# The Strategies, Techniques, and Activities to Teach English Pronunciation with Minimal Pair Sounds Technique

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**Abstract:** *The necessity to teach English pronunciation is increasing as improving communication skills are at the highest demand. However, most of the time, teacher are reluctant to teach pronunciation either not having enough knowledge in the field or not having adequate techniques to apply for teaching pronunciation. Especially, in the case of teaching pronunciation to the Uzbek students are both by far the most important and challenging due to some phonological reasons. This article attempts to analyze the available materials to teach English pronunciation in minimal pairs as distinguishable invaluable technique. Both pros and cons of applying minimal pairs to teach English pronunciation were analyzed and discussed. Top beneficial activities to teach English pronunciation in minimal pairs were given as useful activities to implement in the classroom.*

**Keywords:** Minimal pairs, challenges, benefits, teaching English pronunciation, effective strategies and techniques, pronunciation activities.

## 1. Introduction

Most English teachers tend to just ignore the importance of teaching pronunciation because either they have lack of knowledge in this field or lack of strategies to apply it into the English classroom. However, improving communication skills are already turned into one of the most required fields of study, including pronunciation. Teachers are using various methods and strategies to integrate pronunciation teaching in the English classroom. In Uzbekistan, there is a consistent learning process of English language from the early kindergarten years till the end of the educational process. English learners are required to meet the B2 criteria of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) at the end of the process. Additionally, this level of English language proficiency is required to apply to the universities, institutes, and of course, this level gives a chance to secure a better workplace. To meet the requirements of this level, each learner should have a good command of English language communication. As Fiona Barker asserts (Barker)

"• Pronunciation is a key part of phonological competence.
• It involves the acquisition and mastery of various components.
• Insufficient skill affects a learner's intelligibility which is a main focus of communicative language teaching.
• It is also important for assessing language production." in her "Aspects of pronunciation across CEFR levels and some implications for language learning" article. Hence, English teachers are unable to neglect the necessity to integrate phonetics in their English classroom. Unintelligibility in pronunciation leads to many difficulties in oral communication. Sometimes, students feel really awkward and discouraged when they feel that their pronunciation is not good enough. Indeed, there are limitless opportunities to improve pronunciation for students. This is the same case with teachers. As long as the teacher wants to improve their students' pronunciation skills, there are limitless opportunities or teachers to choose from. I would like to suggest the method of using minimal pair sounds in teaching English pronunciation. In my teaching experience, I use this method and found it absolutely helpful to improve my students' pronunciation.

### Minimal pairs

Minimal pairs those are two similar words that are differentiated only by one sound and those words may confuse the learners how to pronounce or understand it in the context. For example, bed and bad, these are two different words but these are pronounced similarly not the same. This leaves the English learners in the state of confusion. There are over thousand such pairs appear in English language pronunciation. Wikipedia defines minimal pairs are as the "pairs of words or phrases in a particular language, spoken or signed, that differ only one phonological element, such as phoneme, toneme or chroneme and have distinct meanings" (Wikipedia, 2021) As abovementioned, minimal pairs differs from each other only with one sound not a letter, and this makes it difficult to identify whether two similar sounded words are minimal pairs or not. So as to identify if it is a minimal pair, one needs to know what sounds make up these words not the letters. For example, pin-bin, bet-bed, however, some words differ from each other only by one sound cannot be minimal pairs such as, maid /meid/ -made /meid/. Differentiating them is quite complicated.

## 2. Literature review.

### 2.1. Resources to teach English pronunciation in pairs;

There are wide ranges of recourses to teach English pronunciation with minimal pair technique ranging from list of minimal pairs on WebPages, to PDF books and YouTube videos. "Minimal Pairs Book" is one of the most useful sources to practice minimal pairs to improve English pronunciation. Lists of minimal pairs with audio. This is an ebook version of the EnglishClub online Minimal Pairs pages. (EnglishClub, 2021) YouTube videos and channels are also a great source of learning English pronunciation in minimal pairs. Everyone who wants to learn pronunciation in minimal pairs can have a

free access to those videos and channels. For examples, learn English with Cambridge is a great channel for practicing English pronunciation in minimal pairs. "George explains the pronunciation of i in English so next time you won't confuse ship with sheep." (Learn English with Cambridge, 2019) o course there are wide range of materials, worksheets YouTube videos and other sources are available on website pages. Teachers and students can have an access to them without having any problems. Cake application for android devices and laptops is also a great tool to improve English pronunciation. Fluento.com also provides wide range of materials to use in the English classroom. There are some sounds in English that can be difficult for any learner, and there are also distinctions between sounds that some students find confusing because there is no such distinction in their mother tongue. When all, or at least several, of your students are struggling with the same problem, it is definitely worthwhile doing some activities to target specific areas.(Ruthwickham, 2021)

### 2.2. Common activities with paired sounds

**"PICTURE CARDS"** (Phonological Awareness Segmenting Sentences Word Sound Discrimination)**.** This is one of the most common English pronunciation teaching activities. There should be selected minimal pairs and appropriate number pictures. The number of students should also be taken into the consideration.

**"Minimal Pairs Bingo"** this activity gives students the opportunity to listen and differentiate the difference between similar sounds, "recognize the different words written on the card and clearly pronounce the difference when they win and have a chance to be the caller". As each word is called, students tend to all say it quietly to themselves as well. To organize this activity, teacher should make square cards 5x5 so as to can contain 25v words in them. And, among the square cards there should be some space or one can make it in smaller size like 4x4. Teacher decides what words to select and apply them into the Bingo card game.

**"Odd One Out"** this is one of the most popular pronunciation activities. As it can make any pronunciation rules stickier and more memorable for students, it is really advisable activity. Personally, during my English language learning and teaching experience, I have used this activity multiple times. This activity is organized in the following way:

- Similar words are selected in terms of their pronunciation or their meaning. In the case of teach English pronunciation, teacher can use similar sounded words.

*For example, leap tea, great etc.*

- One odd sounded word will be added to each line of words;

*For example,*

   *Meet, seat, sit (for vowels)*

   *Plays, pace, space (for consonants)*

The selection of the odd word can be a reading exercise—where students read the words to themselves out loud and identify the sounds in the written words—or a listening exercise—where the teacher reads the words and the students respond to the "odd" word. Likewise, selected students could try reading the words aloud for others to identify the odd word, or they could work in pairs or small groups with one person pronouncing the words and the others indicating which is odd. (RUTHWICKHAM, 2021)

### 3. Research methodology

Google research tool and teaching observation were used as research methodology. To get the information, researcher used terms such as "Minimal pairs", "Minimal pair's activities", "Top ten activities to use to teach English pronunciation with minimal pairs", and "Most useful minimal pairs", "the problems with teaching English pronunciation with minimal pairs" "Challenges with minimal pairs" on the Google search tool. Research also used the minimal activities among A1, A2, B1 levelled students three times. Students' age was not taken into consideration as the proficiency level was the only concern of the teacher. The research population was only 15 students with the above-mentioned English comprehension proficiency. The research observations were taken place at Information Technologies Park education institution of Samarkand branch.

### 4. Research findings

Advantages of using minimal pairs in the English classroom to teach English pronunciation:

1. **"Minimal pair's technique** is used to help students overcome their difficulties in pronunciation, mainly for English sounds. Beside that hopefully help students to distinguish similar sounds in English word to practice their fluency and accuracy in oral daily activity and reading aloud ability". (Nuraemi, 2015)

2. **It raises awareness**. After being taught, students will be aware of some similar sounded words can be two distinct words. Whenever possible, as soon as they hear two similar words, they try to differentiate them using previous patterns they use in their pronunciation classroom;

3. **It develops skills in articulation**. While teaching minimal pairs in pronunciation class, teacher can have students record their voices, imitate their own sounds. Students can improve their pronunciation by imitating to their own sounds and practice. While practicing, their jaws, tongues and facial muscles start to practice and this boosts their articulation.

4. **Minimal pairs make the pronunciation rules stickier.** Once the learner learns the pronunciation rule comparing to the other word, that sound pattern will be unforgettable. Students may learn or discover new words which were unfamiliar previously.

5. **It boosts student engagement into the English pronunciation activities.** Students participate in the activities more enthusiastically and actively. There are lots of activities are available with minimal pairs to practice pronunciation. For instance, Minimal Pair Drill, minimal pairs Bingo, Odd one Out, Run and Grab etc. (RUTHWICKHAM, 2021)

Challenges of implementing minimal pairs technique into English classroom;

1. **It requires more energy from the teachers than the other typical pronunciation activities**. Students can get easily bored when using minimal pairs continuously in every class. What I mean by saying this is that, teachers are required to find more creative methods to use them in teaching English pronunciation to keep them engaged. (Isna Nur, 2008)

2. **Students can get overwhelmed with so many new rules and practice**. Minimal pair activities require different kinds of sounds to be learned in each class. Students can hardly keep any information they got in their mind. Teachers introduce new sounds in each class non-stop for a while, and it leads them to be frustrated.

3. **Student comprehension lacks**. The students likely not hear the differences between the words so they did pronounce the words incorrectly. The gap analysis of the mean score in the post-test between the experimental and control class ensured if the technique was effective. (Isna Nur, 2008)

4. **A final possibly fatal flaw of the minimal pair concept is that it is predicated on a psychological phenomenon called 'categorical perception'**, but categorical perception has been demonstrated as existing as an auditory phenomenon not exclusive to language, which problematizes it as a concept to use in determining a basic phonological unit for language processing and language acquisition. (Wikipedia, 2016)

However, according to Wikipedia.org articles those opposite views on the effectiveness of minimal pairs are controversial. Some scientists say these opposing views just stem from misunderstandings. (Wikipedia, 2016)

**5.  Research suggestions.**

This research only included the limited number of students in a relatively shorter scope. It would be best if the scope of this research were included larger scope f students, in relatively longer to observe how students are getting improved. In which ways, minimal pairs, help them to improve their pronunciation skills. Reflecting upon what the research done up to this time, further improvements can be added to minimal pair's technique.  Another suggestion for further research is learning the Disadvantages and difficulties with teaching English pronunciation in pair sounds. Because, studying the references on Google search tool, there were not wide variety of works done on these terms.

**6.  Conclusion**

In Uzbekistan, there is a consistent learning process of English language from the early kindergarten years till the end of the educational process. English learners are required to meet the B2 criteria of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) at the end of the process. Additionally, this level of English language proficiency is required to apply to the universities, institutes, and of course, this level gives a chance to secure a better workplace.  To meet the requirements of this level, each learner should have a good command of English language communication. Minimal pair's technique can be applied into English pronunciation teaching classroom as an effective technique to improve English pronunciation skills of students in any English proficiency level. Teachers can change the materials based on students' comprehension levels. Although there are some challenges with implementing this technique into the classroom, this technique remains as beneficial and effective.

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