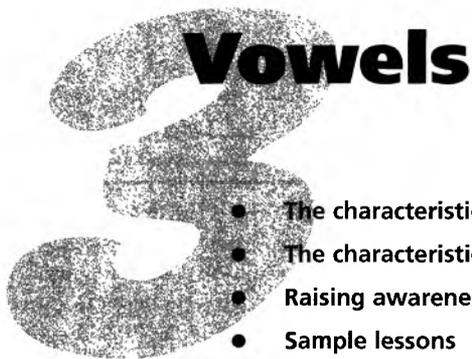


Vowels



- The characteristics of the 'pure' vowel sounds
- The characteristics of diphthongs
- Raising awareness of vowel sounds
- Sample lessons
 - Lesson 1: 'Phonemic bingo': Particular vowel sounds
 - Lesson 2: 'Noughts and crosses': Particular vowel sounds
 - Lesson 3: 'Snap': Particular vowel sounds
 - Lesson 4: 'Stand up and be counted': Vowel sounds/schwa /ə/
 - Lesson 5: 'Which vowel am I?': Vowel sounds
 - Lesson 6: Collaborative writing: Vowel sounds
- Further ideas for activities

The characteristics of the 'pure' vowel sounds

We saw in Chapter 1 that vowels are articulated when a voiced airstream is shaped using the tongue and the lips to modify the overall shape of the mouth. English speakers generally use twelve pure vowels and eight diphthongs.

If you try saying /i:/ /e/ /æ/ /ɒ/ /ɔ:/ /u:/ out loud, you should be able to feel that your tongue changes position in your mouth, yet it doesn't actually obstruct the airflow. Try moving smoothly from one sound to the next, without stopping. You will also be aware of the shape of your lips changing, and your lower jaw moving. It is these basic movements which give vowels their chief characteristics.

It is important to keep in mind what it is exactly which makes a phoneme valid as a unit for analysis; the distinctions between phonemes hold, in that they are units which differentiate between word meanings. In the previous chapter we looked at minimal pairs, such as *soap* /səʊp/ and *soup* /su:p/ to illustrate this principle.

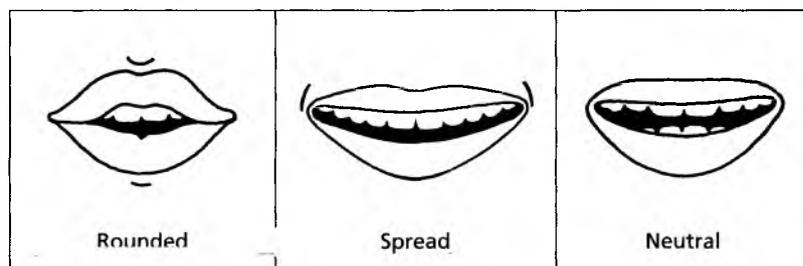
It is useful to mention here too one of the principles behind phonemic analysis: it was mentioned in Chapter 1 that we may pronounce particular sounds in different ways. Your pronunciation of /r/ may be slightly different to mine, yet we manage to understand each other. These two different pronunciations of /r/ are known as **allophones**. (Allophones are usually indicated by being enclosed in square brackets.) Though there may be subtle differences in articulation, they do not lead to a change of meaning. In phonemic transcription, each symbol is therefore used as a representation of the 'principal' sound of a 'family' of similar sounds. Such subtle differences are not important for the classroom, and so we will concentrate on general descriptions for vowel sounds.

The pure vowel sounds

The word 'pure' here is used to differentiate single vowel sounds from diphthongs, which we will consider later. The sounds have been divided up into categories, according to the characteristics of their articulation, and each category begins with a brief outline. All of the sounds, together with the example words, are on the CD.

The tables on the following pages give the following information. A diagram of the 'vowel space' (or the part of the mouth and throat which is used in the production of vowels) is shown. The dot on each diagram represents the height of the tongue, and also the part of the tongue which is raised. The phonemic symbol is shown. The characteristics of the sound are described. Tongue and lip positions are referred to. Example words are given, to illustrate the spelling/sound relationships.

Reference is also made to lip positions; the illustrations below show the basic lip positions which are used in describing the articulation of vowel sounds. We notice, of course, constant movement in real speech, as we move from sound to sound and switch between vowels and consonants. However, if we take a 'snapshot' view of lip positions, this is what we see:



Rounded: the lips are pushed forward into the shape of a circle. Example sound: /ʊ/

Spread: the corners of the lips are moved away from each other, as when smiling. Example sound: /i:/

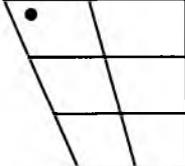
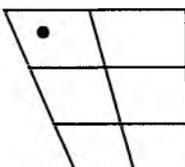
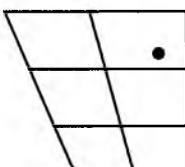
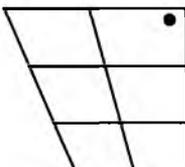
Neutral: the lips are not noticeably rounded or spread. Example sound: /ə/

The languages referred to in the following diagrams are as follows:

Arabic (A)	Chinese (C)	French (F)	German (G)
Greek (Gk)	Indian languages (Ind)	Italian (It)	Japanese (J)
Portuguese (P)	Russian (R)	Scandinavian languages (Sc)	Spanish (Sp)
Turkish (Tu)			

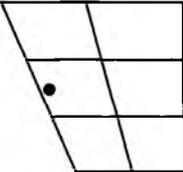
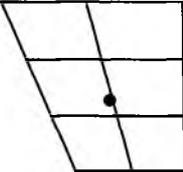
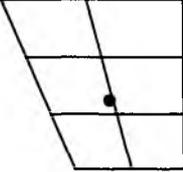
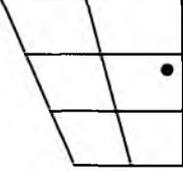
Close vowels

For close vowels the tongue is quite high in the mouth. Moving from /i:/ through to /u:/, we also notice the different positions of the tongue; /i:/ is a front vowel, and /u:/ is a back vowel.

<p>9</p>	<p>i:</p> 	<p>Characteristics The front of the tongue is slightly behind and below the close front position. (The 'close' position is where the tongue is closest to the roof of the mouth.) Lips are spread. The tongue is tense, and the sides of the tongue touch the upper molars.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>bead, key, cheese, scene, police, people, quay</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: C, Gk, P, R, Tu</p>
<p>10</p>	<p>I</p> 	<p>Characteristics The part of the tongue slightly nearer the centre is raised to just above the half-close position (not as high as in /i:/). The lips are spread loosely, and the tongue is more relaxed. The sides of the tongue may just touch the upper molars.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>hit, sausage, biggest, rhythm, mountain, busy, women, sieve</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, Gk, It, J, P, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>
<p>11</p>	<p>U</p> 	<p>Characteristics The part of the tongue just behind the centre is raised, just above the half-close position. The lips are rounded, but loosely so. The tongue is relatively relaxed.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>book, good, woman, push, pull</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: F, Gk, It, P, Sp, Tu</p>
<p>12</p>	<p>u:</p> 	<p>Characteristics The back of the tongue is raised just below the close position. Lips are rounded. The tongue is tense.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>food, rude, true, who, fruit, soup</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: C, P</p>

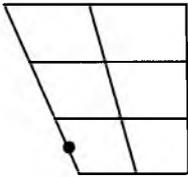
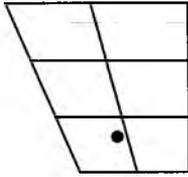
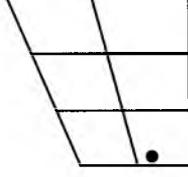
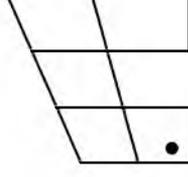
Mid vowels

For mid vowels the tongue is neither high nor low in the mouth. Moving from /e/ through to /ɔ:/, we also notice the different positions of the tongue; /e/ is a front vowel, and /ɔ:/ is a back vowel.

13	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">e</p> 	<p>Characteristics The front of the tongue is between the half-open and half-close positions. Lips are loosely spread. the tongue is tenser than for /ɪ/, and the sides of the tongue may touch the upper molars.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>egg, left, said, head, read (past), instead, any, leisure, leopard</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, Ind, Tu</p>
14	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">ə</p> 	<p>Characteristics: The centre of the tongue is between the half-close and half-open positions. Lips are relaxed, and neutrally spread.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>about, paper, banana, nation, the</i> (before consonants)</p> <p>Commonest vowel sound in English. Never stressed, and many unstressed vowels tend towards this sound. Differs from other phonemes, in that its contrast with similarly articulated long sound /ɜ:/ does not involve a change of meaning. Gets its name from Hebrew /ʔəwɑ:/, meaning 'emptiness', or 'nothing'.</p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, R, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>
15	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">ɜ:</p> 	<p>Characteristics The centre of the tongue is between the half-close and half-open positions. Lips are relaxed, and neutrally spread.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>shirt, her, word, further, pearl, serve, myrtle</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: J</p>
16	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">ɔ:</p> 	<p>Characteristics The back of the tongue is raised to between the half-open and half-close positions. Lips are loosely rounded.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>fork, call, snore, taught, bought, board, saw, pour, broad, all, law, horse, hoarse</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, R, Sp, Tu</p>

Open vowels

For open vowels, the tongue is low in the mouth. Moving from /æ/ through to /ɒ/, we also notice the different positions of the tongue; /æ/ is a front vowel, and /ɒ/ is a back vowel.

17	 <p style="text-align: center;">æ</p>	<p>Characteristics The front of the tongue is raised to just below the half-open position. Lips are neutrally open.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>bat, attack, antique, plait</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, R, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>
18	 <p style="text-align: center;">ʌ</p>	<p>Characteristics The centre of the tongue is raised to just above the fully open position. Lips are neutrally open.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>run, uncle, front, nourish, does, come, flood</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, Gk, It, J, P, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>
19	 <p style="text-align: center;">ɑ:</p>	<p>Characteristics The tongue, between the centre and the back, is in the fully open position. Lips are neutrally open.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>far, part, half, class, command, clerk, memoir, aunty, hearth</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, R, Sp, Tu</p>
20	 <p style="text-align: center;">ɒ</p>	<p>Characteristics The back of the tongue is in the fully open position. Lips are lightly rounded.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>dog, often, cough, want, because, knowledge, Australia</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: Ind</p>

Difficulties in analysing vowel sounds

Aside from the articulatory differences, the length of short and long vowels (the long vowel phonemes being followed by the lengthening symbol /:/), is best seen as relative. For example, consider the sound /ɪ/ in the words *bid* /bɪd/ and *bit* /bɪt/. If you say the two words over to yourself a few times it becomes apparent that the /ɪ/ in *bid* is longer than the /ɪ/ in *bit*. The same phenomenon is noticed in the minimal pair *badge* /bædʒ/ and *batch* /bætʃ/. Essentially, the rule in operation here is that a short vowel is longer before a voiced consonant. Taking the investigation further would reveal that they are actually more likely to be longer before certain types of voiced consonant too. Interestingly this is not true of all languages, yet it is a distinctive feature of English. There are further aspects of vowel length which we will explore in Chapter 5. You should keep in mind the premise that each symbol represents a 'family' of sounds.

The characteristics of diphthongs

A crude definition of a diphthong might be 'a combination of vowel sounds'. A slightly closer analysis shows us that there is a **glide** (or movement of the tongue, lips and jaw) from one pure vowel sound to another. The first sound in each phoneme is longer and louder than the second in English, but not in all languages. If we listen to the word *house* (the diphthong in question is /aʊ/), we can hear that the /a/ part of the sound is longer than the final /ʊ/ part. If you try making the /ʊ/ part longer, you will hear the difference.

English is usually described as having eight diphthongs, and they can be usefully grouped in the following way:

Centring diphthongs end with a glide towards /ə/. They are called 'centring' because /ə/ is a central vowel (refer to the /ə/ table on page 32).

Examples:

- 1 *clearing* /ɪə/
- 2 *sure* /ʊə/
- 3 *there* /eə/

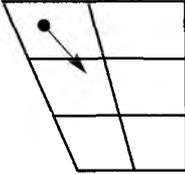
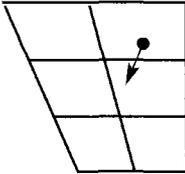
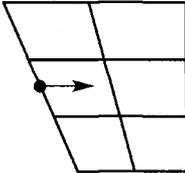
Closing diphthongs end with a glide towards /ɪ/ or towards /ʊ/. The glide is towards a higher position in the mouth.

Examples:

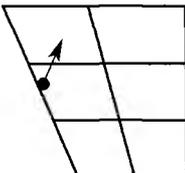
- 4 *they* /eɪ/
- 5 *boy* /ɔɪ/
- 6 *mighty* /aɪ/
- 7 *go* /əʊ/
- 8 *now* /aʊ/

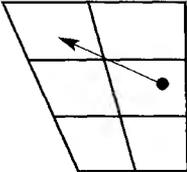
The following tables show the characteristics of the eight diphthong sounds, in the same manner as the previous vowel tables. Bear in mind that while we have mentioned a combination of sounds, or more accurately a glide from one tongue position to another, diphthongs are perceived as one sound, and should be treated as such. The glide in each diagram is shown as an arrow from the tongue position of the initial sound (represented by a dot) to the finishing position of the second element of the diphthong.

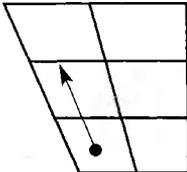
Centring diphthongs

21	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">ɪə</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in the position for /ɪ/, moving down and back towards /ə/. The lips are neutral, but with a small movement from spread to open.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>beer, beard, fear, pierce, Ian, here, idea</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, R, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>
22	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">ʊə</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in the position for /ʊ/, moving forwards and down towards /ə/. The lips are loosely rounded, becoming neutrally spread.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>*sure, moor, tour, obscure</i></p> <p><i>*Quite a rare diphthong. Many speakers replace it with /ɔ:/</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, R, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>
23	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">eə</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in the position for /e/, moving back towards /ə/. The lips remain neutrally open.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>where, wear, chair, dare, stare, there</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, R, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>

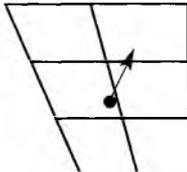
Closing diphthongs ending in /ɪ/

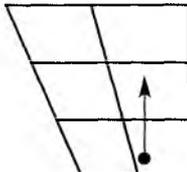
24	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">eɪ</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in the position for /e/, moving up and slightly back towards /ɪ/. The lips are spread.</p> <p>As in . . . <i>cake, way, weigh, say, pain, they, vein</i></p> <p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, G, Ind, It, Sc, Sp, Tu</p>
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<p>25</p>	<p>ɔɪ</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in the position for /ɔ:/, moving up and forward towards /ɪ/. The lips start open and rounded, and change to neutral.</p>
		<p>As in . . . <i>toy, avoid, voice, enjoy, boy</i></p>
		<p>Difficulties for: A, C, Ind, Sp, Tu</p>

<p>26</p>	<p>aɪ</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in an open position, between front and centre, moving up and slightly forward towards /ɪ/. The lips move from neutral, to loosely spread.</p>
		<p>As in . . . <i>high, tie, buy, kite, might, cry, eye</i></p>
		<p>Difficulties for: A, C, Sp, Tu</p>

Closing diphthongs ending in /ʊ/

<p>27</p>	<p>əʊ</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in the position for /ə/, moving up and back towards /ʊ/. The lips are neutral, but change to loosely rounded.</p>
		<p>As in . . . <i>go, snow, toast, home, hello, although</i></p>
		<p>Difficulties for: A, C, F, Gk, Ind, It, J, P, Sp, Tu</p>

<p>28</p>	<p>aʊ</p> 	<p>Characteristics The glide begins in a position quite similar to /a:/, moving up towards /ʊ/. The lips start neutral, with a movement to loosely rounded. The glide is not always completed, as the movement involved is extensive.</p>
		<p>As in . . . <i>house, loud, down, how, bough</i></p>
		<p>Difficulties for: A, C, Sp, Tu</p>

Raising awareness of vowel sounds

The aim of dealing with a sound in isolation in the classroom should be to help learners towards more successful pronunciation of the particular phoneme which is having an effect on communication and intelligibility. In a class which is learning general English, it would not make sense to divert attention away from that purpose in order to teach the complete catalogue of English phonemes, unless the teacher and the class have decided that it would be advantageous.

Sounds should be dealt with in class as and when the need arises. This can be done remedially as a reaction to a communicative difficulty which occurs in class, or because the sounds are an important feature of the grammar or lexis being taught. Sounds can also be practised in their own right, as a way of focusing on a particular area of difficulty.

In spoken language all sounds are, of course, important, but at times certain sounds seem central to the success or otherwise of communication. While L1 English speakers seem able to tolerate a lot of variation in vowel sounds (for example the North/South differences in British English, such as *bath*, pronounced as /bæθ/ or /bɑ:θ/), poor pronunciation can affect intelligibility. Native speakers do accept without too much difficulty some variety in vowel sounds, and certainly the trained ear of a teacher can cope with a wide range of variation, yet vowels present learners with particular difficulties. Accuracy often involves losing a vowel sound from an utterance (seen with /e/ in the 'Alice' lesson plan in Chapter 2) as much as using the correct sound (seen with the *soap* /səʊp/ and *soup* /su:p/, and *paper* /'peɪpə/ and *pepper* /'pepə/ minimal pairs also mentioned in Chapter 2).

Every time someone speaks in class, pronunciation is a matter for consideration. The following suggestions can be used to raise general awareness of vowel sounds. The suggestions are followed by some sample lessons, and other activities.

Using a phonemic chart

This is certainly to be encouraged, especially if the chart is laid out so as to explain the relationships between sounds in a 'student friendly' way. Students will need some initial coaching through the chart, but using one can help enhance independent learning outside the classroom. The learners' reference chart of English sounds is on page 143. The chart aims to give the information that students need in order to be able to use it independently. Have one in your class, give students their own copy, and encourage them to refer to it when they need to. Use it periodically in conjunction with dictionary study, and use it both for teaching 'new' sounds and the correction of sounds already covered.

Drilling, repetition and associating sounds with ideas

Drilling was discussed at length in Chapter 2, and for vowel sounds it remains one of the teacher's best tools. Sounds can be drilled along with the structures or lexis being practised, in order to show how they 'fit in' to the general environment of the language being worked on in class.

If a particular focus is needed, sounds can be worked on singly. Here are some (occasionally light-hearted) suggestions to help make the vowel

sounds more memorable for students. The teacher can model, and students can copy the sound. The suggestions are intended to help students associate sounds with particular ideas, which, for most learners, will make them easier to remember.

Sound	Suggestion
Vowels	
i:	A 'smiling' sound. Smile widely, make and hold the sound. Demonstrate that it is a 'long' sound.
ɪ	Make the sound, and make it obviously short. If necessary, contrast it with /i:/.
ʊ	A short sound. Exaggerate the forward position of your lips. One way into this sound is to ask students what noise a gorilla makes!
u:	Make and hold the sound. Use a 'rising then falling' intonation, as if you've heard something surprising, or some interesting gossip (uuUUuu). Demonstrate that it is a 'long' sound.
e	A short sound. Make the sound, and point out the loosely spread position of your lips.
ə	The 'Friday afternoon' sound. Relax your whole body, slump your shoulders, relax your face and mouth, and say /ə/, as though completely exhausted.
ɜ:	The 'something horrible' sound. Make and hold the sound, curl your upper lip, and pretend to look at something nasty. Look in the litter bin, if there is one to hand. Demonstrate that it is a 'long' sound.
ɔ:	The 'either/or' sound. Liken it to the word <i>or</i> . Demonstrate that it is a 'long' sound.
æ	Make the sound, and point out the neutrally open shape of your lips.
ʌ	Make the sound, and throw your head back slightly as you do it. This works well if contrasted with /æ/.
ɑ:	The 'holding the baby' sound. Place your arms as though holding a baby, and say /ɑ:/. Demonstrate that it is a 'long' sound.
ɒ	Make the sound, and point out your lightly rounded lips.

Diphthongs	For all diphthongs, one of the best techniques is to get students to make and hold the first element, then slowly move to the second. Finish off by making the sound at a 'normal' speed. Some other suggestions are made below.
ɪə	Make the sound while tugging your ear.
ʊə	Hold the first sound, and move to the second.
eə	Likened this to the word <i>air</i> . Point to your hair. Say <i>over there</i> , or <i>on the chair</i> . All will give good examples of the sound, which you can then isolate.
eɪ	Pretend not to hear someone, and say <i>eh?</i>
ɔɪ	Words work best here: <i>toy, boy, enjoy</i> .
aɪ	Make the sound and point to your eye.
əʊ	<i>Oh, hello</i> , said slowly, and exaggerated a little, works well.
aʊ	The 'shut your finger in the door' sound. Pretending to do this and making the sound while pulling a 'pained' expression works rather well!

You may or may not feel comfortable using some of these suggestions with your class; if in doubt, the best advice is not to do it, but devise your own alternative to suit your classroom manner and style. These are all only suggestions.

It can help also to associate sounds with pictures that illustrate the sound (for example a picture of a sheep with /i:/, a picture of a hat with /æ/, and so on). Some students find this a good aid to memory. But if the picture illustrates a word which the student knows, and is in the habit of mispronouncing, this can simply lead to the vowel difficulty becoming further entrenched.

The sounds need obviously to be associated with the phonemic symbols; you need not worry about whether or not students can 'cope' with being introduced to phonemic script, as long as you are clear about explaining the purpose of it. Show students the symbols being used in dictionaries, and aim to use them regularly, clearly and consistently. Care needs to be taken, however, if students are not familiar with roman script (for example beginner Chinese or Arabic students, or those more used to Cyrillic script), to differentiate between phonemic symbols and the letters we use for writing. You can, for example, use a different coloured pen on the board for phonemic script, or save one section of the board for it; however you do it, be consistent, so as to minimise any potential problems. I have used phonemic script successfully with students ranging from complete beginners to very advanced; if you treat its use as a normal part of your teaching, and not as something 'special', or 'technical', you will have a very valuable classroom tool at your disposal.

'Halfway house' sounds

If students are having problems producing a particular sound, you can treat the sound that they are having difficulty with as a 'halfway house' between two others, as shown in the following chart. Students should start by making and holding the 'home' sound, and without stopping, they should make the necessary gradual adjustments of articulation as they head for their 'destination'. Students don't actually have to reach the destination sound, but en route, they will find the sound they are aiming for.

'Home' sound	'Halfway house'	'Destination'
i:	ɪ	e
ɪ	e	æ
e	æ	ɑ:
æ	ʌ	ɒ
æ	ɑ:	ɒ
ɑ:	ɒ	ɔ:
ɒ	ɔ:	ʊ
ɔ:	ʊ	u:
e	ə or ɜ:	ɔ:

The exact 'halfway house' sound you are trying to get students to produce will not necessarily be accurately made in all cases, but doing this procedure can at least get students nearer to producing the sound in question. The teacher needs to exercise judgement in order to let students know when the 'halfway house' has been reached. The idea can also help students to appreciate the subtle differences between vowels, and also, in some cases, show how English sounds differ from similar sounds in L1.

Sample lessons

The activities in the following sample lessons can be used in various ways, whether for raising awareness of a pronunciation issue or as revision of something already covered. However, they are all Practice lessons (see page 14) and thus can form the basis for an extended lesson on pronunciation. Some of the activities can be used for practising consonants, and some necessarily include study and practice of both vowels and consonants. This reflects the nature of what goes on in the classroom; teachers will have to, eventually, deal with vowels and consonants together.

Lesson 1: 'Phonemic bingo': Particular vowel sounds (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Bingo cards

Make some bingo cards with a good range of phonemic vowel symbols on each. Each one should have the same number of sounds on it. Make sure that you have enough to go round. In monolingual classes, the sounds used can reflect typical problem sounds for speakers of the students' L1. In

multilingual classes, the sounds can reflect the range of difficulties for the students present.

Example cards are shown below:

	e	əʊ
æ	i:	
	ɔɪ	ʌ

ʌ		ə
ɑ:	aɪ	æ
	eə	

To play the game, students are given a card each. The sounds are called out one by one, and students cross off or cover up the ones they have on their cards. The way of 'calling' the sounds can be varied according to the needs and abilities of the class.

One variation involves calling out words instead of sounds; students then have to work out whether or not the words contain vowels which match any on their cards. Teachers could also ask students to write another example word on their card as they cross sounds off. The 'caller' would have to allow time for this of course! When a student has filled up her card, she shouts 'Bingo', and the card is checked.

A part of the learning value of an activity like this comes in going through the winning card with the whole class, to see if the student who has crossed all the sounds off first has got them right. The activity can equally well be used for practising consonant sounds.

Lesson 2: 'Noughts and crosses': Particular vowel sounds (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Noughts and crosses grids, with vowel phonemes written on.

ɪ	ʌ	e
ə	ɒ	æ
ɔ:	i:	ɑ:

A grid with nine 'squares' is used, each square having a vowel phoneme. The phonemes used should reflect the sounds which cause particular difficulty for the students in the class. Students should work in pairs, with one copy of the grid for each pair. The first student chooses a square, and provides a word which contains that sound. If they get it right, they put a 'nought' in the square. Then it is the second student's turn; if their suggestion is correct for their nominated square, they put a cross. (You can use different coloured counters, or different denominations of coins, if you want to hang onto the grids for later use.) If a student gets a word wrong (i.e. it does not contain the sound for the square they are trying to win), the second student can try to win the square.

The winner is the first to complete a straight line of three. Although noughts and crosses seems almost universal, the activity has a different slant here, and so the teacher should demonstrate the activity to the whole class, just to make sure that students know what to do. Students can then play the game in pairs. It can also be played in teams, in which case the teams need to be given time to confer. It also helps if a spokesperson is nominated for each team. To provide more focus prior to the game, give students/teams time to look at the 'grid' and think up words in advance, without the use of a dictionary. The activity can equally well be used for practising consonant sounds.

Lesson 3: 'Snap': Particular vowel sounds (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Sets of cards with vowel sounds written on

The teacher needs to prepare several class sets of cards with a single vowel sound on each card. It is recommended that each set has an even number of each vowel phoneme. A lot of preparation is therefore required, but if suitably sturdy materials are used (e.g. card, written on then laminated) the sets can be used many times over. The game is played just like the card game 'Snap', in that cards are dealt out, and two to five players take it in turns to lay them down; the first to shout 'snap' when a matching pair are consecutively laid down wins all the cards that are on the table. To make it more than just a visual game, the instruction can be given that instead of shouting 'snap' when a pair occurs, the players have to shout out a word containing the sound. If the word is not correct, the other player(s) can have a go at providing a word. The teacher can act as referee if necessary.

Alternatively, known or recently studied words can be used on the cards, but make sure you don't put the same word twice and try to ensure a high number of words which share at least one vowel phoneme. It helps to underline the letter(s) corresponding to vowel sounds. When two words are laid down consecutively which share a vowel sound, the players shout 'snap', and the first to do so wins that 'hand'.

Another variation is to make two sets of cards: one with vowel symbols, and the other with recently studied or known words (or some new ones too, if you want to encourage prediction skills). Players take turns to turn over one card at a time from either pile. Whenever the sound on the top vowel card is found in the word on top of the other pile, players again compete to shout 'snap'. Whichever version of the game is used, it is useful to demonstrate it to the class first, to make sure students are familiar with the rules.

Lesson 4: 'Stand up and be counted': Vowel sounds/schwa (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Cards with vowel sounds on

This task is useful for vowel recognition, and uses the students' own suggestions for words. The teacher asks students to write down three or four

words each. These can be recently studied words, words from that day's lesson, or simply random ones. Give each student a card with a vowel phoneme on. Make sure that /ə/ is included. Each student reads out their words in turn, and all the students listen out for which vowel sounds appear in the word. If the sound they have on their card appears in the word that has been read out, they stand up. The student who has the /ə/ card should, by the end of the activity, have been required to stand up more often than others. This activity is very useful for showing the high incidence of /ə/. This is usually demonstrated by this activity, but not always!

Lesson 5: 'Which vowel am I?': Vowel sounds (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Sticky labels with vowel sounds on

The teacher places a sticky label with a vowel phoneme on each student's back. Students move around the classroom, looking at the notes on each other's backs, and tell each other words which include that sound. When they have worked out what their sound is, students have to write their name on the board, and write up the phonemic symbol also. The task can take the form of a race to be first, a race not to be last, or simply a task to be achieved without the competitive element, if you prefer.

To make it more difficult, depending on the level of the class, the teacher can instruct students that the words they say must not start with the sound, but must include it. Also the teacher should tell students that they mustn't cheat, by deliberately giving wrong words! To help prevent this, and also to encourage a co-operative atmosphere, the students can be divided into two teams. The team members help each other guess their sounds, and the first team to get all of them correct, wins.

A slightly easier variation is to have a list of words on the board, each of which includes an example of one of the phonemes assigned to students. Students then have to write their name on the board next to the word which matches 'their' sound, when they have worked it out. Of course, the students need to be told that they must not say any of the words that appear on the board.

Lesson 6: Collaborative writing: Vowel sounds (Elementary+)

Lesson type: Practice

Materials: Strips of paper for writing on

Studying vowel sounds gives plenty of scope for working with rhyme. Collaborative poem writing can be a rewarding group- or pair-based activity. The teacher chooses a current problem sound. In this example the sound is /i:/. Students are asked to write lines of a poem, according to the following criteria: Some lines should start with a subject pronoun (*I, you, he, she, it*, etc.), and they should only use the past simple. (You can, of course, use other criteria; these simply ensure a degree of readability.) The last word in each line should end with the sound being worked on. The lines are written on strips of paper, which can be collected in a box, or put in a pile.

The following are random lines produced by an Intermediate class who did this activity (although admittedly, not all the sentences here use the past simple):

Is this seat free?
He had a cup of tea
I damaged my knee
Would you like coffee?
'To be' or not 'to be'
I sat under a tree
I got stung by a bee
Yesterday I lost my key
I want to be free

Groups then select a given number of lines from the box or pile, and organise them into 'poems', to be read out later to the class. The lines above were reorganised into the following masterpiece:

Yesterday I lost my key
I sat under a tree
I damaged my knee
I got stung by a bee
He had a cup of tea
Would you like coffee?
I want to be free
'To be' or not 'to be'

The finished piece may not be great poetry, but the task focuses students successfully on the sound in question. Students might also be given the chance to make their poem read better (e.g. *Yesterday I lost my key, So I sat under a tree...*). Also, it is noticeable that most of the lines above end in the easiest choice for /i:/, the *-ee* spelling. Alternative spellings for /i:/ can then be looked at in detail at the beginning, middle and ends of words (e.g. *e-mail, easy, Israeli*).

Further ideas for activities

'Phonemic crosswords'

The teacher needs to prepare a basic crossword grid. It's a good idea to spend some time producing a few blank versions, which you can photocopy (or print out if your computer skills are up to it) and adapt to suit the needs of your class. Clues can be in alphabetic script and the answers in phonemic script, or clues phonemic and answers alphabetic, or both clues and answers in phonemic script. (A phonemic crossword clearly requires knowledge of both vowel and consonant phonemes.) Bear in mind how familiar and confident your students are with the phonemes, and aim to make the task achievable, and include a combination of known and recently studied words among your answers. It can help to keep clues related to a particular subject area. To focus clearly on vowel sounds, make sure at least some words 'cross' each other on these sounds. The small example here gives both clues and answers:

¹ ɒ	k	² t	ə	p	ə	³ s
s		ɔ:				i:
⁴ t	ɜ:	t	ə	l		l
r		ə			⁵ ɒ	
⁶ I	n	s	e	k	t	s
tʃ					ə	

Across

- 1 Sea animal with eight legs.
- 4 Swimming version of 2 down.
- 6 These animals all have six legs.

Down

- 1 Big bird which can't fly.
- 2 Very slow animal, with four legs and a shell.
- 3 Animal that lives in the sea and on land, and has flippers.
- 5 These brown mammals live in rivers or the sea and eat fish.

'Irritable vowels'

This is not so much an activity, as a reminder to both teacher and students to pay attention to vowel sounds which have been causing difficulty. It's a good idea to get into the habit of setting aside some time to work on difficult sounds, for example during the last lesson of the week, and to set some homework based on those sounds. Homework activities connected with pronunciation of vowels could include exercises on paper (like matching exercises, crosswords, finding words with particular sounds in a text, etc.) or could be based on awareness of sounds in everyday conversation. For example, students might be asked to consider situations they have been in, or conversations they have had, in which particular sounds have caused difficulties. These could be productive difficulties (i.e. somebody else had difficulty understanding the student), or receptive (the student had difficulty understanding something within a conversation). Students need not be tied down to conversations, either; a lot of very useful work can come from listening to the radio, or watching television and videos. Videos are particularly useful, as students can rewind the bits they have had difficulty understanding, and try again. Particular sounds which have caused difficulty can then be noted down and brought up in class for further study.

Students can be asked to nominate which sound has caused them the most difficulty that week. Each student can be asked in turn, or students can share their thoughts in small groups, asking the teacher for help with sounds as necessary. Students can be asked also for a word which includes that sound. They could also be asked to give suggestions for words for other students to note down. This has the added advantage of helping everyone in the class to concentrate on the sounds and improving classroom communication by helping to familiarise students with each other's difficulties.

Students might be asked to act as monitors for each other for a lesson, a day or a whole week. At the beginning students might say 'I'd like you to listen out for my pronunciation of /æ/'. This works best if students only ask their neighbours in the class; otherwise there is too much for everyone to listen out for. However, narrowing down the task of mastering vowel sounds can pay enormous dividends for individual students, and keeps an achievable aim in mind. Regular use of such ideas in the class also

encourages students to keep pronunciation in mind while concentrating on activities which are primarily concerned with grammar and vocabulary.

'Vowels-U-Like'

As a flipside of the 'irritable vowels' idea, students can also be given time to either congratulate themselves on mastering a particular vowel sound, or have time to practise something they are comfortable with. Students can also be encouraged to point out how well their classmates have progressed with sounds. While we have said that it isn't worth focusing on sounds if they aren't causing difficulties, it's also important to sometimes let students use what they already have, or use what they have recently mastered, without being set too much of a challenge.

Teachers should aim to involve students in setting the agenda for classroom pronunciation work, through helping them to be conscious of the particular sounds which they have difficulty in either recognising or producing.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have:

- considered the characteristics of the 'pure' vowel sounds and diphthongs and seen that vowel sounds can be described in terms of tongue and lip positions. Diphthongs, on the other hand, can be described in terms of a movement (or 'glide') from one vowel position to another.
- studied tables showing the characteristics of the vowel sounds including the tongue and lip positions for each, their phonemic symbols, example words, and we have listed the first languages of those speakers who may have productive difficulties with these sounds in English.
- considered ways of raising awareness of vowel sounds in the classroom.
- considered reasons for using a phonemic chart to promote learner independence.
- considered a variety of classroom activities for focusing on vowel sounds in the classroom.
- suggested that teachers should involve their students in deciding on priorities for classroom pronunciation work, through helping them to be aware of their pronunciation difficulties.

Looking ahead

In Chapter 4 we will:

- look closely at consonant sounds, describing how they are articulated and which speakers might have difficulties in producing which particular sounds.
- look at ways of raising awareness of consonant sounds.
- look at activities which can be used in class to focus on consonant sounds.