Unit 5a: English Plosives /p b, t d, k g, ?/

When the vocal folds slightly open to vibrate and the sound is obstructed at the vocal cavity, the sound is described as the *voiced consonant* sound.

When the folds are widely open to vibrate and the sound is obstructed at the vocal tract, the sound is described as *voiceless consonant*. Another term used to describe voiced/voiceless sounds are *fortis/lenis*.

Table: Three part description of the consonant phonemes in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place Manner</th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Labio-dental</th>
<th>Dental</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palato-alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plosive</td>
<td>p b</td>
<td>t d</td>
<td>k g</td>
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<td>Fricative</td>
<td>f v θ ð s z</td>
<td>f ʒ</td>
<td>h</td>
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<td>Affricate</td>
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<td>tf dʒ</td>
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<td>Semi-vowel</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In the pairs of sounds to be discussed, the left hand consonants are voiceless and fortis while the right ones are voiced and lenis.

1 INTRODUCTION
This unit describes the sounds referred to as plosive sounds. They are also often referred to as stops.

2 OBJECTIVES
At the end of the unit, learners will be able to identify and describe the English plosive sounds and pronounce them correctly.

3.1 /p b/: Bilabial Plosive
/p/ is voiceless and fortis while /b/ is voiced and lenis. In the production of these sounds, the air that escapes through the glottis into the oral cavity is obstructed or stopped by the upper and lower lips. This obstruction forces the air to build up pressure inside the mouth that when the two lips part to allow it flow out, it causes some kind of explosive sound.

Apart from being plosives, the two sounds are also described as bilabials because the two lips are the major articulators during their production.

/p/ occurs as: p, pp, gh as in: pile, cripple, hiccough;
when aspirated: pin, pill, pass, important, people;
when unaspirated: Spain, spite, split;
when silent: pneumonia, psychology;
when initial; medial; final: pen, Paul; staple stipend; tap, cheap.

/b/ occurs as: b, bb as in: bile, bubble;
when initial; medial; final: boot, bite; about, laborious; tab, tube.

3.2 /t d/: Alveolar Plosive
The voiceless-fortis/voiced-lenis divisions are still applicable here. But in addition, the tip of the tongue clicks at the alveolar and allows the pent up air to escape with an explosion. They are, therefore, plosive sounds.

/t/ occurs as: t, tt, d, th as in: tell, little, asked, Thailand and Thompson;
when aspirated: take, tall, tight;
when unaspirated: tick, tool, letter;
when initial: tie, ten; medial: latter, written; final: sat, mat.

/d/ occurs as d, dd as in: do, idle, add, ladder;
when initial: die, den; medial: latter ridden, ; final: sad, pad.

3.3 /k ɡ/: Velar Plosive
The voiceless-fortis/voiced-lenis characteristics also hold. In addition, the back of the tongue strikes the velar i.e. the soft palate. While doing this, the two organs (tongue and velar), which once stuck together and barred air from flowing out suddenly part ways allowing a rush out of air with a plosive sound.

/k/ occurs as: k, c, cc, ch as in: kind, cut, accord, chord;
when aspirated: kind, cat car; when unaspirated: sky, skill, scar;
when initial: kiss, call, medial: actual, akin final tick, park.

/ɡ/ occurs as: g, gg as in: gas, gut, maggot, biggest;
when initial: gas, give, medial: ago, bigger; final: pig, leg, peg.

3.4 /ʔ/: Glottal Plosive
This sound is not a significant consonant sound in RP but very popularly used across the London streets; it is produced at the glottal region of the oral tract. It’s a sound which now seems to have replaced the voiceless, fortis, alveolar plosive, /t/ in Poplar London variety of English. It is a voiceless, fortis, glottal sound, which occurs in words such as water, butter, but pronounced as /wɔʔә/ and /baʔә/ instead of / wɑtә/ and /bɑtә/. It is because /ʔ/ is a variety of sound used among the native speakers in London that is why it is not common to us.

4 EXERCISES
With the aid of 5 examples each, what do you understand by these terms, fortis and lenis? Use English words and sounds as examples.