

Does VESL recommend a specific phonetic alphabet? Which one? I think IPA is too complicated for ESL learners. Every dictionary has its' own system.

This is a very interesting question. It doesn't have an easy answer. First, it is important to discuss the reasons why it is important for ESL learners to use a phonetic alphabet. English doesn't have a simple sound to symbol correlation: there are 21 written consonants and 25 consonant sounds. Likewise, there are 5 written vowels and 14 vowel sounds. Consequently, phonetic transcription is often necessary.

There are several different phonetic alphabets that are used in the teaching of pronunciation and it can be difficult to know which is best. **The International Phonetic Alphabet** (IPA) is the most internationally recognized one, and it is used the most in pronunciation textbooks. However, some textbooks will use a different variation and all dictionaries have their own phonetic system. Dictionaries can be a great resource; however, there is no standard and each version will use a different form of transcription. As a result, when comparing the dictionary symbols with textbooks they will not be the same and in the end consistency is always preferable.

There are benefits and drawbacks to using the IPA that depend on several factors. First, it is used internationally and many learners, especially from China, Korea and Japan, already know it. They have learned it in school and already have a firm understanding of it. I often find that when one of my Chinese learners is trying to pronounce a new English word if I write in IPA they can usually get the correct pronunciation right away. One way to simplify it for you and your learners is to focus only on the symbols that are relevant to the language you are studying.

Ex. IPA chart for North American English

Manner or articulation	Place of Articulation →	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Alveopalatal	Velar	Glottal	
	Stop Voiceless Voiced	/p/ /b/				/t/ /d/		/k/ /g/	
	Fricative Voiceless Voiced		/f/ /v/	/θ/ /ð/	/s/ /z/	/ʃ/ /ʒ/		/h/ /ɦ/	
	Affricate Voiceless Voiced					/tʃ/ /dʒ/			
	Nasal Voiced	/m/			/n/		/ŋ/		
	Liquid Voiced				/l/ /r/				
	Glide Voiceless Voiced	/hw/ /w/				/y/			

Note /θ/ represents voiceless th as in **bath**.
 /ð/ represents voiced th as in **bathe**.
 /ʃ/ represents sh as in **sheep**.
 /z/ represents zh as in **measure**

/tʃ/ represents ch as in **church**
 /dʒ/ represents j as in **judge**
 /ŋ/ represents ng as in **riding**

On the other hand, for many learners with low or interrupted education using the IPA could indeed be too challenging. In fact, it may be difficult to use any phonetic alphabet with learners that have difficulty with the traditional written alphabet. In cases such as these, instructors often use the traditional written letter and add something to it to indicate sound.

Example 1: The **short a** sound in IPA is written as /æ/ and a **long a** sound is written as /eɪ/. For a low-level learner often the teacher will just use:

- a simple **a** to represent short a
- an **a** to represent **long a**.

Example 2: /ʃ/ can be spelled out as /sh/ or /tʃ/ as /ch/

The most important thing that you have to remember is to be consistent. If you choose a book that you like, use the system that is used and stick to it. Changing back and forth can only cause confusion.