The Minimal Pair Collection

PronPack

ACCENT-FRIENDLY PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

Mark Hancock

HANCOCK McDONALD ELT

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Ideas and activities for familiarizing learners with how words sound in natural spoken English.

PronPack:
The Minimal Pair Collection

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Introduction

The book takes an innovative approach to pronunciation teaching, encouraging flexibility with regard to accent and tolerance of the variation which is a natural part of English as an international language today.

The approach

Accent-friendly pronunciation teaching

English pronunciation comes in many 'flavours'. Looking at English Language Teaching (ELT) books, you may get the impression that it's a binary choice between standard British or standard American. Is that a realistic representation of the English speaking world? Do you speak either of these two yourself? What about teachers from Scotland or Alabama? And what about all of the Englishes outside the UK or US, such as Australian or West Indian? And now add to the mix the accents of people who have learnt to speak English as a second language. Many of these speakers are perfectly intelligible and yet have an accent distinctly influenced by their first language. Perhaps you are one of these? This book is for you too.

Accent-friendly for teachers

If you are a teacher of English, you generally teach with your own accent of English. Your learners may think they have chosen standard British or American, but what they get is *you* as a model. Some of us teachers feel anxious about this, but this book is here to say that we needn't be. Globally speaking, the majority of us do not have one of the standard accents, and this is no barrier to being or becoming an excellent pronunciation teacher. I hope this book can be your friend, whatever your accent.

Accent-friendly for learners

This book aims to be accent-friendly, but this is not just about being kind to you the teacher; it's also about being kind to learners. Whether they choose standard British or American, what most learners come out with is an accent which is all their very own. The original choice turns out to have been something of a fantasy. You can't just pick an accent and wear it, like choosing an outfit from your wardrobe. You might not get the accent you want, but hopefully, you'll get the accent you need. This is the realistically achievable accent which will give you access to a community of English speaking people spanning the globe. Learning pronunciation is not about sounding like a fantasy native speaker; it's about understanding and being understood from China to Peru and everywhere in between.

The material

Focus on phonemes

This book will focus on *segmental* aspects of pronunciation. That means we will be looking at individual sounds, or more precisely, the individual phonemes of English. We will not be dealing with *suprasegmental* aspects such as stress and intonation. Our accent-friendly approach means that we will not be trying to train learners to copy any specific accent such as standard British or American. This means we will focus less on the exact quality of individual sounds, and more on the contrasts between one phoneme and another. These contrasts are best shown through minimal pairs.

Minimal pairs

Minimal pairs are two words whose pronunciation is identical except for one phoneme – for example, *ship-sheep*. They are ideal for showing phoneme contrasts because they show how a change of a single phoneme can lead to a change in meaning. This demonstrates that pronunciation is not about 'sounding good' (whatever that might mean), but rather, it's about intelligibility – about understanding and being understood. Minimal pairs form the basic 'raw material' for a range of useful classroom practice activities. This book will provide both raw material and activities: a huge collection of minimal pairs classified into groups (**Section B**), plus a large set of ready-to-use materials for classroom activities (**Section C** and online).

The book

Section A

This section includes 15 brief, practical chapters helping to orient the reader in the background ideas which lie behind the approach and materials in the book. You can choose to read the chapters straight through, or else dip in as the interest takes you. You will find abstracts of the contents of each chapter on the introductory page of the section to help you find the chapters of interest.

Section B

This is the main body of the book – the actual minimal pair collection referred to in the title. The minimal pairs are classified into groups. For example, the P Group includes the phoneme contrasts /p-b/, /f-v/, /b-v/, /f-p/ and /v-w/. Apart from the minimal pairs, the chapters include background information on spelling and articulation, as well as sections entitled *accent-wise*, providing insights into accent variations.

The chapters are organised in such a way that you can use them in class as a continuous course, from beginning to end. Note that Units **1–10** are essential and can

be used by all classes, while **11–15** are optional – these are more likely to be relevant only to more specific learners. It's also perfectly possible to dip into different parts of Section B as and when you see fit. If you are looking for a specific minimal pair, check the minimal pair index in **D1**.

Section C

This section contains a collection of games together with step-by-step instructions. Game types which are used in multiple units in **Section B** are placed here in order to avoid repetition within the units themselves. All games and worksheets can be downloaded from www.pronpack.com for printing or projecting.

Section D

This section contains reference materials which may be of interest, such as a minimal pair index or a rationale for the IPA symbols used in the book.

Support website

An important element of this book is to be found on the website www.pronpack.com. There, you will find downloadable files with a wealth of classroom-ready games and materials for working on the minimal pair contrasts outlined in the book, in full colour so that teachers can use them in class, in printed or in digital form.

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Website Online support materials

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Classroom-ready games and materials online

The materials are gathered into five collections of games which are referred to in **Section B** of this book. Each collection consists of a set of slides of games and materials which you can print, project in class or share in an online class.

Notice that the games given within this book are only examples of what is available – there are many more in the online digital collections outlined below, covering the full range of minimal pairs you may want to focus on.

Minimal group pictures collection: This PDF file contains the *minimal group pictures* which occur at the beginning of each unit in **Section B** of this book.

Grid map games collection: This PDF file contains *grid map games* for all the vowel groups in the Minimal Pair Collection. Full notes explaining how to use these games can be found in **Section C2** of this book.

Four choices collection: This PDF file contains 6 versions of the *four choices game*. Full notes explaining how to use these games can be found in **Section C3**. The Four choices collection is also available as a *Powerpoint* file. This is so that you can easily insert the minimal pair sentences that you would like to work on. These can be selected from the ones provided in this book.

Pair squares collection: This PDF file contains 50 versions of the *pair squares game*. Full notes explaining how to use these games can be found in **Section C4**.

Street map collection: This PDF file contains 12 versions of the *street maps game*, plus a blank template to create your own versions. Full notes explaining how to use these games can be found in **Section C5**.

How to access the materials

1 Go to the website https://www.pronpack.com/
2 In the main menu click on *Resources* and select the title of this book from the drop-down menu.
3 Read the instructions (including the information about the password) and then click on *Go to Downloads*.
4 Select and download the file you are looking for.

Section A Orientation

In this section, you will find an overview of factors to be considered when teaching individual phonemes and using minimal pairs in the context of an accent-friendly approach to pronunciation.

A1 Be aware of accent
Our perceptions of accent and the impact they can have on English language teaching.

A2 Focus on intelligibility
The goals of pronunciation teaching and learning, and why we should focus on intelligibility rather than sounding like a native speaker.

A3 Don't correct everything
Teaching pronunciation in an accent-friendly way, and what this means for what we should and shouldn't try to correct in class.

A4 Keep your approach accent-friendly
Four principles to keep in mind if we wish to make our teaching flexible with regard to accent.

A5 Understand what minimal pairs are for
Minimal pairs – what they are and why they are powerful in pronunciation teaching.

A6 Use minimal pairs in an accent-friendly way
How to use minimal pairs in a way that is flexible enough to allow accent variation.

A7 Use minimal pairs to focus on interactive skills
The important communicative skill of accommodation, and how minimal pair activities can be used to develop it.

A8 Extend the idea of minimal pairs
Other kinds of pairs, which do not match the definition of 'minimal pair', but which can be used in similar ways.

A9 Fit minimal pairs within a coherent course plan

How we can fit minimal pairs within a coherent course plan by presenting them as part of phoneme groups.

A10 Decide if you need audio

How you can model the pronunciation of minimal pair activities in class. You will need to either model it yourself or generate audio using online tools.

A11 Use tech in an accent-friendly way

How learners can use automatic speech recognition to practice their pronunciation and accommodation skills, but they must be aware that it is not always right.

A12 Use phonemic symbols in an accent-friendly way

The difference between phonemic and phonetic symbols, and why the difference is important in an accent-friendly approach to pronunciation teaching.

A13 Understand different kinds of accent difference

Different kinds of accent difference and how we can deal with them in an accent-friendly pronunciation class.

A14 Anticipate the problems learners may have with minimal pairs

The factors which make some minimal pairs more difficult than others for learners from a given L1 background.

A15 Decide which minimal pairs to prioritize

How to decide which phonemes and phoneme distinctions are more important, and which may be regarded as optional.

A1 Be aware of accent

Our perceptions of accent and the impact they can have on English language teaching.

You have an accent

Our perception of accent is very subjective. People sometimes believe that they don't have an accent; that only *other* people have accents. It comes as a shock when you discover, like the woman in the picture, that other people think *you* have an accent. But if you are in the field of language teaching, it's important to be clear-eyed about this: objectively, there is no such thing as having no accent. If you speak, you have an accent. It's also important to understand that, objectively, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' accent. What seems 'neutral' to you may not seem 'neutral' to someone else. Alene Moyer writes, 'In any language – native or not – *everyone* has an accent, yet the idea of a neutral accent standard persists in our collective consciousness' (Moyer, 2013, p.89). Sadly, the myth of the neutral accent has had a strong influence in language teaching.

Accent reduction?

You may be familiar with the term *accent reduction*. It is used to describe training courses, particularly in the US, where participants hope to acquire an accent more like the natives of that country. There may be strong reasons for them to do so – it may be to their advantage both socially and professionally to sound less 'foreign'. However, the very term seems to play on the myth which Moyer identifies: if everyone has an accent, then 'accent reduction' is impossible – you cannot speak with no accent. In such a course, you will be attempting to *change* your accent, not *lose* it. We will call this 'accent training', which, as we will see, is not the same thing as pronunciation teaching.

Accent improvement?

'Accent reduction' courses are aimed at speakers whose native language is not English. A similar kind of accent training is available for native speakers of English who want to 'improve' their accent. For participants on these courses, the motivation is similar: they hope to improve their social and professional opportunities in life. These kinds of courses used to be popular in the UK and went by the name 'elocution lessons'. But if we are to be clear-eyed about accent, then we must question the idea of accent 'improvement'. Can one accent really be 'better' than another? How exactly is it 'better'? In the context of the UK, the answer to this was simply a matter of social class: it was assumed that upper-class accents were better than working class accents. In this context, the target accent was 'Received Pronunciation' (RP), the word 'received' here is being used as a synonym for 'accepted' – this was the accent which was most acceptable in upper class society.

A standard accent?

In the UK, RP became regarded as a 'standard' accent. It was standard in the sense of regionally neutral – it didn't belong specifically to any one part of the country, and so it could serve as a kind of lingua franca for the country as a whole. However, because of the upper-class associations of this accent, there was a strong evaluative element here too: the idea that this accent is not only 'standard' but a 'higher standard'. With the advent of English Language Teaching (ELT), this local prejudice has been exported to the world: RP is often regarded as 'better' in classrooms, from Argentina to India.

'Standard' does not mean 'better'

The two most widely used standards in ELT are RP or General American (GA). But it's important to understand that being 'standard' does not mean those accents are somehow better than other accents. John Wells points out, 'A standard accent is regarded as a standard not because of any intrinsic qualities it may possess, but because of an arbitrary attitude adopted towards it by society' (Wells, 1982, p34).

In the world today, English is an international language, with many more non-native than native speakers. If you want to understand and be understood by as many of those people as possible, having an RP or GA accent is no guarantee. As Wells says, those accents are not intrinsically superior – they are not, crucially, more intelligible. Their usage as models is essentially random, relating more to local prejudices within the UK and US than to anything else.

Moyer, A. (2013), *Foreign Accent: the Phenomenon of Non-native Speech* Cambridge University Press

Wells, J.C. (1982), *Accents of English 1: An Introduction* Cambridge University Press