

I Am A Mouth

By George Hunt

I am a Mouth. I work under the direction of a brain belonging to a Samoan. I am a lucky mouth, because my brain has taught me how to speak English, and although some of the sounds were hard for me to make at first, my brain made me practice until I could make the sounds it wanted me to make without too many mistakes on my part.

Are you a Samoan? I hope you realize just how hard your brain has to work when you speak English. Your mouth has a hard time, too, you know, because some of the sounds

George Hunt, who graduated from Pesega High School in Western Samoa, is a 1970 BATESL graduate at The Church College of Hawaii. He has taught both Samoan and English classes in the Peace Corps Training Program, in the LDS Missionary Language program, and at Kahuku High School.

it has to make, it has never needed to make before in Samoa. Let's try this, for example:

"My brother put a big pig in the truck." Your brain had to work very hard to keep your mouth from saying "My bradder pud a pick bick in da trug." Samoan mouths usually don't have to make a few of those sounds, and so they either can't make them at all, or they make them in the wrong places.

I understand some of the problems your Samoan mouth has because I had a few of them myself, so why not let me help you. We'll try those [p]'s and [b]'s again. The difficulty here is that in Samoan we have only one sound to make, [p], but in English there are two sounds, [p] and [b]. I don't really blame your mouth for not wanting to work overtime on two new ones. First you have to decide which one you need, then you have to concentrate on saying it correctly so that they don't sound the same. A lot of unnecessary bother, you say? Perhaps, but that's English.

We could try this: First, hold your hand a little way from your mouth, and say "palusami". Your hand didn't feel anything did it, because there was no little breath of air when you said the [p]. Say "paper".

That time you should have felt a puff of air on your hand twice--one for each [p] you made as you said the word. Now let's try to see the difference. Hold a piece of paper in front of your mouth, just like you did with your hand. Now, when you say "paper" you can see the paper move with your breath if you are saying it correctly.

You will have to practice saying words with [b] in them to get the sound right--it is not hard to make, but you must think carefully before you say it, so that you do not confuse it with a [p].

The lip position is the same but your vocal chords vibrate when you say [b].

Here is a sentence for you to try: "Peter picked some peas and beans and put them in a bucket."

If you put your fingers in your ears and say the sentence again, you will be able to hear a humming noise and feel the vibration as you say the words with [b] in them, like "beans" and "bucket".

[d] and [t]

You can try this same test as you practice saying words with [d]. In Samoan, you are used to using [t] without a puff of air, so when speaking English, because you find the [t]'s easy to say, sometimes your mouth gets lazy and wants to say a [t] all the time instead of putting in the [d]'s where they are supposed to go. When you say [d], your mouth does almost exactly the same thing as when saying [t]; there is only one difference - the vocal chords vibrate and make the humming sensation again when you say [d] correctly. Practice saying words like "trot" and "trod", "tread" and "dread", "down", and "town".

Say "Donald took a trip downtown". Try to remember not to use a Samoan [t] for both the English [t] and [d].

[k] and [t]

There is no [k] in the Samoan alphabet, but it is easy for you to say because you often exchange it for the [t] in Samoan

when speaking with your friends; thus you often say "kama" and "keine" instead of "tama" and "teine". This makes it easy for you when you say English words like "cake" or "candle", but once again you must be careful not to use this sound instead of the voiced [g] sound in English in words like "garden" and "game".

[g] and [k]

In Samoan, the written [g] is really an [ŋ] sound like you would find in the words, "singing", "ringing", "swinging", etc. The nearest sound to the English [g] then, is the [k], and because this is easy for you, your mouth often does not bother with the new sound [g]; instead it says "came" when you mean "game" or "crab" instead of "grab". Try this: "Gilbert caught a cold after going to the game."

With your fingers in your ears again, you can easily tell the difference between "came" and "game", "come" and "gum", "could" and "good", "curl" and "girl". There is a big difference in the meaning of these words, so try to make a difference in the sound of the words by practicing to say your [g]'s and [k]'s clearly.

[d] and 'th'

There is one last sound which seems hard for mouths to remember. Unlike some other foreign speaking people, we Samoan mouths can say "church" and "chicken" easily enough, but our tongues get lazy when it comes to saying "this", "that", "these", and "those". Here is one time that we say [d], and it is the wrong time. We should say, instead "th"—a funny sound which is made by putting the tongue between the teeth. People who study these things call this sound an "interdental fricative" which is either "voiced" or "voiceless". You needn't worry about that, however, just keep the Samoan [t] and the [d] out of "them", "the", "these", "then", and words like them.

A different sound is made in words like "thin" and "think" and "thong". These are the "th" sounds which are called voiceless, and you can tell that when you put your finger in your ears again, and listen to the difference between "feather" and "thus", and "thick" and "thin".

We have talked about seven different sounds, sounds which Samoan

mouths find hard to make, or else make in the wrong places. These are sounds which will make a big difference in the way you speak English, and which make it easier for people to understand you.

Practice Often

You will need to practice often: Talk to your friends in English; read aloud; think carefully about what you are saying and what you really want to say. You may need to produce each sound slowly at first to get these sounds correctly; then try them rapidly in English sentences. Don't develop bad habits by making the wrong sounds just because they are the easy sounds which you are used to.

There is a lot of work ahead for you and your mouth, but you can both learn to speak these English sounds correctly if you try. I know, because I am a mouth, and I am a Samoan and I have learned them.