

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 /e/ includes *day*, *great*, *age*, *paid* and *hate*.

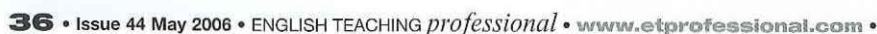




I will describe here a selection of the most popular games that can be played with the cards. More game ideas appear on the website.

*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).

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 /ɔ:/ and /ɜ:/ or /u:/ and /ʊ/). At elementary level, you can either give them more easily separable sets (such as /eɪ/ and /aɪ/) 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



# Pronunciation games

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](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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