

# Which English Sounds Are Hardest for Chinese TOEFL Learners?

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## THREE FINDINGS

- 1 /θ/ is the one sound that separates the groups. Chinese-interface learners averaged 63.5 of 100 on /θ/, about 9.0 points below their next-hardest sound, /ŋ/ (72.5).
- 2 Everything else is nearly the same. On the other 7 ranked sounds, Chinese- and English-interface learners differ by at most 1.4 points.
- 3 Long sentences are hard for both groups alike. Reproduction falls from 79.5% to 51.5% for Chinese-interface learners and from 81.2% to 53.2% for English-interface learners, from six words or fewer to sixteen or more.

## CLASSROOM DRILL

### Tongue between the teeth

5 minutes, whole class then pairs

1. Show the position: tongue tip lightly between the teeth, air pushed out without voicing. Contrast it with /s/, where the tongue stays behind the teeth.
2. Minimal pairs in pairs: think / sink, thin / sin. The listener says which word they heard.
3. Finish inside a real sentence, not in isolation: each student repeats one Listen and Repeat sentence that contains a th-word, and the partner checks that sound only.

## READ THIS BEFORE YOU USE IT

First language is not declared: the study uses the learner's LingoLeap interface language as a proxy, and only 25.9% of sessions (6,057 of 23,390) set one. Pronunciation scores come from automatic assessment, not ETS. The comparison describes that subset, not all Chinese learners.

**Source:** [lingo leap.ai/research/chinese-learners-toefl-pronunciation](https://lingo leap.ai/research/chinese-learners-toefl-pronunciation) · Data: CC BY 4.0 (aggregate numbers only)

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