Pronunciation Learning Cards
Jason Anderson

One of the biggest challenges many EFL teachers face on a daily basis is trying to ensure that revision and consolidation of pronunciation features learnt is enjoyable and memorable for our students. Often we can find ourselves falling into the rut of predictability and repetition, which is as likely to cause the students to switch off as it is to cause them to take interest. As one German student said jokingly when I picked up the phonemic chart for my regular pronunciation slot a few months ago:

"Ah, the instrument of torture!"

Suffice it to say, I didn't spend too long with it that day. Whilst problems of this kind may not happen to all teachers, for those that do suffer from them occasionally, I would like to propose a resource that will help to inject more fun into pronunciation lessons.
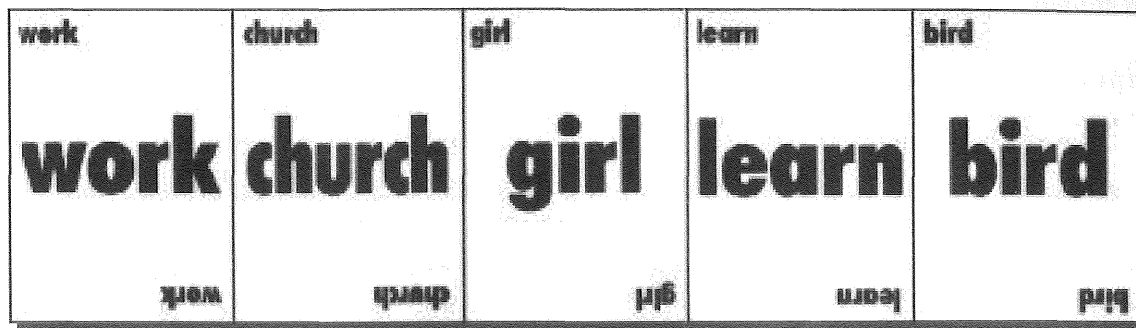
It's a resource that I have somewhat immodestly called 'Pronunciation Learning Cards'. In fact 'Pronunciation Playing Cards' would be a far more accurate description, but I wanted to avoid the word 'play' in the name, as the resource is, in one sense, as serious as any in terms of its ability to help with the consolidation of pronunciation learning. I began developing the resource in 2003, and since then I have devised 12 good activities/games as well as a range of useful techniques that can be used on a daily basis with the cards. Once you have a pack, very little further preparation is required, and they can be used for planned lesson activities and on an ad hoc basis for both remedial pronunciation teaching and fillers at the end of lessons. What's more, I've created a website for the cards where teachers can download them for free and try them out in class. More about that later.

At this stage, it's important to say that the cards only focus on one area of segmental pronunciation teaching, although this is one of the most problematic areas for many learners – the discrimination, differentiation and production of (RP-like) vowel phonemes: Separating your '*work*' from your '*walk*' and your '*won't*' from your '*want*'. Minimal pairs work, having drifted in and out of fashion over the last 50 years, has often filled this area. Pronunciation learning cards have the advantage over minimal pairs in that they usually require learners to work with 3-6 phonemes simultaneously, thus enabling the students to see more of what Adrian Underhill calls 'the whole picture' when 'mapping out' their vowel phonemes[1]. What's more, students find them fun to use, and we all know that positive emotion is one of the best learning aids available to us.

Description of the Cards

For each vowel phoneme in standard RP (excluding the schwa, for reasons which will soon become apparent), there are 5 cards, each with a common one-syllable word that includes the phoneme. For example, for the /ɜ:/ sound the 5 card set shown in Fig 1 is included.

Fig 1

These cards are chosen to ensure that a range of common spellings and adjacent consonant sounds are provided for each phoneme. Obviously, the schwa sound rarely appears in isolated one-syllable words when produced in isolation, so for this reason, it has been omitted from the cards. This produces 19 sets of 95 cards and 4 jokers, as shown below:

1 - iː	2 - ɪ	3 - ʊ	4 - uː	5 – e	6 - æ	7 - ɜː
each	if	good	two	said	thanks	work
week	sick	look	true	test	man	church
please	his	would	room	when	hand	girl
tree	which	put	who	head	cat	learn
key	build	foot	new	friend	black	bird

8 - ɔː	9 - ʌ	10 - ɑː	11 - ɒ	12 - əʊ	13 - eɪ	14 - aɪ
door	one	start	want	road	day	five
bored	love	calm	what	won't	great	why
call	mum	arm	stop	phone	paid	right
walk	run	car	got	know	age	like
saw	touch	heart	off	go	hate	buy

15 - aʊ	16 – ɔɪ	17 - ɪə	18 - eə	19 - ʊə
how	boy	ear	hair	cure
town	point	here	where	pure
found	coin	year	care	lure
out	toy	beer	there	tour
loud	boil	real	chair	sure

The cards lend themselves to a variety of activities and games for the EFL classroom. The activities include sorting, dictation, differentiation and raising awareness of sound-spelling relationships. The games include Snap, Pelmanism, Noughts and Crosses, Freeze, Connect 4, House and a board game called Sound Race, among others, which enable the students to consolidate and internalise the following aspects of phoneme awareness:

- the ability to differentiate quickly between the phonemes
- awareness raising of relationships between similar phonemes
- receptive pronunciation of the phonemes when listening to other learners
- productive pronunciation of the phonemes to make themselves intelligible to other learners
- knowledge of common sound-spelling relationships

Because there are no phonemic symbols used on the cards themselves, they can be used with students who have no knowledge of the phonemic set for English.
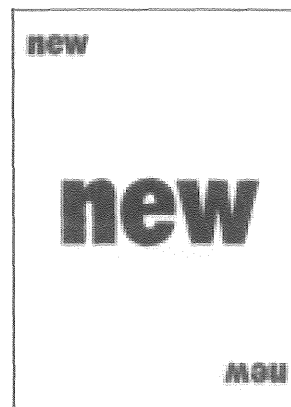
Adaptability of the Cards
One key feature of the cards that I find useful is the flexibility with which they can be adapted to different groups of learners. For each game, the teacher can choose which sets to use, thereby grading them to the needs of classes at any level between elementary and advanced. The degree of challenge of the games can be increased either by using more sets, or by choosing sets with more or less similar vowel phonemes. Although I have used them predominantly in multi-lingual classes where they allow for peer-teaching and correction between learners of different L1s, they can also be highly effective with monolingual classes in dealing with difficulties that are common to all the speakers of an L1. Two example lessons using the cards are given below, which also describe briefly how two of the games are played.
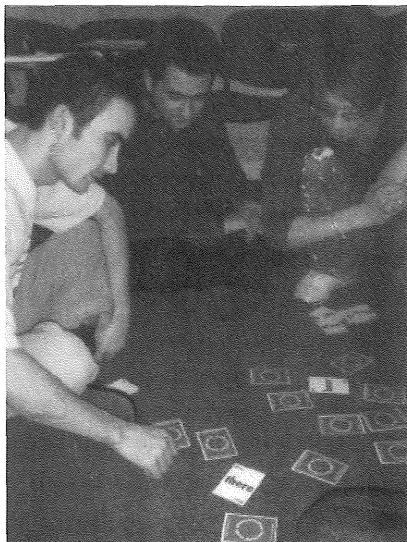
Example 1: Pelmanism
Student Context: A multilingual class of 16 upper intermediate students with a variety of vowel phoneme difficulties and some knowledge of phonemic symbols

For each student the teacher chooses one phoneme, and selects the related sets from the PLCs (pronunciation learning cards). Using blu-tac, she sticks the cards onto the board, next to the phonemic chart, and the students are asked to discuss and decide in pairs which vowel phoneme is in the word on each card. They all come up and write the vowel phoneme and their name under one card (see fig 2), checking with the teacher if necessary. Each student now has a phoneme. Once the answers are checked and confirmed, the teacher can shuffle the remaining cards (4 from each set, as 1 remains on the board), and deal out 4 cards to each student. A quick mingle game ensues in which each student has to get rid of their cards (by giving them to the student whose name is next to that phoneme on the board), and also has to get the 4 cards for their phoneme as quickly as possible. Mistakes are quickly noticed as students decline to receive cards they don't need. The winners take a few minutes and the last students finish soon after. Now the learners can sit down in groups of 4 to 6 (the larger the group, the more challenging the next game is). If possible, the teacher should sit learners with confusable phonemes together (eg. /iː/, /ɪ/, /ɪə/, /eə/). They then play a game of Pelmanism, spreading out their cards face down on the table or floor. Students take it in turns to turn over two cards, saying the words on them as they do.

Fig 2

/uː/ Marco

If they are the same, the student keeps both cards and gets another go. If they are different, he has to put them back. Any mistakes, they miss a turn. When all the cards are paired up, the student with the most pairs is the winner. As the game continues, students learn to remember which cards are where, and, more importantly, what sound each word has. The memory works hard as students are required to store spatial, lexical and phonemic information together, the kind of activity that could promote more efficient long-term learning, according to research by Schiffrin among others[2].

Example 2: Snap
Student Context: A monolingual class of intermediate Russian speakers who are having difficulty locating and distinguishing the four phonemes /e/, /æ/, /ʌ/ and /ɑː/

The lesson could start with work on articulation of the four vowel sounds in which the teacher models and drills the sounds separately. The teacher could then shuffle the 20 words that represent the four sounds in the PLCs and stick them onto the board in random order, modelling and drilling the pronunciation of each word. The students could then come to the board together to group the words with similar vowel sounds, while the teacher takes a back seat to allow for peer-teaching, discussion and correction. After the correct answers are confirmed, the students could play a game of Snap with the cards. The cards are shuffled and dealt out among groups of three students, who keep their piles face down.* As in traditional snap, they take it in turns to turn over their uppermost card, placing it face up on a pile in front of them, and saying the word as they do. Three piles will appear on the table. If any two of the topmost cards have the same vowel sound, the first student who shouts out 'Snap!' wins the two piles. The game continues in this fashion until one student wins all the cards. Students can change groups and play again if they wish. Having already sorted the cards, the learners will be drawing partly on memory, partly on sound perception and partly on sound-spelling relationships to make decisions as they play. A few games really helps to consolidate the learning, and really improves the speed at which the learners can match the sounds. They usually have a lot of fun as well.

* For each group to have a set of the same four phonemes, it is necessary to photocopy and cut up the cards several times, depending on the number of.

Quantity or Quality...or both?
Over the last five to ten years, several writers have questioned the relevance of promoting native-speaker pronunciation models/targets in modern ELT. As my Pronunciation Learning Cards clearly support the teaching of the 20 RP vowel sounds I would like to address these issues briefly in relation to the PLCs. Although I work in an EFL environment where most of my learners have set native-speaker-like models for their

pronunciation development, I believe the cards are relevant and useful to students of EIL (English as an International Language), for whom native-speaker-like pronunciation of English is of far less concern than mutual intelligibility with other non-native speakers.

In her preliminary research into phonological features interfering with intelligibility between non-native speakers, Jennifer Jenkins claimed that vowel length is likely to interfere with intelligibility, but vowel quality, with the exception of /ɜː/, isn't.[3] Her Lingua Franca Core promotes the teaching of vowel length, but not quality. The implication for teachers of EIL is that they should encourage their learners to draw on their L1 vowel pronunciation, add a bit of length where necessary, learn the /ɜː/ sound, and thereby make themselves understood to any other EIL speaker. Such evidence, if conclusive, would undermine the value of resources like the PLCs. However, aside from issues of what the learners we teach want (see Timmis, 2002 for a more detailed discussion of this issue[4]), I feel that this research has not been extensive enough (in terms of the variety of L1s analyzed, the contexts in which the language was used and the quantity of data) to indicate that vowel quality is irrelevant to intelligibility issues. What's more, I feel that whilst we may not necessarily need to 'push' an RP-like pronunciation as a target, it does provide a useful model to aim towards. As Jenkins' research itself has shown clearly, learners depend far less on contextual cues and far more on phonological ones when recovering meaning, so why not provide phonological cues that allow for the least possible ambiguity?[5]

Intelligibility errors that I have recorded recently in class between non-native speakers include one student saying 'now' in reply to a request, and being understood as having said 'no' (a difference in vowel quality between two diphthongs) and another who said 'good luck' and was perceived as saying 'good look' (quality, not quantity), not to mention 'won't' and 'want' (both length and quality are critical to separating these two).

In fact, a close scrutiny of Jenkins' own research data provides ample evidence of ambiguities which can be argued to be caused at least in part if not wholly by vowel quality issues.** And this is the point: Is it not somewhat simplistic (and unnecessary for teachers) to attempt to separate quality from quantity in issues of intelligibility when it is clear that the providing of models that integrate the two is inevitably going to produce more intelligibility?

**Examples of this are:
On p83 of The Phonology of English as an International Language, Jenkins discusses a hypothetical French speaker who might say /ʌt/ when attempting to say 'hot' and concludes that a non-native speaker listener may not be able to recover meaning. Surely, both the absence of the /h/ and the difference in quality between /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ contribute to this breakdown in communication. On pp85-86 Jenkins cites breakdowns in communication due to the following pronunciation errors: toys as [taɪz]; want as [wəʊnt]; 'covered' pronounced variably as ['kəʊwəd], ['kəʊvəd], ['kəʊvət] and ['kɒvəd] before meaning is eventually recovered from context; mall as [maːl]; hat as [hɒt]. If we add onto this the breakdowns that are caused by mispronunciation of /ɜː/ (the vowel quality which Jenkins admits is necessary in her Lingua Franca Core), there are at least 7 out of a total of 27 pronunciation error breakdowns in Jenkins' own data that can be argued to be caused at least primarily, if not wholly, by vowel quality. Despite this, Jenkins "remain(s) unconvinced" (p.162) by the importance of vowel quality in intelligibility between non-native speakers.

Like all practising teachers, I draw largely on impressionistic evidence when deciding what is and what isn't useful for my learners. I believe I have noticed stronger-than-usual improvements in peer-intelligibility amongst classes who have used the PLCs several times a week, and equally importantly, I have noticed a lot more enjoyment.

Feedback Please
The PLCs are still an experimental resource, and whilst I know of many teachers working in a similar context to myself who find them a useful addition to their tool cupboard, I would also like to find out about opinions further afield. So if they sound like a good idea, go to the website, download them, try them out in class, and send me feedback, please!

The website is: **http://kilnsey.tripod.com/pronunciation_learning_cards.htm**

And if you don't teach RP, but you like the idea, please get in touch - I am interested in developing sets for other types of English, such as Standard American English or Australian English.

References

1 **Underhill, A.** (2005) *Pronunciation Learning and Joy* (Talk, IATEFL Cardiff)
2 **Stevick, E. W.** (1976) In *Memory, Meaning and Method* (Newbury House), p.18 he quotes **Shiffrin, R. M.** (1970). 'Memory Search', chapter 12 of **Norman, D. A.** (ed.) *Models of Human Memory*. 375-447: 'Many units of information, of many different kinds, are commonly stored in a single, more or less unified "image"'.
3 **Jenkins, J.** (2000). *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (Oxford University Press) p.144-145.
4 **Timmis, I.** (2002). 'Native-speaker Norms and International English: A Classroom View'. *ELT Journal* Volume 56/3 July 2002.
5 **Jenkins, J.** ibid.
p82: "It seems then that in ILT speakers have very limited access to context to compensate for the inadequacies of speech perception and production."
p83 "But in ILT, given speakers' frequent inability to 'say what (they) mean' pronunciation –wise, which is compounded by listeners' seemingly ubiquitous use of bottom-up processing strategies, pronunciation is possibly the greatest single barrier to successful communication."

Jason Anderson is an EFL teacher and teacher trainer on the Cambridge CELTA currently working at Oxford House College, London, UK. He has taught English for 10 years, both in the UK and in Ukraine. His first publication 'Teamwork – Interactive Tasks to Get Students Talking' (DELTA Publishing, 2004) was shortlisted for the 2005 British Council Innovations Awards, his second title for DELTA is due to come out in 2006. His professional interests include phonology, SLA research and research into spoken English grammar.