

Young learners and the phonemic chart

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The main aim of this article is for teachers to help their students become more knowledgeable and interested in learning the sounds of English and to help them see how it can facilitate autonomous learning with self-study English language learning material and dictionaries. Hopefully if we start educating learners from a young age they will be more comfortable with the phonemic script and see the benefits of it when they are older and more self-aware learners.

Why use the chart?

First of all let's take a look at why we should use the phonemic chart at all in class. I've spoken to many teachers who say they shy away from using the chart. Perhaps they are unfamiliar with the sounds and symbols, or they see it as too difficult for their students to learn. Or they might have come up against student resistance to using the symbols in class doing pronunciation work. Hopefully this article will help us to see how it can be incredibly beneficial for teachers and students to become more familiar with the sounds and give them some ideas of how they can become more confident (teachers and students) about using the phonemic chart.

Here are some of the reasons I can see for using the phonemic chart in pronunciation work:

- It provides a standard from which to teach and learn pronunciation.
- It enables the students to better use their dictionaries.
- It gives the teacher a fast and effective tool for teaching pronunciation and for correcting errors.
- Once accustomed to it the students can use it in their notes to help learn the correct pronunciation of new vocabulary. Often without proper drilling etc, it can be difficult for students to remember the correct pronunciation as the spelling of English can be confusing.
- If, as a teacher, you feel you are still learning about pronunciation or want to learn about the phonetic chart then doing activities is one of the best ways of doing this.
- Teachers can be selective about the sounds they help their learners to focus on. Learners should be made aware of the importance of pronunciation and of which sounds help them to become more comprehensible in the English speaking world.

Background to the activities

Although the following activities are aimed mainly at young learners many would be ideal for adult groups. Adults also enjoy kinaesthetic activities, and many of the ones described in this article are just that!

The ideas are for the most part are discrete item approach activities- isolating sounds. I have also included an activity which shows how we can incorporate pronunciation work into more communicative activities.

Now for the fun part. Here are 10 ideas for teaching pronunciation using the phonetic alphabet.

The phoneme race

This is useful for introducing students to new phonemes and revising recently learnt sounds.

- Put six or so symbols on the board.
- Write words on cards big enough to be seen when stuck on the board. Five for each sound is enough.
- Drill the sounds. Be imaginative with your voice if doing it with young learners. They will remember it better if they are having fun.
- Put the students in teams. One person from each team races to the teacher and is given a card. They return to the group and decide which phoneme is used in the word from the board. They write the phoneme on the back of the card and run back to the teacher. If the symbol is correct the student is given another card. They must keep the cards and try to accumulate as many as possible. The winning team is the one with the most cards at the end.
- Give the students blu tack and ask them to stick the symbols to the board. Then do another drilling session.
- Then, in the teams, the students choose two symbols and race to make a sentence for each that includes three of the words from that symbol. The sentence must make some sense!
- Then you can reward the most imaginative sentences.

Make your own wall charts

- Put the symbols you want to learn on the board and drill them.

- Then ask students to match flash cards with each symbol. For example, /i:/ can be matched with a picture of cheese.
- Then ask the children to draw the symbol and the picture on the top of a large piece of coloured card. These cards are then stuck to the wall for the next class.
- In the next class, the children are put into coloured teams. Each team is given ten words on cards which they have to stick to the posters. Play some fun music to do this! Give them a time limit.
- Then, check how many they got correct. (Try to use words they are familiar with, or words you want to revise.) The winners are those with most correct.
- Every few classes you can revise this, repeat it and add to it. So you end up with a comprehensive and colourful wall display all created by them. Much more interesting than a published phonemic chart for young learners.

Chinese whispers.

Again, this is for revising individual sounds.

- The teacher sits the learners in a circle and shows a student a symbol, also whispering it in their ear.
- The sound is passed around the class. If the sound is correct at the end for the symbol the students get a point, if not the teacher gets a point.

Using dictionaries

This should be done with students who are familiar with the script and is suitable more for teenagers and adults.

- Choose five words from the dictionary and write them in phonetic script.
- Ask the students in pairs to write down what they think the word is.
- Then get the students to swap papers with a different group and ask them to look up the word to see if they were correct.
- The winners are the group with most correct.
- Then they can make a new list of five words for the other group to repeat the activity with.
- This can be combined with a revision of vocabulary from the course book they are using. The students look up words in the dictionary from the book and transcribe them for the other group to guess.

Going shopping

This is a communicative activity which incorporates some sounds you have been doing in class into a shopping list activity where the students have to practise dialogues buying certain items like cheese, meat, /i:/, and crisps, milk /I/.

- Students can be put into two groups of shop owners and customers with a budget to make it more 'authentic'.
- Then they have a certain time to buy all the items they can on the list.
- For the shop owners, give them flash cards of food items or pieces of card with the food and prices on them.
- Afterwards they can decide the cheapest and most expensive shops as a class.