

## **PRONUNCIATION AND PHONETICS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS DEVELOPING LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses effective activities for teaching minimal pairs or words that differ by only one sound essential for English as a Second Language (ESL) students aiming for pronunciation mastery. Recognizing and reproducing distinct sounds can be challenging for learners whose native languages do not differentiate these phonetic elements. By focusing on minimal pairs, these exercises not only improve pronunciation but also foster a dynamic learning environment where students can practice at their own pace while actively engaging with their peers.

**Keywords:** ESL, pronunciation, phonetic elements, minimal pairs, speech.

The objective of improving pronunciation is that it needs to be said at the outset that the aim of pronunciation improvement is not to achieve a perfect imitation of a native accent, but simply to get the learner to pronounce accurately enough to be easily and comfortably comprehensible to other speakers. "Perfect" accents are difficult if not impossible for most of us to achieve in a foreign language anyway, and may not even be desirable [1].

Learners' errors of pronunciation derive from various sources:

1. A particular sound may not exist in the mother tongue, so that the learner is not used to forming it and therefore tends to substitute the nearest equivalent: she or he knows
2. A sound does exist in the mother tongue, but not as a separate phoneme, that is to say, the learner does not perceive it as a distinct sound that makes a difference to meaning. In Hebrew, for example, both the /i/ and /i:/ (ship/sheep) sounds occur, but which is used depends only on where the sound comes in the word or phrase, not what the word means; and if one is substituted for the other, no difference in meaning results. These are called "allophonic variations" of a phoneme, or "allophones". The result is that the Hebrew-speaking learner is not naturally aware of the difference in English, and may not even hear it.

Overall, the second of the two problems is the more difficult. A very new sound is often easily perceived as alien, and once you hear a sound you are well on the way to being able to pronounce it. But if you cannot hear it then you cannot even attempt to pronounce it, and the problem of perception needs to be overcome before any progress can be made.

We suggest some ideas for improving learners' pronunciation.

- Imitation to teacher or recorded model of sounds, words and sentences.
- Recording of learners' speech, contrasted with native model.
- Systematic explanation and instruction (including details of the structure and movement of parts of the mouth).
- Imitation drills repetition of sounds, words and sentences.
- Choral repetition of drills.
- Varied repetition of drills (varied speed, volume, mood).
- Learning and performing dialogues
- Learning by heart of sentences, rhymes, jingles.
- Jazz chants.
- Tongue twisters.
- Self-correction through listening to recordings of own speech.

There are some sounds in English that can be difficult for any learner, and there are also distinctions between sounds that some students find confusing because there is no such distinction in their mother tongue. When all, or at least several, of your students are struggling with the same problem, it is definitely worthwhile doing some activities to target specific areas. First, they need to be able to hear the difference between the incorrect and the correct sound. Then they need to learn how to make the correct sound. Finally, they also need to be able to recognize when and how to make the correct sound [2].

Then you can look for appropriate minimal pairs—words that are exactly the same except for one different sound. These can help you target the sounds that your students need to focus on. A simple example would be: **“Ship” and “sheep”**

The sounds “i” and “ee” in these two words are significant because they are the only difference between two words which have different meanings, but for many ESL students the two sounds are not distinct in their mother tongue. By learning to recognize and reproduce the difference in these words' sounds and meanings, students can start heading towards pronunciation mastery. Try to choose pairs of words that not only contain your required minimal pairs, but are also suitable to the ability level of your students. The pairs will be useful to practice the target sounds through fun activities.

There are lots of games and activities learners' can use to teach the topic. Since they will all involve speaking and listening, they are naturally engaging and interactive games. The purpose of these is to focus on the particular sounds of students are having problems with using appropriate minimal pairs of words [3].

### **1. Minimal Pairs Bingo**

This activity can give students the opportunity to hear the difference between the minimal pairs, recognize the different words written on the card and clearly pronounce

the difference when they win and have a chance to be the caller. As each word is called, students tend to all say it quietly to themselves as well.

**2. Odd One Out** Put similar words into groups of three—two with one sound, and one with a different (although similar) sound. Or, you could have groups of four or five which contain the same sound, but only one that's different. For example: meet, seat, sit (for vowels) plays, pace, space (for consonants)

**3. Run and Grab**

You could have your minimal pairs on flashcards or you could simply write two (or more) words at a time on the board. Create two teams and then pair students up with a member of the opposite team. In turn, each pair goes to stand at the back of the room, looking down an aisle at the board. When you call one of the minimal pairs out, the pair races to the front to touch the correct word (the odd word out) on the board or grab the appropriate flashcard.

**4. Sound TPR (Total Physical Response)**

Younger students especially enjoy any activity that involves movement. Designate particular movements to particular sounds, as lively or as gentle as you like. For instance, they could be sitting at their desks and raise a hand, clap or stand up when they hear a particular sound, or they could be standing in a space and jump or run in response to sounds. They could respond to words on flashcards by correctly pronouncing them and moving in the prescribed way, or they could respond to the teacher (or another student) saying the words.

**5. Chinese Whispers**

When someone is genuinely whispering, and therefore not using their voice, it is nearly impossible to hear the difference between some words. For example, “bit” and “pit.” In a social situation where whispering is used we rely on context to fill out the meaning.

**6. Minimal Pair Math**

Assign a number to each of the minimal pair words you wish to focus on. Then call out the words in your chosen sequence, possibly joined with mathematical symbols (e.g., plus, minus). Students can write down the words and their associated numbers while you speak. Ask the students to give the final number that all these words add up to.

So, all of the activities described in this article have common denominators. They each follow a set structure that can be used often by the same teacher, but offer great variety because of the actual content. They can also be very easily adapted to any age group or language level. They also allow students of varying language levels to perform at their own level speak often and listen for purpose to the words of others.

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