**ER 12.3 *Knees and knights***

Some words in English begin with two or three consonants sounds (‘word initial consonant clusters’). But there are restrictions on these clusters, and not all consonants can be used.

Here are some words which have two and three word-initial consonant clusters. They show nearly all (but not quite all) the combinations possible in English:

two initial consonants:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *prince* | *please* | *thrill* | *train* | *snail* | *spot* |
| *dwarf* | *tweak* | *French* | *crown* | *skin* | *stain* |
| *clear* | *break* | *shrink* | *queen* | *draw* | *thwack* |
| *flirt* | *black* |  |  |  |  |

three initial consonants:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *split* | *squint* | *spring* | *stretch* | *scramble* |  |

The purpose of this activity is for you to work out something about the combinations allowed.

(a) Write down the first two or three consonants of each word. Remember that we are dealing with sounds, not spellings. So you need to use phonetic script. For example, for *prince* you would write /pr/. The phonetic symbol for the ‘th’ in *thrill* is /θ/, and for the ‘sh’ in *shrink* it is /ʃ/. Also remember that the sound often written with a ‘c’ (in *scramble* for example) is phonetically a /k/. So for *scramble* you would write /sk/. Notice too that sometimes two written consonants count as one sound: that is why *thrill, thwack* and *shrink* are on the two initial consonant list.

(b) Concentrate first on the two-sound clusters. Arrange them according to their first sound: so put all the ones beginning with /p/ together, and so on.

(c) Now you should be able to make some statements about which sounds can come first in a word initial consonant cluster. What about the sounds coming second? Forget for a moment the clusters beginning with /s/, because they behave differently from the others. You will see that quite a restricted number of sounds can come second. How is this different for clusters beginning with /s/?

(d) Look next at the three-consonant combinations. It is easy to work out what sound must come first. But can you make any generalization at the sounds occurring second and third?

**The answers:**

The sounds which come first in a two-sound initial cluster are:

/s/, /p/, /b/, /f/, /t/, /d/, /θ/, /ʃ/ and /k/.

When the first sound is not an /s/, the second sound comes from a very small collection: just /l/, /r/ and /w/.

To put this in the terms that some phoneticians would use: the first sound must be from a group known as ‘obstruents’. These are sounds where the airflow is obstructed in some way (many are what are more traditionally called ‘plosives’). The second sound must be from a group known as ‘sonorants’: sounds produced with a continuous non-turbulent airflow (rather than by airflow obstruction).

Where the first sound is /s/, a larger selection of consonants can be placed in second position.

As for three-sound combinations, the first sound must be /s/. The following two sounds must make up one of the two-sound combinations we have just discussed. So *split* is possible because there is an initial /s/, and the following two-consonant combination /pl/ is allowed.