

General English Learners (GELs) Glossary



Academic English - The type of English needed to read and understand study materials and write about any given subject.

African American English (AAE) - A language variety used by many, but not all, African Americans in the United States. AAE impacts all domains of language: morphology, syntax, semantics, phonology, and pragmatics. Not all African Americans speak AAE, and AAE is not only spoken by African Americans. A.k.a. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English, Ebonics, African American Language (AAL).

Appalachian English (AppE) - A dialect of American English native to the Appalachian mountain region of the Eastern United States. All Appalachian English is rhotic and characterized by distinct phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon.

C1C2 - A consonant cluster in which the first consonant is identified as C1 and the second consonant is identified as C2. For example, in *frog*, the letter f is C1 and the letter r is C2.

Consonant cluster - Two or more consonants positioned together in a word, sometimes called consonant blends, in a way in which you can hear each of the consonants' sounds (*fr* in *frog*; *tr* and *st* in *trust*; *spl* in *splash*).

Consonant digraph - Two consonants positioned together in a word to form a single sound, or phoneme (*ch* in *chat*; *sh* as in *wish*).

Decoding - The process of seeing a written symbol and being able to say the sound it represents; the ability to apply knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly pronounce written words.

Dialect - Synonymous with language variation, dialect is a label used to refer to any variety of a language shared by a group of speakers living in the same place or in close proximity to each other, or belonging to the same socioeconomic or social group.

Digraph - Two letters positioned together to make one single speech sound, or phoneme. There are consonant digraphs (*ch* in *chin* or *much*) and vowel digraphs, which are often called vowel pairs (*ea* in *beat*).

Diphthong - A single sound formed by the combination of two vowels in a single syllable, in which the sound begins as one vowel and moves, or glides, toward another (as in *coin*, *loud*, and *side*).

Encoding - The process of hearing a sound (phoneme) and being able to write a symbol to represent that sound (grapheme). It includes hearing a whole word and then being able to write the whole word with the correct spelling.

General American English (GAE) - The language variety that is used in mainstream print media, business, and education.

General English learner (GEL) - A student who speaks a language variety other than GAE.

Grapheme - A written symbol that represents a single unit of sound in a language (phoneme). A grapheme can be a single letter, such as *b*, *e*, or *d*; or it could be a sequence of letters, such as *ea*, *ou*, *ch*, or *sh*. For example, the grapheme (written representation) of the sound /t/ is *t*.

Heritage language variety - The student's language variety which is spoken outside of the classroom or school setting.

Language variety - An alternative term for "dialect," which has a stigmatized connotation as dialects are often seen as "substandard" ways of speaking. There are many different variations of the English language. The variation used in mainstream print media, business, and education is known as General American English (GAE); students may use other language varieties outside of school. Like GAE, other language varieties follow complex, rule-governed phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical systems.

Lexical system - A system of knowledge that a speaker has about the words or vocabulary of a language, profession or subject. This system includes knowledge of the meanings, use, form, and relationships between words to determine the semantic or denotative meaning of a word or phrase. Understanding the lexical system of a language helps readers develop "mental dictionaries" of words and phrases used in the language.

Mexican American English (MAE) - A dialect of American English spoken primarily by Mexican Americans (sometimes known as Chicanos), particularly in the Southwestern United States ranging from Texas to California. It is a fully formed and native dialect of English, not a "learner English". It is even the native dialect of some speakers who know little to no Spanish, or have no Mexican heritage. A.k.a. Chicano English (ChE), Latino English, Mexican American Language (MAL).

Morphological system - A system that organizes the smallest units of meaning in a language (morphemes). This system primarily focuses on how root words, prefixes, and suffixes are utilized in a language.

Phoneme - The smallest unit of sound that distinguishes one word from another word in a language. For example, /p/, /b/, /d/, and /t/ in the words *pad*, *pat*, *bad*, and *bat*.

Phonetic system - The system of human speech sounds. This includes the physical sounds of the language (acoustic properties), how listeners perceive the sounds of the language (auditory properties), and how the vocal tract produces the sounds of a language (articulatory properties).

Phonological awareness - The ability to recognize and work with sounds in spoken language. It is a broad skill that includes identifying and manipulating oral language components including words, syllables, and onsets and rimes.

Phonological system - The system of the speech sounds of a particular language; the set of consonant and vowel units that make up the words of a language or language variety.

Phonology - The study of speech sound patterns, their meanings, and how they are organized and used in a language.

Semantic system - A system of knowledge that describes the meaning conveyed by words, phrases and sentences, and includes a person's vocabulary or way of speaking.

Syntactic structures - The arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses in a sentence that make sense in a given language. Also refers to the rules and principles that govern sentence structure in a language, i.e., how words and phrases may be joined (like *and*, *or*, *but*), subject or noun/verb agreement (singular or plural), case (like *I*, *me*, *mine*), the use of reflexive pronouns (like *myself*, *my*), etc.

Syntactic system - The set of rules and interacting patterns of a language. This includes the order of words in a sentence, the placement of punctuation, and the use of capital letters. Understanding the syntactic system of a language helps readers understand the grammar of a language. This is essential to communicate meaning through language.

Unvoiced - Sounds that are produced from pushing air through and out of the mouth in various ways. We often say that this kind of sound is "turned off" because there is no vibration of the vocal cords. These sounds are sometimes called voiceless or whispering sounds. Some consonant sounds are unvoiced. With an unvoiced sound, one does not feel a vibration when gently placing a hand on the neck while saying the sound (e.g., /s/ in *sip*; /f/ in *fox*).

Voiced - Sounds that are produced when the vocal cords in our throats vibrate. We often say that the sound is "turned on" because of these vocal cord vibrations. Vowel sounds and many consonant sounds are voiced sounds. With a voiced sound, one can feel a vibration when gently placing a hand on the neck while saying the sound (e.g., /z/ in *zip*; /m/ in *map*).