



Pronunciation Focus

Exercises for Lesson Seventeen (Consonant Lesson Five): Sue and Zoo

Like F and V, and the TH sounds, S and Z are **fricatives**. More precisely, S and Z belong to a category of fricatives called **sibilants**, from the Latin verb which means *to hiss*. S is indeed a hissing sound, but Z is a buzzing sound.

How the sounds are produced (manner of articulation): Air from the lungs is forced through a narrow opening, as when air leaks from a tyre.

Where the sounds are produced (place of articulation): The sides of the tongue are turned up and form a seal with the upper teeth on both sides. Together with the roof of the mouth, the tongue thus creates a narrow tube which focuses air forward towards the upper front teeth. The tip of the tongue points up towards the alveolar ridge—the ridge on the roof of the mouth just behind the upper front teeth. Air leaks out through the narrow space between the tip of the tongue and the alveolar ridge. The upper and lower teeth are nearly closed or lightly touch. The lips are open and spread into a smiling position.

Experiment. It is often thought that the S sound is produced by forcing air through closed teeth. But this is incorrect. To verify this, close your upper and lower teeth together, then open and spread your lips into a smiling position. Whilst keeping your tongue in a neutral, relaxed position, blow air out through your teeth. It may be difficult to restrain your tongue and keep it in a relaxed position. Make a conscious effort to do so. If you succeed, you will produce a messy, wet whishing sound. That's NOT an S.

So correct it by pointing the tip of your tongue forward and up towards the roof of your mouth just behind the upper front teeth. Better, right? If you haven't done so already, you can further improve it by sealing the sides of your tongue up against the upper teeth on both sides.

Finally, test your success by opening up a gap between your upper and lower teeth. If you are using your tongue properly, you should be able to produce a nice clean hissing sound even with a gap open between upper and lower teeth. Choose whatever position your teeth feel most comfortable in while you can still hear a clear hiss (we all have different mouth shapes and slightly differing teeth positions, there is not one single way that is 'correct' to make the sound).

You may also try pushing the tip of your tongue forward so that it presses up against the alveolar ridge. If the sides of your tongue are sealed against your teeth, and you press the tip of your tongue forward with enough force, you should be able to shut off the flow of air completely. The leaky tyre gets patched over, and pressure builds up behind your tongue. So it's possible to shut off the flow of air completely, even with your mouth open!

Alternative experiment. Place the tip of your tongue against the alveolar ridge, just where you tap it to pronounce the T sound. Keeping your tongue in the T position, blow out some air to make a TH sound. You should be able to feel how the edges of your tongue are lightly touching all of the upper teeth, and air is leaking out on all sides.

Now focus the sound. First, pull the tip of your tongue back just a little bit and point it up; this will allow air to escape forward and out. Next, seal the edges of your tongue against the side teeth; this will prevent air from leaking out anywhere else.

Aim to produce a long leaky sibilant sound alternating between TH and SS like this.

Don't rush it: let each sound last for a count of one second.

THSSSSTHSSSSTHSSSS...

For TH, the tip of your tongue touches the back surface of your front teeth. For SS, the tip of the tongue points up to the roof of the mouth just behind your front teeth. The goal of this exercise is to become aware of the position of your tongue as you make these two sounds.

Here also you can experiment with shutting off the flow of air completely by pressing the tip of your tongue against the alveolar ridge. Move your tongue as if you were going to make a T sound; but instead of tapping the tongue, press it forward to stop the flow of air. Then let the air burst out in a strongly plosive T:

SSSSSSST...OP!

Note. It seems some people naturally touch their upper and lower teeth together whenever they make the S sound. You can see this happen when you watch people speak who naturally show their teeth when they smile—people with that gleaming Julia Roberts smile, if not quite so glaring. If this is natural for you, or if it helps you to focus the S sound, well then go ahead and touch your teeth together. But if you use your tongue properly, you should be able to produce almost exactly the same sound with a small gap open between upper and lower teeth.

Experiment: Say the word *sue* several times over. The first time, make an effort to close your front teeth together. A light touch is enough; there's no need to squeeze them tightly. The second time, pronounce the S without exactly touching the teeth together: leave a small gap open between upper and lower teeth.

Teeth closed: SSOO

Teeth slightly open: SSOO

As the exercise above demonstrates, both TH and SS are **voiceless** consonants: they are made with the breath alone, without any vibrating or singing sound from the voice. Practise placing a long vibrating EE sound between two voiceless SS sounds; this will be a stretched-out version of the word *cease*.

SSSSSSSEEEEEEEEESSSSS

By contrast, Z is a **voiced** consonant. To produce the buzzing Z sound, the tongue and lip position is exactly the same as it is for S. The only difference is that now you will vibrate your vocal cords. You will feel the vibrations travel up from your vocal cords into your tongue and teeth. As you become aware of this vibrating sensation in your tongue and teeth, consciously aim to bring it forward toward your upper front teeth and out into the world. Give this a go with a stretched-out version of the word *easy*. Begin and end with a long EE sound, and make a long buzzing ZZ sound in between.

EEEEEEEEEEZZZZZZZZZZZZZZEEEEEEEEEE

Now in the same manner, practise these two words with S or Z on either end.

seize: SSSSSSEEEEEEEZZZZZ

Zeus: ZZZZZOOOOOOSSSSS

Note: Like S, Z can be pronounced quite clearly with a small gap open between your upper and lower teeth. If you try closing your upper and lower teeth together whilst you make a long buzzing ZZZZZZ, you'll feel a powerful vibration in all of your teeth. This is likely to be an unpleasant sensation.

Experiment. Say the word *zoo* several times over. The first time, make an effort to close your front teeth together. A light touch is enough; there's no need to squeeze them tightly. The second time, pronounce the Z without exactly touching the teeth together: leave a small gap open between upper and lower teeth.

Teeth closed: ZZOO

Teeth slightly open: ZZOO

Both ways of pronouncing Z and S may be considered "correct." In general, it's probably best to do what comes naturally. But it is strongly recommended that you record yourself performing some of these exercises, and that you experiment with both

methods—both the closed-teeth and the slightly-open-teeth method. It's a matter of deciding what feels better in your mouth and what sounds better to your ear. In any case, these exercises will help you become much more aware of the different sounds and sensations involved in speaking English...and that's our main goal.

Spelling: Notice and Identify

The S sound can be represented either by S or C, sometimes both, as in *descend*, and by X when pronounced KS. C usually has the S sound (rather than the K sound) before the vowels E or I, or before Y, as in *receive*, *decide* and *cycle* (in contrast to *case*, *coal* and *cute*.) The Z sound can be represented either by Z or S, or by X when pronounced KZ. Say the following sentences aloud and then write down what you hear, respelling the words so that S always stands for the hissing S sound and Z always stands for the buzzing Z sound:

1. Suicide is not considered an acceptable method for exiting this earthly existence.

WRITE YOUR ANSWER HERE:

2. The cause of the nausea Susan feels may be the poisons her husband mixes in her meals.

WRITE YOUR ANSWER HERE:

3. Is it possible to resolve this crisis without the use of poison gasses?

WRITE YOUR ANSWER HERE:

ANSWERS

1. SuiSide iZ not conSidered an aKSeptable method for eKSiting thiS earthly exKZiStenSe.
2. The cauZe of the nauZea SuZan feelZ may be the poiZonZ her huZband miKSiZ in her mealZ.
3. IZ it poSSible to reZolve thiS criSiS without the uSe of poiZon gaSSiZ?

Position. S sounds much the same wherever it appears in a word—at the beginning, middle or end. However, **Z is slightly devoiced** at the end of a word (it does not have so much buzz). Try saying these words aloud and see if you notice the difference.

buzzes

zoos

hazards

If the Z in the middle and the Z at the end of the word *buzzes* had the same sound and duration, it would sound like *buzzizz*. That would sound rather bizarre. Instead, what should happen is that the vibrating voice of the preceding vowel carries over into the first half of the final Z, but then trails off into an S for the second half. We might represent this as follows:

Buzzizs

[SCROLL DOWN]

Practise the following examples. What you should aim for is something like the representation under the heading “Slightly devoiced.”

<u>Word</u>		<u>Fully voiced bizarre version</u>	<u>Slightly devoiced</u>
zoos	→	zoozz	zoozs
hazards	→	hazardzz	hazardzs
causes	→	cauzizz	cauzizs
means	→	meanzz	meanzs

S and Z in combination with other consonants. As our previous lessons lead us to expect, voiceless S goes together with other voiceless consonants (F, K, P and T), while voiced Z goes together with other voiced consonants, such as V, G, B and D.

Practise reading through these examples. Final Z is spelt Zs to remind us that it is partially devoiced.

<u>S Word</u>		<u>Pronunciation</u>	<u>Z Word</u>		<u>Pronunciation</u>
laughs	→	lahffS	loves	→	LuvZs
cakes	→	kAYkS	eggs	→	egZs
maps	→	mapS	crabs	→	crabZs
boost	→	booST	refused	→	rifyooZD
sets	→	seTS	heads	→	heDZs

Plural nouns and third-person verbs. When an ES is added to the spelling of a word (in order to make a verb agree with its subject or to make a noun plural), it always gets pronounced IZ. Practise reading through these examples.

<u>Phrase</u>	<u>Pronunciation</u>
He uses poison gasses.	He yooZIZ poiZon gaSSIZ
One of the judges always marches.	One of the judgIZ alwayZ marchIZ
Who knows what causes the worst cases?	Who knowZ what cauZIZ the worst caSIZ?
It amuses the hippopotamuses.	It amyooZIZ the hippopotamuSIZ.
It decreases his pain and relaxes his muscles.	It decreaSIZ hiZ pain and relakSiZ hiZ musLZ
He has crushes on bunches of duchesses.	He haZ crushIZ on bunchIZ of ducheSSIZ