

Learner profile: Cantonese



This guide presents common challenges faced by Cantonese learners of English and typical features of language production. Please note, these guidelines are intended to advise teachers on areas where students may experience problems. However, native speakers may not all find the following points challenging.



Facts

- **Language family:** A Sino-Tibetan language.
- **Native speakers:** 73.4 million.
- **Location:** Cantonese is an official language in Hong Kong and Macau. It is also spoken in China.
- **Writing system:** Traditional Chinese characters. The Chinese script is traditionally written vertically, however, today, writing horizontally from left to right is more common.

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Pronunciation

- Cantonese does not have some of the sounds found in English, such as:
 - the /d/ in 'dog'
 - the /v/ in 'vase'
 - the /z/ in zoo
 - the /r/ in 'red'
 - the /g/ in 'girl'
 - the initial sound in 'she' /ʃ/
 - the sound in the middle of 'measure' /ʒ/
 - the sound at the beginning and end of 'judge' /dʒ/
 - the initial sound of 'think' / /
 - the initial sound of 'the' /ð/.Many of these sounds may be replaced with other sounds. The 'l' and 'r' distinction is particularly difficult for native Cantonese speakers to perceive.
- Cantonese is a tonal language, with at least 6 tones which can change the meaning of the word. Cantonese speakers must learn English sentence intonation and stress patterns. Cantonese words are monosyllabic so native speakers must learn to pronounce polysyllabic English words.
- Cantonese has no consonant clusters and so native speakers might be difficult for produce in English.

Grammar

- The nouns in Cantonese are not marked in terms of plurality or gender but from the context of the sentence.
- There is no definite article in Cantonese. Therefore, native Cantonese speakers may omit the article in English.
- The past, present and future tense all appear to be very similar in Cantonese because there are no inflections on the verb.
- Phrasal verbs are not present in Cantonese and may confuse native speakers.

Writing

- Cantonese speakers must learn the Roman alphabet when learning English. However, pinyin (Chinese characters written in the Roman alphabet) is being used more frequently with the increase in technology and the QWERTY keyboard.
- The Chinese full stop is written as 。, which is written below and to the right of the last character. There is also a different comma used for a list of items: 、.

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Recommended FlashAcademy® lessons

Some lessons which might help based on the above differences:

Beginner > A few basics > Personal pronouns

Beginner > Letters & Numbers

Beginner > Phonics 1 > Additional sounds

Beginner > Phonics 2 > Initial 'R' clusters

Beginner > Phonics 2 > Initial 'L' clusters

Beginner > Phonics 2 > More initial consonant clusters

Beginner > Phonics 2 > 3-letter clusters

Beginner > Food & Drink > Articles

Beginner > Family, Friends & Pets > Plural nouns

Beginner > Home, Time & Leisure > Present tense

Beginner > Holidays & Travel > Past tense

Beginner > Shopping, Numbers & Colours > Give in vs. Give up

Beginner > Punctuation > Full stops

Beginner > Punctuation > Commas

Intermediate > Environment & Society > Articles