Nasal Consonant

The basic characteristic of a nasal consonant is that the air escapes through the nose. For this to happen, the soft palate must be lowered; in the case of all the other consonants, and all vowels, the soft palate is raised and air cannot pass through the nose, in nasal consonants, however, the air does not pass through the mouth; it is prevented by a complete closure in the mouth at some point.

/m/ and /n/ are simple, straightforward consonants with distributions like those of the plosives. There is in fact little to describe. However, /ŋ/ is a different matter. It is a sound that gives considerable problems to foreign learners, and one that is so unusual in its phonological aspect that some people argue that it is not one of the phonemes of English at all.

There are three phonemes in English which are represented by nasal consonants, /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/. In all nasal consonants the soft palate is lowered and at the same time the mouth passage blocked at some point, so that all the air pushed out of the nose.

/m/ and /n/

All languages have consonants which are similar to /m/ and /n/ in English.

Notice:

1- the soft palate is lowered for both /m/ and /n/.
2- for /m/ the mouth is blocked by closing the two lips, for /n/ by pressing the tip of the tongue against the alveolar ridge, and the sides of the tongue against the sides of the palate.
3- Both sounds are voice in English, as they are in other languages, and the voiced air passes out through the nose.

Him /him/ lamb /læm/
Room /ru:m/ gaim /geim/
When /m/ or /n/ is found before another consonant, as in some of the examples above, the voices or voiceless nature of the final consonant has an effect of the length of the both the vowel and the nasal consonant: this is very similar to the lengthening or shortening of the vowels, examples like *seet* /siːt/ and *seed* /siːd/.

/ŋ/ is often syllabic: that is, it occupies the place at the center of the syllable which is usually occupied by a vowel. Both the words *lesser* /lesə/ and *lesson* /lesnɪ/ have two syllables: in *lesser* the second syllable is /-sə/, and in *lesson* the second syllable is often /-snɪ/ (n₁ means that /n/ is syllabic).

/ŋ/ This is the third English nasal consonant and the only one likely to cause trouble, because many languages do not have a consonant formed like /ŋ/.

Notice:

1- The soft palate is lowered and all the air passes out through the nose.

2- The mouth is blocked by the back of the tongue pressed against the soft palate.

3- The sound is voice.

Remember first of all that the letters *ng* in word like *sing* represent only one sound for most English speakers.
/η/ does not occur at the beginning of words, but it does occur between vowels, where it is more difficult than in final position. The most important thing is to keep /η/ and / η/ separate and not to confuse them.

In some words /g/ is normally pronounced after / η/ before a following vowel, for example, anger /æƞə/ and finger /fɪƞə/.

A useful general rule is that if the word is formed from a verb, no /g/ sound is pronounced. As with singer /siƞə/ hanging /hæƞiƞ/ but if not, /g/ is pronounced, as in stronger /strɒƞə/ formed from the adjective strong /stɒƞ/ and anger /æƞə/ which is not formed out of a shorter word.