

# Minimal Pair Card Game for Improving Pronunciation and Listening

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This article introduces a card game that can be used as a classroom activity for providing students with a way to spend ample time practicing minimal pair listening and pronunciation skills.

## The Situation

One of the difficulties a learner of a new language faces is that of minimal pairs. The term “minimal pairs” refers to two words within a language which have different meanings but vary in one sound segment only (Fromkin, Blair & Collins 2000 p.249). Examples of this in English are the words “fat” and “hat”. There are many of these in the English language. Which minimal pairs cause a student problems, depends on the phonetics of their native language and their language of study (L1 and L2). In the case of Japanese learners, “fat” and “hat”, pose a problem because of the nature of the Japanese language which lacks the sound for the English “f”. Another example would be “eel” and “heel” for a French learner of English. This pronunciation problem would arise because the French language lacks an “h” sound. For this reason these language learners have a very difficult time clearly differentiating between the sounds both when they hear them and when they attempt to pronounce them. In turn, difficulties with minimal pairs may even cause language learners problems in areas like reading and spelling, as students mix up words and thus meanings.

Minimal pairs are a more serious problem than simple poor pronunciation or listening skills on the part of a student. This is because mistakes with minimal pairs do not simply impair understanding; they can lead students to believe that they understand when in fact they are quite mistaken. These kinds of mistakes can hamper their conversation skills in the obvious way that they are difficult to understand, but it can also affect their confidence and thus their inclination to even try to communicate in the first place.

The problem with helping students with minimal pairs is that it is not as simple as teaching a rule and then reinforcing it with an exercise and/or homework. This simply does not provide enough practice to enable to students to learn and become competent with new phonetics. Though minimal pairs are addressed by many language learning texts, they generally do so in a brief, one time activity or some simple repetition. Though this is better than nothing, this does little to aid students in gaining any lasting improvement in either listening or pronunciation. Minimal pairs need to be seen as a problem to be dealt with over a longer period.

## A Solution

Before setting the students to any minimal pair learning related task it is important to first increase the students' awareness of what minimal pairs are, why they are difficult and what kind of problems they cause. Next the students must be reassured that with practice that these difficulties can be overcome. It is also important to tell the students that in regular classes they need not worry about minimal pairs too much or this may hinder the communicative of your class. Instead make it clear that they need only concentrate 100% during the activity about to be discussed. The last step is to give students the practice they need to learn how to differentiate between minimal pairs that cause them trouble. As mentioned previously which pairs these are, is determined by a combination of their L1 and L2. A teacher who understands his or her students' L1 and L2 can go about creating list and then a card set of pairs. For example a deck of cards with pairs of “fat” and “hat”, “feel” and “heel”, etc. A good list of English minimal pairs may be found in a number of texts or online. (Try this search: <http://iteslj.org/links/search.cgi?query=minimal+pairs>)

## Minimal Pair Card Game

With this newly fashioned deck it is proposed that students play a simple game called “Fish”. Each student is dealt between five and eight cards, the remaining stays in a stack in the middle.

The students then take turns asking each other for cards matching the ones they possess. This game may be done in groups of two to six, though four members are probably best.

One student starts by asking one of the other students for a pair to a card they possess in this fashion, "Excuse me, (Name of the student they want to ask) \_\_\_\_\_, do you have a fifteen?" If the student has it she/he gives it to the asking student, then the asking student places the newly made pair down and can ask the same student or any other student for another card they possess one of. If, on the next request, the student does not have the card they simply say, "No, I don't have it. Sorry.". Then the student who is doing the asking takes a card from the pile in the center and his or her turn is complete.

The process goes round and round until all of the cards have been made into pairs. The student who has the most pairs wins.

Once the students have played a few times a small change to the game will improve its effectiveness. If a student hears a card being asked for which they possess, on their turn, when they ask for the card they should ask for card with, "May I have \_\_\_\_?" rather than "Do you have \_\_\_\_?", as they know that the student they are asking has the card in question. If they do so and are correct they receive an extra turn after making a mistake, if they are mistaken they lose a turn. This will both teach them a useful phrase and encourage them to listen during the other students' turns.

This simple game is effective because it forces students to focus both on their pronunciation and listening. One might suggest that a simple "repeat after me" exercise with the teacher has the same function. The difference is there is a certain amount of pressure as there is an actual need to be understood. For the students to ensure they receive the card they need for a pair, they must pronounce correctly or potentially be misheard and not receive the card or receive the wrong card. The student being asked is in the same situation, only they must focus and listen to avoid giving the wrong card. Any students not participating in the exchange must also listen as a card they possess might be mentioned, giving them an opportunity on their turn to ask for it.

## Final Remarks

A few things make this activity a very effective means of practicing minimal pair pronunciation and listening.

- The students' problem areas are quickly given identified. Thus identified they can either work together as group to get the pronunciation right or ask the teacher for help.
- The game can be played as many times as the teacher feels necessary.
- The size of the class is not an issue as they work in groups.
- Students are forced to spend the activity time pronouncing and listening actively.
- Many students enjoy it as a respite from regular class.

For classes that find the activity particularly difficult, one way of easing students into it is to start with minimal pairs of one kind and slowly expand the deck each class. For example starting with only "S" and "Sh" pairs (sip and ship, sin and shin), then expanding to "F" and "H" (feel and heel, fit and hit), until finally they are dealing with all the various minimal pair types that are relevant to their L1 and L2 situation.

This activity may also provide effective practice for any number of similar pronunciation problems or important vocabulary. With a little thought a teacher can adapt it to their language setting and the learners they are working with.

The cards are the only stumbling block for the teacher. Of course the teacher could make them by hand if only one set was needed but for a large class making the cards on a computer is obviously faster. With a reliable printer, capable of printing onto thick enough paper so as not to be seen through, any number of necessary card sets can be made. The cards for minimal pairs must be made and can be made to suit the minimal pair problems which are specific to the student's native language. So previous to making the cards, teachers need to either draw on their teaching experience and knowledge of the students to provide the pertinent pairs for the cards or get access to the information via texts or the internet.

It is of course very important for the teacher to review the correct pronunciation each time before the activity and then roam among the students lending a hand here and there. Finally before trying the activity with the students it may be helpful to test your students listening skills on the task to be engaged in. With their initial test scores in hand the teacher may give the test again in a few weeks and show the students their improvement, giving them a motivational boost.

# Bibliography

- Blair, D., Collins, P., Fromkin, V., (2000). An Introduction to Language. Sydney: Harcourt Australia Pty Limited.

# Links

- Search The Internet TESL Journal's database of web links:  
<http://iteslj.org/links/search.cgi?query=minimal+pairs>
- Have your students try Charles Kelly's "American English Pronunciation Practice"  
<http://www.manythings.org/pp/>

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XI, No. 9, September 2005

<http://iteslj.org/>

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<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Fryer-MinimalPairs.html>