising.

What this means in practice

Praise effort and the willingness to correct, not right answers.

A wrong answer is valuable. It tells the student's brain exactly what needs to change. A student who gets something wrong and then corrects it is learning more effectively than a student who guesses right.

Do not make a big deal of errors. The system corrects them automatically. Keep the student in a relaxed, focused state where they can move quickly and try again without anxiety.

Speed is the signal you are watching. When response times drop, the student is building the neural pathways needed for fluent reading and listening.

5. The ESL teaching sequence

The sequence for ESL students follows the same overall path as for native speakers, but with one important addition at the beginning: a full focus on sounds and pronunciation before anything else.

Here is why this matters. A student who cannot accurately hear the difference between two English sounds will build their entire vocabulary on a shaky foundation. They will mishear words, mispronounce them, and fail to recognise them when spoken at normal speed. Accurate auditory discrimination and pronunciation work is not a nice extra — it is the foundation that everything else depends on.

Stage	Focus	When
1	English sounds — all 42 phonemes, with emphasis on missing and difficult sounds for the student's language	First session and ongoing until solid
2	Pronunciation training — mouth movements, recording and self-correction, auditory discrimination	Runs alongside Stage 1 from the first session
3	Syllable sounds — progressive sounding out, syllable recognition, word recognition by sight	Begins once student has a working knowledge of FE characters
4	Vocabulary and early reading — learning word meanings through simple sentences, building sight words	Begins early, runs in parallel with Stage 3
5	Extended reading — eReader practice texts with comprehension questions	Typically from around Grade 3 equivalent reading level

Stages 3, 4 and 5 overlap and run in parallel once a student has a solid foundation in sounds. Stage 1 and 2 work must continue alongside the others whenever gaps are identified.

6. The teaching tools in detail

FE has 9 important tools. Each targets a specific skill. For ESL students, the English Sounds tool and the Pronunciation Training tools are far more central than they are for native speakers. The description below reflects the ESL-specific emphasis for each tool.

Note: you can open two tool windows at the same time. This is essential for ESL students — for example, having the English Sounds tool open alongside the Pronunciation Instructions tool, or the eReader open alongside the Pronounce Any Word tool.

Tool 1 — English Sounds

This is where every ESL student starts. It covers all 42 English sounds and their FE representations. For ESL students, the tool does something additional that is not needed for native speakers: it organises the sounds based on the student's native language.

Select the student's language first

Before doing anything else, select the student's native language from the dropdown menu. The tool will then reorganise the 42 sounds into three categories:

- Same sounds — sounds that exist in the student's native language and are produced identically. The student already knows how to make these. They just need to learn the FE character that represents each one. This goes quickly.
- Close sounds — sounds that are similar to something in the native language but not identical. These usually require some attention and practice but are not difficult to acquire.

- Missing sounds — sounds that do not exist in the student's native language at all. These require the most work. The student must first learn how to make the sound physically, then learn to hear it reliably, and then practise it until recognition and production are automatic.

Teaching the sounds in order

Work through the sounds in this order: same sounds first, then close sounds, then missing sounds. This gives the student early wins, builds confidence, and ensures they understand how the tool works before encountering the harder material.

For each sound, ask the student to click on the box to hear it and then produce the sound themselves. Watch and listen carefully. Even sounds the tool classifies as 'same' may not be produced accurately by every student — some students think they know a sound but are producing a slightly different version.

The Roman alphabet challenge

For students whose native language uses the Roman alphabet — French, Spanish, German, Italian, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and others — there is an extra layer of difficulty. These students already associate sounds with Roman letters, but some of those associations are different in English.

For example, a French speaker sees the letter 'j' and instinctively produces the French sound for it — the 'zh' sound as in 'vision'. In English, 'j' makes a different sound entirely, as in 'jump'. The student must override an existing, automatic association and replace it with a new one. This takes deliberate repetition. Do not rush through these sounds. Spend extra time on any sound where the student's instinctive response is the wrong one.

Pinyin and Romaji speakers

Mandarin speakers who know Pinyin and Japanese speakers who know Romaji face a similar but smaller version of the same challenge. Both systems use Roman letters, but with different sound values to English. A Mandarin speaker may see the letter 'x' in Pinyin and think of the Pinyin 'x' sound, which is not an English sound at all. Identify which specific letters carry different values and give those extra attention.






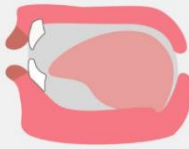
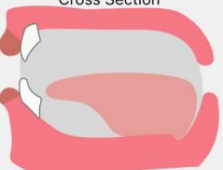


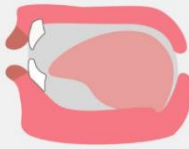
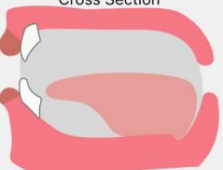

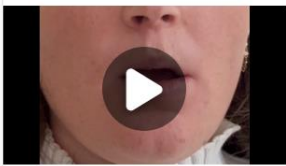



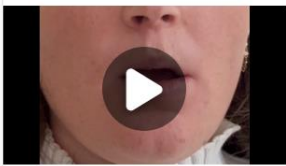




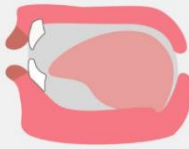
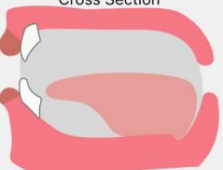

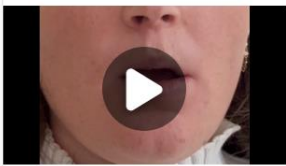


Words that start with missing sounds

For each missing sound, the tool provides a list of ten common English words that begin with that sound. This is useful because it gives the student immediate real-world context. However, some sounds — such as the 'u' in 'put' and the 'zh' sound in 'vision' — do not commonly appear at the start of English words. For these, the word list uses words where the sound appears within the word. Some students may already recognise some of these words from borrowed English words, brand names, or place names in their own language, which can help them anchor the new sound.

Tool 2 — Pronunciation Training

This is the tool that makes the biggest difference for ESL students. Native speakers use it rarely if at all. For ESL students, it is central to the entire teaching process, particularly in the first sessions.

Students are shown how make each English sound. There are images of the mouth from the front and in cross section. There are videos from the front and the side. With a compound sound like /w/ which is made up of the sound /oo/ closely followed by /u/, there is a video of an English speaker making the sound /oo/ then/u/ and combining them into /w/. Students can also record their own sound and compare it with the reference sound on the website.

FE Letters	Example	IPA Spelling	Practice												
W, w, $\overset{w}{O}$, $\overset{w}{o}$, $\overset{w}{U}$, $\overset{w}{u}$ 	w in wind 	W													
Compound Consonants (Voiced)															
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Phoneme and Example word	The sound /w/: /oo/ then /u/														
															
															
Description															
<p>Step 1: Start with /oo/: make a narrow circle with your mouth and blow out air while voicing with your throat.</p> <p>Step 2: Quickly glide to the “u” sound, opening your mouth as if you are about to take a big bite. The tongue is low and flat in the mouth and the sound resonates from the back of the throat.</p>															

As students practice making these sound, students will hear themselves making the sounds. This can be very helpful for some students.

The tool has two distinct training systems: Missing Sound Training and Difficult Sound Training. These address different problems.

Tool 3 - Soft Sounds: f, h, l, p, th

The mouth movements for these sounds are relatively easy to make but the sound produced is soft, so a number of students don't think they are making the sound correctly when they are. These sounds are almost never used by themselves in English: they are always followed by a vowel. Fonetic English has taken the 5 soft sound and recorded each of the soft sounds followed by a vowel. Regardless of their native language, students can practice their pronunciation by recording their sound and comparing it to the reference sound on the website.

Tool 4 - Missing Sound Training

A missing sound is one that does not exist in the student's native language. The student has never produced this sound before and may struggle even to hear it accurately. Missing Sound Training follows three stages:

Stage 1 — Instruction and first production

The tutor pages through the usual sounds of English in the English Sounds tool, asking the student to make each sound. This serves two purposes: it teaches the student how to use the tool, and it identifies which sounds the student cannot produce accurately.

For each problem sound, open the Pronunciation Instructions tool in a separate window alongside the English Sounds tool. The Pronunciation Instructions tool shows the student exactly how to make the sound — lips position, tongue position, airflow, and whether the sound is voiced or unvoiced.

Help the student get their camera working and open in a window next to the Pronunciation Instructions window. Being able to see their own mouth while watching the instruction makes a significant difference.

Ask the student to attempt the sound. Give feedback. Correct their mouth position if needed. Then ask them to try again. Even a brief period of focused practice on a single sound can produce noticeable improvement very quickly. A French speaker can learn to produce the unvoiced 'th' sound — a sound that does not exist in French — in a matter of minutes with the right instruction and a little practice.

Stage 2 — Listening discrimination

Once the student can produce the sound, they need to be able to hear it reliably in syllables and words. This is not the same skill as producing it. The Missing Sound Tool uses the Sounding out Syllables tool to teach missing sounds to students. The lessons are different for each language, as each language has different missing sounds. The lessons are indexed by missing sound, so a student wanting to learn a missing sound first selects their native language and then selects the Fonetic English character that makes the missing sound from a drop down list of missing sounds.

Fonetic English has analysed the sounds (phonemes) of many languages and has classified the sounds into exact and close matches and missing sounds. Phonetic English has selected syllables which have a missing sound and common phonemes – sounds which are in both the foreign language and in English – so that the student will be able to partially discriminate the syllable sounds. The student listens to syllables containing the target sound and selects the correct box. At this stage they do not record their pronunciation. The goal is purely auditory discrimination — training the brain to distinguish this sound from others.

Lessons are organised by difficulty. Earlier lessons use syllables where the target sound is easy to discriminate. This usually means there are 2 or more common phonemes. Later lessons use syllables that are more challenging — for example, reducing the number of sounds that are shared between the two languages.

Stage 3 — Pronunciation practice with self-correction

Once the student can hear the sound reliably, they practise recording their own pronunciation and comparing it to the reference recording.

In the Syllable tool, a red microphone icon indicates that the student can record. The student records themselves producing the sound, then hears their recording and the reference recording played back continuously one after the other until the student presses the stop button. They can replay the sound comparison as many times as they want.

This is a powerful self-improvement loop. The student does not need the tutor present to do this — once you have shown them how to use it, they can practise independently. Teach the student how to use this feature in the first session and assign it as a key homework task.

The recording feature is available in many of the FE tools, not just the Syllable tool. Look for the red microphone icon.

Tool 5 - Difficult Sound Training

Difficult sounds are different from missing sounds. A difficult sound contrast occurs when two English sounds exist in the student's language but are confused with each other. The student can produce both sounds but cannot reliably distinguish them in English. This means that difficult sounds are taught in pairs.

The most common example is l versus r — a contrast that is difficult for many East Asian language speakers. Both sounds exist in some form in these languages, but not as distinct phonemes. The student hears them as the same sound and produces them interchangeably.

Other common difficult contrasts include:

- Unvoiced 'th' versus 't' (as in 'think' versus 'tank')
- Unvoiced 'th' versus voiced 'th' (as in 'think' versus 'that')
- Voiced and unvoiced pairs: f/v, s/z, sh/zh, p/b, t/d, k/g

Mouth movement exercises: suggested exercises for specific languages are available in the tutor section of the website — show students and parents where they are and how to use them.

- For voiced and unvoiced pairs, a useful teaching exercise is to have the student keep their mouth still and change the sound by engaging and disengaging the voice box.
- Alternate mouth movements e.g. making the sounds: 'l r l r l r' in quick succession can help the student to integrate the mouth movements so that they make the correct mouth movements when pronouncing l or r without having to think. This builds muscle memory and helps the student feel the physical difference between the two sounds.

The Difficult Sound Tool uses the Sounding out Syllables tool to teach difficult sound pairs to students. The lessons are different for each language, as each language has different difficult sound pairs. The lessons are indexed by the two difficult sound pairs being taught, so a student wanting to learn a difficult sound first selects their native language and then selects the Phonetic English characters that makes the difficult sound pairs from a drop down list of difficult sound pairs. Difficult sound lessons contain the missing sound pairs and real English words in FE that differ only in the difficult sound — for example, 'thank' and 'tank', or 'thin' and 'tin'. The student hears a word and must select the correct box. Lessons are named using the two contrasting sounds, for example l-r.1, l-r.2, th-t.1, and so on.

Important rule for difficult sound lessons

Lessons should only contain words with one difficult sound pair at a time. Do not use a word that contains two difficult sounds simultaneously, as this makes it much more difficult for the student to isolate what they are practising.

For example, if both /a/ and /r/ are difficult for a student, do not use the word 'brat' which contains both. Use words that isolate a single contrast.

Tool 6 — Sounding Out Syllables

Once a student has a working knowledge of the FE characters and can produce the main English sounds, this tool becomes the engine of decoding progress. It teaches students to recognise the sounds of syllables quickly and reliably. Once a student can recognize a number of syllables, the student can sound out words syllable by syllable to quickly learn to recognize words by sight — sightwords — you see a word, recognize its shape and instantly know its sound and meaning.

Why syllables?

A syllable is short. Because it is short, it puts very little load on working memory — the part of the brain that holds information while thinking. Working memory can only hold about 2 to 4 new pieces of information at a time, and for as little as 20 seconds.

When a student learns the sound of a syllable — sees it and instantly knows its sound — that syllable moves into long-term memory and no longer occupies working memory space. Learning just 200 of the most common syllables is enough to decode thousands of English words by sounding the words out syllable by syllable.

Progressive sounding out

The key technique is progressive sounding out. Rather than saying each sound separately and then trying to blend them (/c/ ... /a/ ... /t/ ... cat), the student builds the syllable step by step:

- /m/ → /me/ → /men/ → /ment/

At each step, the student holds only two things in working memory: the sound built so far, and the next sound to add. This keeps cognitive load small and makes accurate blending much easier.

For students from phonetic language backgrounds: the concept of progressive sounding out will be immediately intuitive. These students already know how to decode written words by sounding them out, because they do it in their own language. Once they grasp the FE characters, progress on syllables tends to be fast.

For students from non-phonetic or logographic language backgrounds: for example, speakers whose native writing system uses characters rather than letters — the concept of sounding out may need more time to establish. These students may initially try to memorise the whole word rather than decode it sound by sound. Demonstrate progressive sounding out clearly and practise it explicitly before moving into Practice Mode. [Note: both Mandarin and Japanese are logographic languages, but Pinyin for Mandarin and Romaji for Japanese are Roman alphabet representations used for typing in words on a QWERTY keyboard which are then translated into a logographic character.]

Learning Mode

The student sees a grid of syllable boxes. Clicking a box plays the full syllable. Clicking the speaker icon plays the syllable progressively sounded out. The student repeats each syllable aloud. The recording feature is available here — encourage students to use it to compare their pronunciation with the reference.

Practice Mode — Basic

The student has the same 6 boxes as in Learning Mode. A sound is played and the student clicks the correct syllable. Response time is recorded. The aim is to drive response times down until recognition is automatic.

Practice Mode — Advanced

Advanced mode displays syllables the student may not have seen before. A sound is played and the student must click the box or boxes that contain characters representing that sound – there can be more than one box. This requires decoding on the fly — which reinforces FE character sounds and builds the habit of sounding out syllables progressively.

Tool 7 - Pronounce Any English Word

The student types in any word and hears it pronounced — as a whole word, syllable by syllable, and with each syllable progressively sounded out. This is an essential reference tool for ESL students during reading. Open it in a window alongside the eReader so the student can look up any word immediately.

Tool 8 — Vocabulary

A native speaker learning to read already knows what a lot of words mean — they just cannot decode the written form. It is assumed that native English speakers already know the meaning A0 and A1 CEFR words. Clicking on a word will display the meaning of the word written in very simple English: e.g. the meaning of an A2 word will be written using A0 or A1 words.

Vocabulary is far more central for ESL students than for native speakers. An ESL student must learn both the sound and the meaning simultaneously.

The FE vocabulary system teaches words in sentences rather than as isolated items. This matters because words change meaning depending on context, and sentences give the student the auditory, visual, contextual, and translational cues all at once. Research consistently shows that multiple simultaneous cues produce much stronger and more lasting memory than a single cue.

The six-step learning cycle

Every word is learned through the same cycle:

1. The student reads a sentence containing the target word in FE text.
2. Before clicking on the word, the student tries to infer its meaning from context. This step is critical — students who infer before clicking remember the word approximately three times longer than students who click immediately.
3. The student clicks the word to verify. They hear the native pronunciation and see the precise translation into their language. Many words have multiple meanings. “Star” has 5 meanings: a hot ball of gas in space radiating light, an asterisk, a 5 or more pointed 2 dimensional image, someone who is good at something, and a movie star. Having the words in a sentence means that the student will be given the precise translation of the word in that sentence. Students can also have the Fonetec English Dictionary open in a separate window to see the other meanings of a word.
4. After every five or so sentences, the system presents a quiz. The student must pass three times per word for the system to record that the student knows the word.
5. The word is marked as known and added to the student's vocabulary count.

- Spaced reviews are scheduled automatically, such as: 2 days later, then 1 week, 2 weeks, 1 month, 2 months, and ongoing. Without spaced reviews, approximately 80% of new vocabulary is forgotten within a month. With them, 95% or more is retained long-term.

The most important habit to establish: infer before clicking

The single biggest factor in long-term retention is whether the student tries to work out a word's meaning before clicking to verify it. Even if they are wrong, the attempt to infer creates a memory trace that the verification then strengthens.

In the first few sessions, do not let the student click immediately. Ask: 'What do you think this word means? What clues do you have from the sentence?' Then let them click to check.

The dashboard will show whether students are pausing before clicking or clicking immediately. Check this at the start of every session in the early weeks. [Note: this is not right at the moment but it would be good to add. Not sure how to do it.]

Vocabulary levels for ESL students

Vocabulary is organised by CEFR level: A0, A1, A2, B1, and B2. Unlike native speakers, ESL students cannot be assumed to know A0 or A1 vocabulary already. The tutor should estimate a starting level based on what they know about the student and adjust quickly based on what the first session reveals.

Starting point	Recommended vocabulary level
True beginner, no prior English	A0 — 349 core survival words
Some basic English (greetings, numbers, colours)	A0–A1, skip known items quickly
Studied English at school, can read slowly	A1–A2 — assess first session
Conversational English, wants IELTS preparation	A2–B1 — assess and place precisely
Strong spoken English but weak reading/writing	Test at B1, may be able to start higher
Heritage speaker (English heard at home)	Assess carefully — may know B1+ vocabulary but lack reading skill

These are starting points only. Adjust immediately based on performance. If the student knows more than 70% of words at a level already, move up. If they are struggling with more than 30% of new words, move down.

A0 vocabulary: survival sentences

A0 vocabulary is taught through very simple survival sentences — short, practical exchanges covering introductions, basic needs, location, food, numbers, and everyday communication. These sentences use only A0 words and are designed to be immediately useful in real life. Because the sentences are readable in FE from the start, A0 vocabulary work also introduces the student to reading in FE right away.

Translation: essential for ESL, not optional

For ESL students, the translation feature is essential. Every word can be translated into the student's native language at the word level. Every sentence can be translated as a complete sentence. Use the sentence-level translation rather than word-by-word wherever possible, because many words change meaning depending on context and the sentence translation gives the meaning that is correct for that specific use.

Prefixes and suffixes

The vocabulary tool includes courses teaching the meaning of common prefixes and suffixes. This is particularly valuable for ESL students because it allows them to infer the meaning of words they have never seen before. A student who knows the root word 'act' and knows that 're-' means again and '-ion' turns a verb into a noun can work out what 'reaction' means without being taught it directly. This reduces the total vocabulary learning load by approximately 30%.

The tutor's role changes as vocabulary progresses

In the first few sessions, your role is to teach the student how to use the vocabulary system correctly: infer before clicking, complete daily spaced reviews, take quizzes seriously. Once these habits are established — typically after the first three to four weeks — the student can work largely independently. Your role then shifts to accountability: checking the dashboard, identifying problems early, and keeping the student on track.

For students aiming at IELTS, make clear that consistent daily practice is non-negotiable. The expected rate with 30 to 35 minutes of practice per day is approximately 90 to 110 new words per week. At that rate, a student can move from A0 to B2 — all 6,200 words across all levels — in 13 to 17 months. More practice can reduce that time.

Tool 9 — The eReader

The eReader is where extended reading practice happens. For ESL students, it serves two purposes simultaneously: building reading fluency and reinforcing vocabulary in context.

When to start reading

Introduce the eReader as soon as the student can decode short sentences. This is earlier than you might expect. Students do not need to have mastered all 42 sounds or all common syllables before they start reading. Vocabulary sentences in FE are readable from the very early stages, and getting students reading real text quickly is one of the best ways to reinforce everything else they are learning.

Extended reading practice with longer texts and comprehension questions typically begins when a student has enough vocabulary and decoding ability to read a passage of several sentences without stopping at every word — roughly equivalent to a Grade 3 reading level.

What the eReader provides for ESL students

- Tap any word to hear it pronounced and see the syllables sounded out progressively.
- Word-by-word translation into the student's native language.
- Full sentence translation means a word in a sentence has just one meaning: contrast this to looking up a word in a dictionary. The word may have multiple meanings in the dictionary, and the student needs to select the right meaning.
- If the student opens the Pronounce any English Word tool and positions it next to eReader window, the student can compare the student's own pronunciation to the reference pronunciation using the recording feature.
- Comprehension questions at the end of each text. Wrong answers receive a hint and require a second attempt. The student cannot move to the next question until they have selected the right answer, which can improve the student's reading comprehension.

What to read

Choose texts that are slightly challenging — enough new vocabulary to provide learning, not so many unknown words that the student cannot follow the meaning. For IELTS preparation, include texts from the kinds of topic areas that appear in IELTS: travel, science, society, technology, environment, culture.

The eReader can also handle texts generated specifically for the student's interests or study subjects. A student studying history can read history content. A student preparing for a nursing qualification can read medical English. The system can generate materials written at the right level for any subject area, so the student builds English skills while learning content that matters to them. If a student is learning Indonesian history in Indonesian, Fonetic English can write English reading practice materials that contain the core elements of the Indonesian history course, helping the student learn their course.

7. The first session

A first session for an ESL student will usually run for about an hour. The entire session is focused on sounds — this is different from the native speaker guide, where the first session introduces syllables as well. For ESL students, sounds need more time.

Students need to learn Fonetic English so that a student knows what sound is being represented by a Fonetic English character.

Step 1 — Talk first (10 minutes)

Before opening any tool, have a conversation. Find out:

- What is the student's native language?

- Can they read and write in their native language?
- Have they studied English before? For how long? What kind of study?
- What is their goal — IELTS, work, travel, family, study?
- How do they feel about learning English? Some students are embarrassed or frustrated; others are eager. This affects how you frame the session.

Then explain briefly what FE is and what the session will involve:

What to say to the student

"English spelling doesn't always match the way words sound. If you look at the word 'through', there is no way to know from the spelling alone how to say it. Fonetic English fixes this — it adds information directly to the spelling that tells you exactly how every word sounds, without changing the spelling itself.

Before we can use that system, we need to make sure you can hear and produce all the sounds of English. Some of those sounds may be the same as in your language. Some will be similar. And some may be sounds you have never made before. That's what we're going to work on today.

When you get something wrong, that is useful. It tells us exactly what to practise. So don't worry about mistakes — they are part of the process."

Step 2 — English Sounds tool (30–40 minutes)

The tutor should introduce Fonetic English to the student so that the student can understand what sounds the Fonetic English characters represent, which is needed to understand the English Sounds tool.

Then the tutor should select the student's native language from the dropdown. The tool will organise the sounds into same, close, and missing categories.

1. Work through the same sounds first. Ask the student to click each box and produce the sound. These should be easy — but watch carefully, because some students produce a slightly different version of what they think is the same sound. Also show the student the Fonetic English character that represents the sound. The student needs to learn that character because that character is the way we refer to the sound.
2. Move to the close sounds. Ask the student to click and produce each one. Listen for accuracy.
3. Work through the missing sounds. Open the Pronunciation Instructions tool in a separate window. Help the student get their camera open alongside it. For each sound the student cannot produce accurately, work on the physical production of the sound with the student. You will be able to see and explain to the student how the student can make the mouth movements more accurately.

4. Note every sound that needs more work. Do not spend so long on any single sound that the session stalls — make a note and come back to it.
5. If time allows, move into Practice Mode — Advanced. Have the student hear a sound and select the correct FE character. Watch response times.

Do not expect to finish all 42 sounds perfectly in the first session. The goal is to identify the landscape — which sounds are solid, which need practice, which are missing — and begin working on the most important gaps.

Step 3 — Teach self-correction with the recording feature (10 minutes)

Before the session ends, teach the student how to use the recording feature to self-correct. This is one of the most valuable things you can give an ESL student for independent practice.

1. Open the Missing Sound tool. Find a syllable containing a sound the student struggled with in the pull down lesson list.
2. Show the student the red microphone icon. Explain that clicking it lets them record their pronunciation.
3. Have the student record themselves. Play back their recording alongside the reference recording.
4. Ask the student: what do you notice? Help them hear the difference. Ask them to try again.
5. Repeat until the student can self-correct without your input.

Why this matters

The recording and playback feature turns pronunciation practice into a self-improvement loop that does not require a tutor to be present. A student who can hear the difference between their pronunciation and the reference can correct themselves. This dramatically increases the amount of productive practice a student can do between sessions. Improved auditory discrimination often required the development of new neural pathways, and the only way to develop new neural pathways is practice. Improved auditory discrimination will also improve the student's ability to self improve their pronunciation. A student can practice by themselves, which can assist students who do not like practicing in groups.

Assign specific sounds and syllables for recording practice as homework from the very first session.

Step 4 — Assign homework (5 minutes)

Be specific. Do not say 'practise the sounds'. Say:

- 'Use the Pronunciation Instructions tool for [specific sound]. Practice for 10 minutes. Record yourself and compare to the reference.'
- 'Do Practice Mode on the same sounds and close sounds. Aim for response times under 2 seconds.'

The tools are self-correcting, so the student can practise independently without supervision. Encourage short daily sessions of 10 to 15 minutes rather than one long session.

8. Ongoing sessions

After the first session, a typical 30 to 60 minute session follows this pattern:

Check the dashboard first

- Which sounds or syllables still have slow response times?
- Which sounds does the student consistently get wrong?
- Are vocabulary reviews being completed on time?
- Did the student complete the recording homework?

Use this data to plan the first 10 minutes of the session. Go straight to the specific problem and work on it until the response time drops or the accuracy improves.

How the balance shifts over time

In the first few sessions, most of the time is spent on sounds and pronunciation. As the student builds a solid foundation in sounds, the balance shifts toward syllables, then toward vocabulary, and then toward reading.

Phase	Typical session balance
Sessions 1–3	70% sounds and pronunciation, 30% syllables and FE characters
Sessions 4–6	40% sounds and pronunciation, 40% syllables, 20% vocabulary sentences
Sessions 7–12	20% sounds (targeted gaps only), 40% syllables and word recognition, 40% vocabulary
Sessions 13+	10% sounds (as needed), 30% vocabulary, 60% reading

These are rough guides, not rules. Every student is different. A student who makes rapid progress on sounds may be reading within three sessions. A student with many missing sounds may need six sessions before syllable work becomes productive.

When a student stumbles on a word while reading

1. Ask them to look at the FE cues on the word.
2. If they cannot decode it, ask them to break it into syllables and sound each one out progressively.
3. If they still cannot manage it, use the Pronounce Any English Word tool to hear it together.
4. If the word contains a sound they have been struggling with, make a note and return to it in the pronunciation section of the session.
5. Move on quickly. Do not dwell on a single word for too long.

9. Locating and plugging gaps

The single most useful principle for teaching ESL students with FE is this: find out what the student does not know, and teach that. Do not work through a fixed sequence if the student already knows parts of it.

Every student arrives with a different combination of strengths and gaps. Your job in the first session — and in the first few minutes of every subsequent session — is to locate the current gaps and focus the teaching time on them.

Common gap patterns and how to address them

Student can speak English but cannot read it

This is common among heritage speakers and people who learned English informally. These students often have good pronunciation and a reasonable vocabulary, but no connection between spoken words and their written form. They may find the FE characters confusing at first because they have never needed to think about the sounds of individual letters.

Focus on: the FE characters and what they represent. Use the English Sounds tool but move quickly — they can already produce the sounds. The challenge is linking sounds to characters, not producing the sounds themselves. Move to syllables and then reading as quickly as possible.

Student can read English slowly but cannot hear or speak it well

This is very common among students who studied English through grammar and translation, particularly in Asian school systems. These students may know a large number of written word meanings but have poor auditory discrimination and weak pronunciation. They may be surprised to discover how much of their vocabulary they cannot actually recognise when spoken aloud at natural speed.

Focus on: the full pronunciation training sequence. The missing and difficult sounds work is essential here. Get the student recording and comparing their pronunciation early. Some students who are

sensitive to criticism may find practicing by themselves is a welcome relief. Reading can continue in parallel using texts they can read slowly, but the core work is pronunciation.

Student knows no English at all

The first session is entirely sounds. Begin with the same sounds for the student's language, move to close sounds, then begin the missing sounds. Assign pronunciation homework from the first session. Vocabulary sentences begin as soon as the student has a working knowledge of the FE characters — this can start in the second or third session using A0 survival sentences.

Student has good English but specific pronunciation problems

For example, a student who is fluent and has a large vocabulary but cannot reliably produce the 'r' versus 'l' contrast, or the 'th' sounds. In this case, skip the early stages and go straight to the specific difficult sound training for those contrasts. Use the difficult sound lessons and alternate mouth movement exercises. This is the most efficient path for a student who is close to their goal but has specific gaps.

The guiding principle

The tools will tell you what a student knows and what they do not. Response times show where recognition is not yet automatic. Error patterns show where understanding has broken down. Dashboard data across sessions shows whether gaps are closing.

Use the data. Teach the gaps. Do not spend time on what the student already knows.

10. The dashboard and homework

The tools log everything: which items were attempted, whether answers were correct, and how long each response took. For ESL students, the dashboard is especially important because there are more variables to track — sounds, syllables, vocabulary, and reading all running in parallel.

What to check before each session

- Response times on specific sounds and syllables — anything slow is a target for the session.
- Error patterns — consistent errors on specific sounds indicate a discrimination problem, not just a speed problem.
- Vocabulary review completion — are spaced reviews being done on time? If reviews pile up, retention collapses.
- Inference behaviour — is the student pausing before clicking, or clicking immediately? Immediate clicking means they are not building the inference habit.
- Homework completion — the data will show whether the student practised.

Assigning homework

Be specific. For each homework item, say exactly what to do, which tool to use, and what target to aim for. Examples:

- 'Use the Pronunciation Instructions tool for the unvoiced th sound. Record yourself 10 times and compare each recording to the reference. Stop when your recording sounds the same as the reference to you.'
- 'Do Practice Mode — Basic on syllable lessons 1 to 15. Aim for response times under 2 seconds.'
- 'Complete your vocabulary reviews before starting any new sentences.'
- 'Read the next section of the text we started today. Click on every word you are unsure about.'

For ESL students, daily practice is especially important because sounds and vocabulary both require frequent repetition to become automatic. Encourage 15 to 20 minutes per day rather than one long session before each lesson. Short, frequent practice is far more effective than occasional long sessions for building the neural pathways that underlie fluency.

11. Quick reference

Situation	What to do	Tool to use
New student, first session	Talk first. Select native language. Work through same sounds, close sounds, missing sounds. Teach recording feature.	English Sounds → Pronunciation Instructions
Student cannot produce a missing sound	Open Pronunciation Instructions. Help student set up camera. Work on lip/tongue position. Practise until the sound is close.	Pronunciation Instructions
Student confuses two similar sounds	Use Difficult Sound lessons. Alternate mouth movement exercises. Use real word pairs that differ only in the problem sound.	Pronunciation Training — Difficult Sounds
Roman alphabet speaker with wrong letter-sound association	Extra repetition on that specific character. Do not rush. The old association is automatic and takes time to override.	English Sounds — Advanced Practice
Student from phonetic language background	Move quickly through sounds to syllables. Progressive sounding out will be intuitive. Focus on FE characters.	Syllable Tool
Student knows words but cannot hear them spoken	Full pronunciation sequence. Recording and self-correction homework. Prioritise listening discrimination.	Pronunciation Instructions → Syllable Tool
Student bored with sounds, wants to start vocabulary	Start A0 vocabulary sentences alongside sounds. Keep sounds as homework.	Vocabulary → Sounds (homework)
Student stumbles on a word while reading	FE cues first. Break into syllables. Use Pronounce Any Word if needed. Note sound for later practice.	Pronounce Any English Word
Student clicking vocabulary without inferring	Stop. Ask what they think the word means. Explain the 3x retention benefit. Check dashboard for pause indicators.	Vocabulary — Dashboard
Vocabulary reviews piling up	Make reviews mandatory. No new sentences until reviews are done. Explain why reviews prevent forgetting.	Vocabulary — Dashboard
Student has good English, specific pronunciation gap	Skip early stages. Go straight to the relevant Difficult Sound contrast lessons.	Pronunciation Training — Difficult Sounds
Student does not complete homework	Look at the dashboard together. Find out why. Adjust assignments if needed. Short daily sessions are better than none.	Dashboard
Student wants to know what a word means	Use vocabulary tool. Use sentence translation rather than word-by-word where possible.	Vocabulary / FE Dictionary
IELTS preparation	Ensure A0 to B2 vocabulary coverage. Use reading texts matching IELTS topic areas.	Vocabulary → eReader

The ESL student's journey is more complex than the native speaker's, but the destination is the same: a student who reads English fluently, understands what they read, and no longer has to think about how words sound. The tools do the heavy lifting. Your job is to locate the gaps, teach the student how to use the tools to fill them, and keep them moving forward.
