

BBC Learning English

6 minute English

Difficult words to pronounce



Yvonne: Hi, this is '6 minute English' and I'm Yvonne Archer...

Callum: I'm Callum Robertson. Hello!

Yvonne: Hello Callum! In this week's programme, English words that are often 'mispronounced'. Callum – can you explain 'mispronounced' for us?

Callum: Certainly. If you MIS-PRO-NONCE... if you 'mispronounce' a word, you don't say it correctly. You get some of the sounds wrong in that word.

Yvonne: Very good. And is there a word that you often mispronounce, Callum?

Callum: Umm – not really.

Yvonne: I didn't think so - so I've got three difficult ones here for you! But, before you read them out, any thoughts?

Callum: Well, looking at these words on paper, I think there's a good chance that some people would mispronounce them. Yeah.

Yvonne: And that's why you're saying them instead of me! So, off you go...

Callum: Okay, the words are: regularly...ethnicity...and anaesthetist. Whew!

Yvonne: Yeah, but you said them slowly, Callum. Yeah, that was tough. But there are three thousand other Brits who also agree that those words are difficult to say.



They were recently questioned by a company called Spinvox and the research showed that 'regularly', 'ethnicity' and 'anaesthetist' – ooh, I said it - are some of the most mispronounced words in the English language. Now before we hear more about that research, I've a question for you, Callum: How many sounds do experts say we need to be able to pronounce - so that we can speak English clearly? Is it:

- a) 44
- b) 104 - or 400?

Callum: Well, I'm fairly confident on this as I've just made a series on pronunciation. In British English, there's generally about forty-four sounds that are needed to pronounce English words. So, about forty-four – there's maybe a few more - but forty-four; that's my answer.

Yvonne: Well, I'm not telling you! You'll have to wait until the end of the programme.

Now as we hear an extract from the BBC's Today programme on the most mispronounced words in English, try to find – whew – I can't pronounce 'try...' - try to find out which word was the most mispronounced...

THE TODAY PROGRAMME

If you find 'statistics' and 'ethnicity' difficult to pronounce, it appears you're not alone. The Daily Mail says they're among the top ten most troublesome words in the English language. Researchers who questioned three thousand people found that the most mispronounced word was 'phenomenon' followed by 'anaesthetist' (anaesthetist) and 'remuneration'.

Yvonne: Callum, which word was the most troublesome – the most difficult to pronounce?

Callum: Well, that was 'phenomenon'... phenomenon.



Yvonne: Phenomenon... phenomenon... Yep, I have to say that I have to take that one really slowly - and just looking at it on paper makes me nervous. So why do you think so many of us get it wrong, Callum?

Callum: Well of course, when we get nervous, we generally make more mistakes. But here, it's the mixture of the particular sounds that are in words – that's what causes the problems. So having the 'm' and 'n' sounds – the 'mmm' and 'nnnn' in 'phenomenon' – having so many of them so close together – that makes it a difficult word to pronounce.

Yvonne: Hmmm - and what about 'anaesthetist'?

Callum: Well 'anaesthetist' - it contains an odd mixture of 't' and 'th' sounds – there's also an 's' in there as well before that group of consonants and that also makes things difficult to pronounce.

Yvonne: Oh dear, it certainly is!
Now the newspaper that published those research results describes such words as 'tongue twisters'. But I wouldn't call them tongue-twisters really, would you Callum?

Callum: Umm - not really, no - because 'tongue twisters' are generally a sentence or an expression that is very difficult to say quickly and repeat again and again and again.

Yvonne: Well, I'm feeling really mean today, Callum. Go on - give us an example - and don't - say – it - slowly!

Callum: Okay – try this one and a very famous one is: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper".



- Yvonne:** ...Cor – that was pretty good, wasn't it?! Of course, but we don't have to say tongue twisters in life – but we usually do have to use words like umm, what – ummm - 'statistics' or 'February'. I can't even say it myself – 'February'.
- Callum:** February.
- Yvonne:** February.
- Callum:** Well yes. It is difficult to get through life without saying words like 'February'. Yes.
- Yvonne:** But the research shows that many of us try to do just that. We don't want to feel embarrassed when we mispronounce those words so we just avoid them. And that's a really bad example for learners, isn't it?
- Callum:** Well, I don't know about that. It's something natural that native speakers do. That...you know, if you're not sure how to pronounce a word, choose another word...or... And I do the same in writing in spelling; if there's a word I'm not sure how to spell, my spelling isn't, you know, perfect - sometimes I will re-write to avoid using that word. So, as in anything, pronunciation does only get better with practise so don't worry about it!
- Yvonne:** Just go for it. Okay, now for the answer to our question: How many sounds do experts say we need to be able to pronounce - so that we can speak English clearly? Is it: a) 44, b) 104 or c) 400?
- Callum:** Well, as I said, forty-four; I'm fairly confident that it's forty-four or thereabouts.
- Yvonne:** Ah, you knew it all the time, Callum. Well, that's all we've got time for today. Join us again for more '6 minute English'.
- C/Y:** Goodbye!