

Pronunciation Practice

Minimal Pairs

Minimal pairs are pairs of phonemes that are often confused by students and can change words/meanings significantly. For example unvoiced “th” and “s” are a minimal pair. You cannot interchange them without significantly changing a word or the meaning of a sentence.

Have you ever seen the Berlitz commercial with the German Coast Guard officer? He hears a distress call from a British ship with the captain saying, “Mayday! Mayday! We are sinking! We are sinking!” The German officer replies, “Halloo. Zis is ze German Coast Guard. Vat are you sinking about?”

Here are some more minimal pairs to watch out for when teaching pronunciation:

Minimal Pair	Example
f vs. v	fat vs. vat / fail vs. veil
s vs. sh	see vs. she / dis- vs. dish
r vs. l	purr vs. pull / rap vs. lap
eh vs. æ	bed vs. bad / together vs. to gather
b vs. p	bull vs. pull / rib vs. rip
b vs. v	ban vs. van / Gibb vs. give
unvoiced th vs. t	third vs. turd / bath vs. bat
unvoiced th vs. s	think vs. sink / bath vs. bass
unvoiced th vs. f	thought vs. fought / with vs. whiff
voiced th vs. d	they vs. day / father vs. fodder
voiced th vs. z	then vs. zen
ei vs eh	late vs. let / bait vs. bet
s vs. z	sue vs. zoo / bus vs. buzz
w vs. v	wine vs. vine / worse vs. verse
i vs. ih	beat vs. bit / sheet vs. sh**
l vs. n	lice vs. nice / lick vs. nick
f vs. h	few vs. hue / phase vs. haze
p vs. f	pale vs. fail / pry vs. fry / pays vs. phase

Minimal Pairs Practice Activities

If your students are having trouble with a specific minimal pair (or just whenever you want to practice one), here are a few activities to try. Most (if not all) of them can be done with little or no preparation.

One or Two

No preparation or materials are necessary for this activity. You simply designate one sound as #1 and the other as #2. Then you read through a list of words. If the students hear you say a word with the #1 sound, they hold up one finger. If they hear you say a word with the #2 sound, they hold up two fingers. For a greater challenge, cover your face as you speak so they can't see your mouth.

Fly Swatter Game

For this game, you need two fly swatters and a white board or chalkboard. On the board, write a bunch of words with the minimal pair you're focusing on. Write them in random order, large and small, in all different colors if you want. Divide the class into two teams, and have them stand in the back of the room. Select one student from each team to go first. Armed with their team's fly swatter, the students must run to the board and swat the word that you say.

Pair Dictation

Pair students up, and give them each a handout. Student A will have Handout A, and Student B will have Handout B. On Handout A, the student will see five complete sentences and five fill-in-the-blank sentences. Student B will have a corresponding handout with the opposite complete/fill-in-the-blank sentences. Each student will read his/her complete sentences to the other, who will listen and fill in the blanks with the words they hear.

Minimal Pair BINGO

You can play with as many different sets of minimal pairs as you want. You just have to give the students a big list of words to choose from. They can write any words they want from the list on their own BINGO cards (with a "Free Space" in the middle). Call out the words from the list, and the first student to get five in a row wins!

Minimal Pair Map

This activity will take a little bit of planning if you are directionally or spatially challenged. Choose two minimal pairs – maybe f vs. v and p vs. b. Assign a direction to each sound. For example, f = up, v = down, p = right, and b = left. Give or have the students draw a grid in the size of your choosing (4x4, 5x5, it's up to you). Have them all start in the center square of the grid and use a coin or other small object to move one way or another each time you say a word. If you say the word "pay," for example, they must move to the right (p = right). If you say "bay," they must move to the left (b = left). Say ten words, and then see if everyone is in the correct square. Let the students take turns being the "caller."

Shouting Dictation

Students must dictate a list of words to a partner who is standing across the room. Play background music to make them speak even louder. The first pair to correctly dictate each partner's list wins. This game is loud, but it encourages students to exaggerate in their pronunciation, which helps them learn.