Pronunciation games

Jason Anderson

puts his cards on the table.

few years ago I was playing around with ideas for making pronunciation learning more enjoyable for classes of mixed-nationality adult learners, when I came across a good idea: word cards which could be used in the sorts of games which usually require playing cards to help students develop their awareness of the differences between the vowel sounds in English.

With further development and experimentation, I was pleasantly surprised both by the effectiveness of this resource in aiding students to internalise the vowel sounds themselves and by the motivational advantages that any gamebased resource can provide in class.



When I used these in conjunction with activities that enable students to map out the vowel sounds, I found that my students were improving their pronunciation skills, both productively (in making themselves understood when speaking) and receptively (when listening to other speakers of English). Many of the students also developed a greater awareness of sound-spelling relationships in English, and thus greater confidence in predicting appropriate pronunciation of words they met for the first time in written form. Even more importantly, pronunciation lessons became more enjoyable, and students often looked forward to using the cards.

Three years down the line, I can report that many colleagues have also found the Pronunciation Learning Cards useful in both multilingual and monolingual classroom settings. As a result, I have decided to share the cards more extensively, and to that aim I have created a website where teachers can download the cards and create their own set to use in class. In this article I would like to provide a flavour of what the cards are and how they are used.

Pronunciation Learning Cards

The cards themselves are simple enough. Each card looks like a playing card, but instead of a suit and a number, it has a single one-syllable word on it (not in phonemic script). There are five cards for each vowel phoneme (except schwa /ə/, which appears only rarely in isolated one-syllable words). So, for example, the set for /i:/ includes the words *each, week*, *please, tree* and *key*. The set for /eɪ/ includes *day, great, age, paid* and *hate*.

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For each sound, I have chosen a range of common words both to raise the students' awareness of sound-spelling relationships and to ensure the vowel phonemes appear alongside a range of consonants. Any number of sets can be used to play games, and there are a total of 19 sets, which correspond to the 19 vowel sounds (monophthongs and diphthongs) in standard British English, excluding schwa. There are enough sets for a group of up to 16 learners all to be involved in playing games at the same time using only one pack of cards. Teachers can choose sets with very similar pronunciation for games with higher-level groups, or sets that map out distinctive phonemes for lower-level groups. Most importantly, the sets can be chosen to suit a group of learners and their specific problems with intelligibility and comprehension.

I will describe here a selection of the most popular games that can be played with the cards. More game ideas appear on the website.

1 Snap

One of the simplest games that can be played with the cards at intermediate level is Snap. Playing in groups of three. the students simply shuffle together five sets (25 cards, for example /i:/, /1/, /1/, /eə/ and /eɪ/) and deal them out amongst themselves. Each player must hold their cards in a pile face down so that they can't see them. Players take turns to turn over the top card in their pile and place it face up on the table (or on the floor) in front of them, saying the word on the card as they do so. Each player should make their own pile of cards (three piles close together). When two of the three top cards have the same vowel sound, the first player to say 'Snap!' wins the two piles and picks up the cards (leaving the third pile, which has a different top card). The game continues until one player is left with all the cards (the winner).

Snap can be played in small or large groups (eg at elementary level, students can work in pairs with four sets per pair; at advanced level, groups of four can play with eight sets per group – more piles to watch makes it surprisingly challenging).



Snap encourages the students to think quickly about the vowel sounds in each word. This helps them to improve their time-processing skills, which is likely to aid in pronunciation recall and effective pronunciation of written words. Snap also benefits visual learners who naturally need to see a word in their mind's eye before they pronounce it.

2 Pelmanism

Pelmanism (sometimes called *Memory*) is another popular game which can be played with the cards. A set of five sounds can be used for groups of four to six students. One card is removed from each set, and set aside as a reference card, whilst the remaining cards (four in each set) are shuffled together and spread out face down on a table or on the floor. Players take turns to turn over any two cards at the same time. The player turning the cards over should say the two words and let the others see them. If the two cards have the same vowel sound, the player wins them (and keeps them) and gets another go. If they don't, they are turned back over (ie face down) in the same location and the next player takes a turn. Players must try to remember where each word is. The player with the most pairs at the end is the winner. A player who mistakenly collects two cards with different sounds (thinking they are the same) misses a turn.

Hopefully, the short-term memory is playing an important role in this game as learners try to remember where the cards are and what vowel sound each one has, thereby increasing the likelihood of them internalising the sounds themselves as this provides the only link between different cards.

3 Freeze

Players can play this game in groups of five, with five sets of cards. The sets are shuffled together and dealt out among the players, who can look at their cards. The player to the left of the dealer starts by placing one card face up on the table and saying the word on the card. If the next player has a card with the same vowel sound, they should play it. The next player should do the same, etc. Any player who hasn't got a card with the same vowel sound, and therefore cannot play, has to pick up all the cards, whether they are the second player (who picks up only one card) or a later player who must take all five cards for a particular sound. The player to the left of the one who has picked up starts the next round. The first player to get rid of all their cards is the winner.

So far, this doesn't sound very interesting, but here's the fun bit: A player who doesn't have a card with the same vowel sound can 'bluff' and put down any card. If the other students don't notice that the sound is different, the player gets away with it (which rarely happens!). However, if another player notices, they can say: 'Freeze!' to challenge the player. If the challenge is correct (and the vowel sound is different), the player who bluffed has to pick up all the cards, and the player who said 'Freeze!' can start the next round, gaining an obvious advantage. A player who challenges incorrectly has to pick up all the cards, and the player who was challenged starts the next round. Learners will often make 'real' mistakes when playing Freeze (by putting down a card with the wrong vowel sound). If this happens, the others can also say 'Freeze!' to challenge the player in question.

This game forces the learners to peer-challenge and peer-correct as they play. With the teacher monitoring as adjudicator, learners' errors and successes can be noted for further work on the sounds in question.

4 Noughts and crosses

This game is played in pairs. Each pair will need to create a quick 'board' for themselves by drawing two vertical and two horizontal lines on an A4 piece of paper to create a Noughts and Crosses grid. Give out two sets of cards to each pair (ten cards). At pre-intermediate level and above, it's more challenging to give them two easily confusable sets (such as /ɔː/ and /ɜː/ or /uː/ and /ʊ/). At elementary level, you can either give them more easily separable sets (such as /ei/ and /ai/) or get them to play in teams of two. They should shuffle and deal out the cards between themselves. Each player will have a mixture of the two vowel sounds. They then take turns to lay down a card face up on one of the empty spaces of the grid, saying the word as they do so. They both have the same aim: to complete (ie put down the



last card) a line of any three cards with the same vowel sound. Unlike traditional *Noughts and Crosses*, either player can complete a line of either sound. Usually one of the players will win before the last card is played, but if they don't, there is an interesting twist to the end of the game. As there are nine spaces in the grid and ten cards, the player who did not go first will have the last card. They can play this card by putting it on top of any card on the grid to try to complete a line of three.

This provides an advantage to the player who goes second which counterbalances the traditional advantage to going first in *Noughts and Crosses*, and creates more strategic options. After ten minutes with one pair of sounds, pairs of students can swap sets and continue playing and refining their strategy. You can even have a knockout tournament at the end of the lesson! This game is very easy to learn, but quite difficult to master. It's more relaxed than *Freeze* or *Snap* and gives each learner plenty of time to think without feeling under pressure. ★ Often learners say the words on the cards repeatedly to themselves while deciding which card to play to check they've got the sound right, which naturally leads to greater sound awareness.

Other possibilities

Other games that can be played with the cards include *Cheat, House, Rummy* and *Connect 4*. They can also be used for whole-class mingle activities, as a way to group students together, for board games and for running dictation exercises. The variety of games and sounds means that a class of learners can use the cards up to twice a week for three months without feeling bored with them. Students don't need to know the phoneme symbols to be able to play. And, what's more, they're relatively preparation-free.

Learner styles

I have also noticed that the different games appeal to different learner styles. *Noughts and crosses* is very strategic and appeals to both logical-mathematical

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and spatial-visual learners within Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences model. House (in which players try to collect all five cards with the same vowel sound) appeals to interpersonal and linguistic learners, as they must pass cards around in a circle, listening carefully to each other to ensure that they make the right decisions as they attempt to collect their target cards. Other games involve kinaesthetic, naturalistic and interpersonal dimensions as well. Whilst not all of the games necessarily involve the learners speaking, all of them encourage them to 'hear the word in their mind's ear', as Adrian Underhill refers to the act of silently recalling a sound. Even between their playing turns, many of the learners often move their lips as they are studying what card to play next or what cards the other learners have played.



Reservations

Although I have obviously found the cards useful and enjoyable for my own students, I do, however, have several reservations about them. Firstly, it remains to be seen how applicable these cards are to other contexts in which English is taught. The pronunciation sets on the cards conform to a fairly standard British English model of pronunciation, and would not necessarily be appropriate for teachers of American, Irish or Australian English or indeed for teachers of what Jennifer Jenkins refers to as 'English as an International Lingua Franca'. The cards may need adapting for such contexts on a case-by-case basis, and it is unlikely that one pack will suit all teachers and learners of English.

Secondly, whilst I am in no doubt that learners who use the cards regularly over

a long time period improve in their ability to identify and categorise the different vowel sounds, this may be partly due to them simply remembering what set each card belongs to. However, bearing in mind that there are 95 cards, representing many of the most common spelling variations for the vowel sounds of English, this itself is not necessarily a bad thing and is likely to assist them in further vowel sound acquisition in the future.

And thirdly, apart from my own experiential, and essentially impressionistic evidence that students seem to be improving their pronunciation through regular use of the cards, I neither have the time nor the resources to carry out any studies at present that would provide more empirical evidence of their effectiveness.

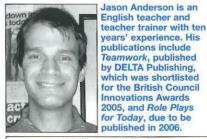
Recommendations?

This is why I would like to share the cards and get critical feedback from other teachers and learners. If you are interested in trying them out, there are full instructions on the website for printing and laminating the cards yourself, as well as detailed instructions for a variety of games that can be played with them. They are currently a free resource and will remain so until I am more certain of their usefulness. I would appreciate any feedback. I've had plenty of positive feedback, but negative comments are also welcome. Also, if you think of any more ideas for using the cards, I would be really interested to hear about them.

You can download the Pronunciation Learning Cards from:

http://kilnsey.tripod.com/pronunciation_ learning_cards.htm

Jenkins, J The Phonology of English as an International Language OUP 2000 Underhill, A 'Pronunciation Learning and Joy' Talk given at IATEFL Cardiff, 6th April 2005



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