

7 Pronunciation Mistakes

Mandarin speakers make — and how to fix them

Your grammar is fine. Your vocabulary is fine. So why do people still ask you to repeat yourself? These are the seven sounds giving you away — and the drills that fix each one.

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Coach Seven

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You don't have an English problem. You have a feedback problem.

Here's what nobody tells you. You've studied for years. You know the grammar better than most native speakers do. You can read, you can write, you can follow a movie without subtitles. And people *still* say "**sorry, what?**"

That's not a knowledge problem. It's a **correction** problem. Nobody in your daily life is going to stop you mid-sentence to tell you which sound went wrong. They'll nod, guess from context, and move on. So the mistake stays. For years.

THE REAL MATH

Mandarin syllables are built on a strict pattern: a consonant, a vowel, and at most an *n* or *ng* to close. English breaks every part of that rule — it ends words in almost any consonant, and it stacks up to four in a row (*strengths*). Your mouth isn't missing a few sounds. It's missing an entire **shape** of syllable.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN YOU FIX THIS

- **You get understood the first time.** No repeating, no spelling your own name out loud.
- **You stop shrinking in meetings.** Most hesitation isn't about ideas. It's about bracing to be misunderstood.
- **People stop asking where you're from** in the first thirty seconds of every conversation.

I've spent seven years coaching intermediate and advanced speakers — people who are already good and are tired of being treated like they're not. These seven come up more than everything else combined for Mandarin speakers. The first two are structural — they affect every sentence you say, not just certain words. **Work through them in order.**

Dropping the ends of your words

You say **"I li' this boo', it's ni'."** You meant *I like this book, it's nice. Every word lost its last sound.*

WHY IT HAPPENS

A Mandarin syllable can only end in a vowel, *n*, or *ng*. That's the entire list. English ends words in *k*, *t*, *p*, *d*, *g*, *b*, *s*, *z*, *f*, *v*, *l*, *m*, *ch*, *sh* and more — sounds your mouth has never had to produce in that position.

The cost is bigger than a slight accent. English carries **grammar** on those endings. Drop the **/d/** and your past tense disappears. Drop the **/s/** and your plural does. You end up sounding like you're making grammar errors you're not actually making.

THE FIX — ARRIVE AT THE ENDING

Deliberately over-pronounce every final consonant while you practice. Hold it an extra beat. Feel your tongue, lips or teeth physically **arrive** at the closing position rather than trailing off into a vowel.

Yes, it will feel exaggerated. Native speakers do soften these in fast speech — but they soften from a **full** sound. You'd be softening from nothing, and a listener can hear the difference.

Watch the voicing too. *bed* and *bet* are different words. Keep your voice running through the end of the **/d/**.

DRILL — LAND THE ENDING

Hold each final consonant for a full extra beat before you release.

bed / bet

bag / back

prize / price

save / safe

hard / heart

cold / colt

Now in sentences. Every ending gets its full value:

I likedd the bookk a lott.

She wantedd both contracts signedd today.

The clients calledd and leftt three messages.

I workedd late, finishedd it, and sentt it.

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MISTAKE TWO · CLUSTERS

Breaking up consonant clusters

"street" becomes **"si-tu-reet"** or **"sreet."** Either you add vowels that aren't there, or you drop consonants that are.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Mandarin has no consonant clusters at all. English is built on them: *street*, *splash*, *twelfths*, *asked*, *strengths*. When your mouth meets three consonants in a row with no vowel between them, it does one of two things — inserts a small vowel to make it pronounceable, or deletes a consonant to simplify it.

Both destroy the word's rhythm. A one-syllable English word becomes three syllables, and the listener loses the beat of your sentence.

THE FIX — CONNECT, DON'T SEPARATE

The trick is that the consonants **overlap**. You don't finish the /s/ and then start the /t/ — your tongue is already moving into the /t/ position while the /s/ is still hissing.

Build it backwards. For *street*: say *eet*. Then *reet*. Then *treet*. Then *street*. Adding one sound at a time from the end keeps you from inserting a vowel at the front.

Practice slowly with the cluster stretched — *sssstreet* — but never with a vowel in the middle. Slow is fine. Extra syllables are not.

DRILL — BUILD IT BACKWARDS

One sound at a time, from the end of the word toward the front. Never insert a vowel.

eet → reet → treet → street

ash → lash → plash → splash

ong → rong → strong

ee → ree → three

Now the full set, at speed:

street

strong

splash

school

spring

twelfth

asked

texts

world

friends

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MISTAKE THREE · TH

Replacing TH with S, Z or D

"I sink dis is de sird time." You meant I think this is the third time.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Mandarin has no /θ/ and no /ð/. Faced with a sound that doesn't exist, your brain substitutes the closest thing it has — usually s for the voiceless one and z or d for the voiced one.

The problem is frequency. *The, this, that, they, them, there, with, think, through, three* — TH sits inside the most common words in English. There's no way to avoid it.

THE FIX — THE TONGUE LEAVES THE MOUTH

This is the only English sound where your tongue is **visible**. The tip goes lightly between your teeth, or just touching the back of the top teeth, and air flows continuously over it. Nothing blocks, nothing pops.

Voiceless /θ/ — *think, three, both*. Air only, no voice.

Voiced /ð/ — *the, this, mother*. Same position, voice on, tongue buzzing against the teeth.

Do it in a mirror. If you can't see your tongue, you're making an s. Exaggerate heavily in practice.

DRILL — SHOW YOUR TONGUE

think / sink

thing / sing

three / free

mouth / mouse

path / pass

worth / worse

Now the voiced ones, in words you use constantly:

This is the one that they wanted.

My brother and my mother are both here.

I think there are three of them.

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MISTAKE FOUR · L AND R

Mixing up L and R

"I'll col-lect the rice" and "I'll cor-rect the lice" should not sound the same. For many listeners, they do.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Mandarin has an *l* and it has an *r*, but the Mandarin *r* is a different sound from the English one, and neither behaves like English at the **end** of a syllable. Final **/l/** in particular doesn't exist — so *ball* drifts toward *bao* and *people* toward *peepo*.

THE FIX — ONE TOUCHES, ONE DOESN'T

English /l/: the tongue tip touches the ridge behind your top teeth and *stays there* while your voice runs. Including at the end of a word. Especially at the end of a word.

English /ɹ/: the tongue touches nothing. Pull it back and up into the middle of your mouth, bunch it with tension, keep the tip floating. Push your lips forward into a slight trumpet shape.

That's the entire distinction — contact versus no contact. If you're unsure which one you just made, ask whether your tongue hit the roof of your mouth.

DRILL — CONTACT OR NO CONTACT

light / right

lice / rice

collect / correct

glass / grass

play / pray

long / wrong

Final L — hold the tongue against the ridge:

The ball l is still l on the table le.

All l the people le will l call l.

I feel l we ll enough to travel l.

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MISTAKE FIVE · V AND W

Turning V into W

"That's a *very* good *wideo*." The /v/ doesn't exist in Mandarin, so your mouth reaches for the nearest thing.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Mandarin has no /v/ phoneme. It does have a w glide, and that's what your mouth defaults to — two lips rounding, no teeth involved. The two sounds are close enough that the substitution feels invisible from the inside.

From the outside, *vest* becomes *west* and *vine* becomes *wine*. Different words, and the context doesn't always save you.

THE FIX — TEETH ON LIP

/v/ is a labiodental fricative. Your top teeth rest on the inside of your bottom lip and you push air through the gap while your voice is on. You should feel your bottom lip *vibrating*. The air never stops — you can hold a /v/ for ten seconds.

/w/ uses no teeth at all. Lips round and then immediately move into the vowel. It's a glide, not a friction sound.

Shortcut: say *fff*. Freeze your mouth exactly there. Now switch your voice on without moving anything. That buzz is /v/.

DRILL — TEETH VS. LIPS

vest / west

vine / wine

very / wary

veil / whale

vet / wet

verse / worse

Now both sounds in one breath:

We watched a very long video.

The winner visited in November.

I would never leave without it.

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MISTAKE SIX · RHYTHM

Giving every syllable the same weight

You say **"I WANT TO GO TO THE STORE."** A native says **"I wanna go tuh thuh STORE."**

WHY IT HAPPENS

Mandarin is syllable-timed and tonal. Each syllable gets roughly equal length, and pitch carries *meaning* rather than emphasis. English is **stress-timed** — it sprints through unimportant syllables and lands hard on the important ones, and pitch signals emphasis rather than word identity.

Two things go wrong. Every word arrives at the same size, so listeners can't tell what matters. And pitch movements that feel natural to you read as emotional signals you didn't intend.

THE FIX — MEET THE SCHWA

English has one sound that appears more than any other: the /ə/, called the **schwa**. It's a lazy, neutral "uh" with no character at all — that's the point. In unstressed syllables, English collapses almost every vowel into it.

banana isn't *ba-na-na*. It's buh-NAN-uh. *problem* is PROB-luhm. *about* is uh-BOUT.

Your instinct will be to give every syllable its proper value. Resist it. **Being lazy is correct here.** Then land hard on the one syllable that matters.

DRILL — CRUSH THE SMALL WORDS

Say each line twice. First slowly and wrong, giving every word equal weight. Then fast and right, letting the underlined words almost disappear.

I need to talk to her about the project.

What are you going to do for dinner?

He was a friend of my brother from college.

I can do it, but I don't want to.

Now word stress — exaggerate the marked syllable:

de-**VEL**-op

COM-fort-a-ble

im-**POR**-tant

MAN-a-ger

op-por-**TU**-ni-ty

IN-ter-est-ing

Collapsing the two English "i" sounds

You meant to say "**sheet of paper**" or "**I'll sit here.**" This one has embarrassed more of my students than any other on the list.

WHY IT HAPPENS

English distinguishes the long, tense /i/ in *seat* from the short, relaxed /ɪ/ in *sit*. Mandarin's *i* sits close to the first one, so both English words come out the same.

The result is that half of these words become the wrong word entirely — occasionally a much worse word.

THE FIX — RELAX, DON'T SHORTEN

Most people are told /ɪ/ is just a "short i." That's misleading, and it's why it never sticks. **It's a different mouth position, not a faster one.**

For /i/: lips spread wide like a smile, tongue high and pushed forward, muscles tense.

For /ɪ/: **let everything go slack.** Corners of the mouth relax, tongue drops slightly and pulls back. Your jaw barely moves — the change is in tension, and that's the whole trick.

DRILL — TENSE VS. RELAXED

Do this in front of a mirror. Say the turquoise word with a hard smile, then let your face go completely lazy for the coral one.

seat / sit

sheet / shit

beach / bitch

leave / live

feel / fill

reach / rich

green / grin

heat / hit

Then run them together so both live in one breath:

Please sit in that seat.

I live here, so I won't leave yet.

Did you fill it, or did you feel it?

Ten minutes a day beats two hours a week

Pronunciation isn't knowledge. It's a physical skill, like a golf swing. Reading this guide changes nothing on its own — your mouth has to build habits your first language never gave it, and muscles learn through short, frequent repetition, not long occasional sessions.

YOUR DAILY TEN MINUTES

- **Two minutes — one sound only.** Pick a single mistake from this guide. Not all seven. One.
- **Three minutes — minimal pairs, out loud, exaggerated.** Slower and bigger than feels normal.
- **Three minutes — the drill sentences.** Record yourself on your phone. Play it back.
- **Two minutes — free speech.** Talk about your day and try to catch the sound in the wild. This is where it transfers.

DO THIS

- **Record yourself.** You cannot hear your own mistakes live. Your brain hears what you meant to say.
- **Use a mirror.** Half of these fixes are visible on your face.
- **Exaggerate.** Overshoot in practice so normal speech lands right.

NOT THIS

- **Don't practice silently.** Reading a drill in your head trains nothing.
- **Don't chase all seven at once.** One sound per week beats seven per day.
- **Don't wait to feel ready.** It will feel strange for about two weeks, then it won't.

THE HONEST CATCH

There's one thing you can't do alone, and I'd rather tell you now than let you find out in six months. **You can't correct what you can't hear.** Your ear was built by Mandarin. When you drop a final consonant, you don't hear a missing sound — you hear a complete word. You'll record yourself, play it back, and think it was fine. That's not a discipline problem. It's why people plateau for years with perfect grammar. At some point you need someone outside your head to stop you and say *"that one. right there."*

You've got the list. Now get the feedback.

These seven fixes will move you further than another year of grammar study. But drilling alone only takes you to the edge of what your own ear can detect — and then it stops.

That's the whole reason Clear Accent Academy exists. I work with **intermediate and advanced speakers only** — people who are already good and are done being underestimated. No beginner material, no polite nodding, no pretending something was fine when it wasn't. You talk, I stop you, we fix it, you say it again correctly. That's the entire method.

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