

Gender-Based Vowel Preferences and Their Use As a Teaching Tool

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Newly-discovered preferences for front-of-mouth vowels in male names, and the opposite in female names; use in a phonetics or pronunciation lesson.

Objectives

This lesson plan can be tailored to a variety of objectives: introducing or practising the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), practising minimal vowel pairs, or simply sensitizing the students to the production of the vowel sounds, and the location of production within the mouth. It uses some recent findings from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which indicate that males whose first names are pronounced at the front of the mouth (Tim, Bill, Pete) are perceived as more attractive than those with back-of-the-mouth names (Paul, Todd). For women, however, it is just the opposite.

Level

The lesson is suitable for all levels.

Time Needed

From 40 minutes to an hour, depending on the size of group and the time spent on warmer, presentation and follow-up discussion.

Preparation

Using two of the same issue of a magazine or newspaper (I used a free Paris weekly), cut out two identical headshots of five men and five women: i.e. twenty photos in all. Glue each of these to a Bristol card. Then label each card with a first name, creating minimal pairs between the "twin" photos, varying only by a vowel, e.g. Pat/Pete, Tim/Tom, Ginny/Jenny. Thus the same woman will appear on one card as Meg and another as Mag, and so on.

If you have more than 25 students, make one or more duplicate sets of cards. One set of five cards will be enough for up to six students.

For the closure or homework activity, find out the birth year of the majority of the students. Then go to the U.S. site www.socialsecurity.gov to find the ten most popular baby names (male and female) for that year. (A similar site undoubtedly exists for Great Britain.) Transcribe the names into IPA, or, if teaching the phonetic alphabet is not a priority, print them as they are.

Warming-up

You may wish to begin by asking the students about the first names that they like in English. Can they give a reason for the preference, such as an association with a friend or a celebrity?

Presentation

On the board, put a list of male and female first names, written in IPA. Ask the students to transcribe the names. If they are new to the phonetic alphabet, you can give them charts to use. Alternatively, if teaching IPA is not part of your class plan, simply ask them to pronounce the names, and the vowels alone, in pairs.

Small Group Work

Announce to the students that they work for a dating or matrimonial agency. Their job is to rate the candidates on their physical attractiveness, based on the photo they have sent in. Put them in groups of 3-6, preferably homogeneous by gender, and give each group a set of five different photo cards (male photos for female students and vice versa). They should pass the photos around and note an attractiveness score of 1-10, with ten being the top mark. Afterwards, the group leader should figure the average score for each photo. Ten to fifteen minutes is sufficient for this activity.

Full-class Tabulation of Results

Using the lists of names which you already have on the board, ask for the average score of each "applicant". (I have found it helps to have a teacher's set of cards, so that I can hold up the photo as I call out the names.) Write the numerical scores on the board next to the names.

At the end of this tabulation, reveal to them that Pat and Pete, Dan and Don et al are in fact the same person. (This is a useful but discreet repetition of the minimal vowel pairs.) They will be surprised at the large difference in attractiveness scores. (When I tried this activity, we found a significant difference of two points or more for 4/5 of the names, based on the phonological variation. However, if students rate the attractiveness of members of their own sex, the difference is insignificant.)

Ask them how they account for it. The answer will generally be something along the lines of, "Tastes differ." Explain to them the results of the MIT study, and encourage them to give their reactions. Ask them to recall the preferred first names they gave at the beginning of the class; do they fit the study's findings?

Closure

Ask the class what first names are most popular in their country for people of their age. Tell them you have found the ten most frequent names for their age group, male and female, in the U.S. Give out the list of names in IPA, and let them transcribe in class or for homework.

Alternatively, hand out the list written in the standard alphabet and have them pronounce the names. Again, they can indicate their favourites.

Student Reactions

Students have found this activity great fun, although they don't always agree with MIT's conclusions. Some refuse to believe that they could be influenced by something so "superficial" as a first name. The idea is provocative, and generates discussion about what aspects of a person form our first impressions, and how powerful and lasting these tend to be.

References

For the MIT study, see the archives of Michael Quinion's linguistic website, World Wide Words, for the article "What's In a Name?", August 2004, week 2, at <http://listserv.linguistlist.org/archives/worldwidewords.html>.

For the most popular baby names, the site, as noted, is Social Security Online, at <http://www.socialsecurity.gov>.

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<http://iteslj.org/>
