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In this column, we discuss the latest developments in ed-tech, as well as tried and tested apps and platforms, and the integration between teaching and technology. We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

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The Benefits of Using the British Council Interactive Phonemic Chart

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The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was created in the late 1800s and is a standardized portrayal of the forty-three individual sounds that can be found in English. The British Council Interactive Phonemic Chart (IPC), like the IPA, groups the individual sounds into three categories: vowel sounds, diphthong sounds, and consonant sounds (see Figure 1). The IPC was developed to help students hear the various sounds in English in isolation and to provide example words for each sound.

Figure 1

International Phonetic Chart



Chart Layout

In the IPC, the pure vowel sounds (top left section) have been arranged in the same pattern as in the IPA chart: according to the shape of the mouth

at the point of articulation. For example, from left (the lips are wide) to right (the lips are round), and from top (the jaw is more closed) to bottom (the jaw is more open). The diphthong sounds (top right section) have been grouped in rows according to their final sound. The middle and bottom rows of the consonant sounds (bottom section) are all voiced sounds (with the exception of the /h/ phoneme) and the top row of the consonant section is a mixture of voiced and unvoiced consonant sounds.

How it Works

The IPC is incredibly easy to use, and can be used in both live face-to-face lessons, and also used on remote online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom and so on, provided that the computer audio has been shared with the students. The application can be downloaded from the Google Play store for Android devices and the App Store for Apple devices (see Figure 2). Search for the “LearnEnglish Sounds Right” app.

Figure 2

LearnEnglish Sounds Right App



You can also download and use a non-interactive image of the chart onto your laptop or computer from the British Council teaching English webpage: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/phonemic-chart>



Once downloaded, the app can be basically used in two ways. To play a phoneme in isolation for stu-

dents by simply clicking on the phoneme you would like to be played. Or, by choosing the drop-down arrow in the top right corner of each phoneme for a selection of three example words containing the sound.

Resource Integration

The IPC also integrates well with other resources and materials. For example, there are many excellent Japanese to English, English to Japanese electronic dictionaries (Swan & Smith, 2001) in which the words the students look up are accompanied with the IPA script. This is also the case if students search the meaning of words on Google, or on most online dictionaries, Merriam-Webster for example. Lastly the IPA is used in many textbooks such as the Cambridge Unlock series, so the IPC can be integrated into classes that use these texts.

Practical Ways the App Can Be Used

Drilling

The sounds or example words on the IPC can be used for choral drilling.

As a Model

The teacher can use the IPC as a model for students, a model of the isolated sounds for some focussed pronunciation work, or as a model of the sounds within an example word.

Articulator Training

Students can find it difficult to pronounce certain vowel sounds due to the position of the articulators (i.e., the mouth and tongue). Therefore, it can be beneficial for students to repeat the vowel phonemes from left to right or from top to bottom, paying attention to the position of their mouth and tongue. This can help highlight that pronunciation is not just a speaking skill but also a physical action (Underhill, 2005).

Noticing

The teacher can use the chart as a way of guiding students to notice the difference between certain sounds. I have found this useful with problematic vowel sounds that Japanese students struggle with e.g., Cap /kæp/ and cup /kʌp/. Playing the vowel sound and having students match it to the phoneme can help students notice the different vowel sounds.

Self-study

As the IPC is a free resource for anyone to download and use, it can also be used by students as a way of self-studying pronunciation. Furthermore, students can use it as a reference when they come across unknown lexis when studying.

The more the IPC can be exploited, the more chances are created for the students to repeat, practice and train their ears to problematic phonemic sounds (British Council, 2001).

Possible Limitations

The IPC was developed by the British Council so therefore the individual phonemic sounds and example words are spoken in a British accent. This likely does not match much of the JALT readership, however, using the IPC could be a beneficial way of raising learners' awareness of other World Englishes.

Student Feedback

I surveyed my students at the start of semester one and at the end of the academic year after consistently using the IPC in class. Over the year I used the IPC to conduct feedback, as a model, and to drill students. It was never the aim of the lesson but was used when new emergent language came up or pronunciation problems occurred. At the start of the year not one of the sixteen students answered that they understood the phonemic chart. By the end of the year, thirteen of the sixteen stated they had *much greater*, or *greater* understanding of the IPC.

Conclusion

The British Council Interactive Phonemic Chart is an easy to use, simple, effective, and engaging application that can add a new way of dealing with pronunciation. Also, helping raise learners' awareness of the phonemic script through using the IPC, students can then use this knowledge when they work on their listening, speaking, pronunciation, and can help foster autonomous self-study. Also, exposure to different kinds of World Englishes could help reduce the shock learners feel when confronted with fluent speech in the future (Field, 1998).

References

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