

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Feel the fear but do it anyway

by Anna Morris (Director of Studies, EC Dublin)

The very first time I was introduced to the phonemic script (the IPA) was in primary school. I was probably about nine years old at the time and my English teacher used the symbols when teaching me new vocabulary. I found it very useful especially because, at that time, there were no online dictionaries or apps, which you could use to listen to the pronunciation of new words.

The fact that I found the IPA useful as a student had an immense impact on my early teaching practice. Consequently, I started ‘teaching’ my students the chart so that I could use it in class, which worked in a school populated mainly by long term students. However, it became quite problematic when I started working in a school with continuous enrolment and a large population of short term students. Nowadays, I ask myself why on earth did I bother ‘teaching’ the chart?

There has been a lot of talk amongst teachers about whether there is a need to use the phonemic script in class, whether students need to know another (for some the third) script and, whether teachers can call themselves ‘pron stars’ if they do not use it. I believe that the IPA can be helpful for both teachers and students and, in this article, I will present benefits of using it in class. I will also reflect on constraints related to continuous enrolment and teacher training in that area.

Let’s start by defining the IPA. For me it is a collection of symbols which are a visual representation of sounds. Approximately half of the symbols look the same as alphabet letters, which means that they are easily recognised by students. In addition, some phonemic charts used in ELT include intonation and stress marks. As described by Underhill (2005), the chart shows the phonemic set in English in which each phonemic symbol is in turn ‘a visual hook for that physical and auditory experience.’

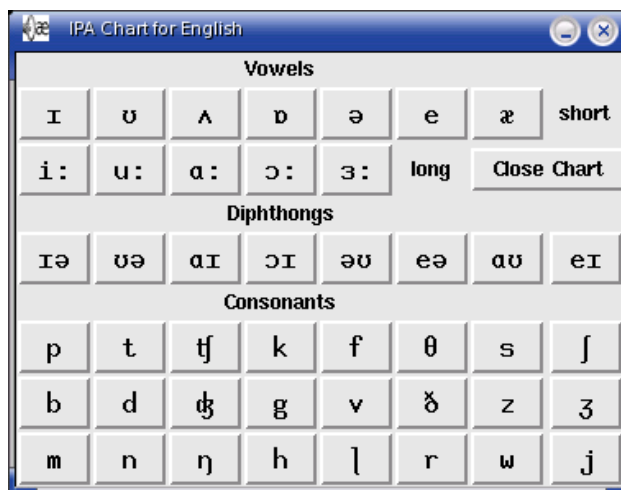
According to Underhill (2005), pronunciation is not only aural but can also become physical, visual, spatial, affective and intellectual. I believe that visual representation of pronunciation (here I refer to not only to the phonemic script but also stress and intonation marks) helps transform something very illusive into something more tangible and, in fact recordable. Phonemic symbols make it possible for students to record pronunciation features they might struggle with for later study, which consequently facilitates autonomy and encourages students to develop metacognitive learning strategies. Apart from that, systematic use of phonemic symbols might help students notice the correlation between English spelling and pronunciation. As explained by Meyer (2009), English spelling is morphophonemic and so understanding how phonemes are represented by single letters, as well as noticing spelling patterns, can assist in the development of basic ESL literacy.

Another argument supporting the use of the phonemic symbols is that it can be an excellent tool for remedial pronunciation teaching of particular features of pronunciation such as consonants, vowel length and word stress, which, according to Hewings (2004) are amongst the most important for learners to produce correctly, in order to be understood.

“There has been a lot of talk amongst teachers about whether there is a need to use the phonemic script in class”

He explains that even students with high level of English, if they make these errors, might experience communication breakdown and lose confidence. Therefore, helping them ‘fix’ their pronunciation problems should be central to our role as teachers.

At the same time, most teachers I have worked with seemed reluctant to use the phonemic chart. Perhaps one of the reasons is that most of the teachers in Ireland work in schools with continuous enrolment, which means that there are new students in class every week. This means that simply ‘teaching’ the chart is not going to work. The question is : do we really need to ‘teach’ it? Coming back to what Underhill (2005) said, phonemic symbols are visual hooks for the physical and auditory experience. Therefore, learners don’t study the symbols but sounds. This means that there is no need to teach the symbols. Drawing from my experience, students are very open to the IPA being used in class and they very quickly make connections between sounds and symbols. Moreover, they can be easily trained in recognising the symbols if they are frequently used on the board. As explained on ICALTEFL, it is fine to introduce individual symbols as needed rather than the whole chart in one go. For instance, the teacher can write the word which is causing problems on the board and then write a symbol or a cluster of symbols above the word. The same goes for stress and



Be very unafraid: The international phonetic alphabet is worth the risk.

Pic from google image labelled for reuse

intonation - marking these on the board helps students 'see' and recognise them. It goes without saying that practice makes perfect.

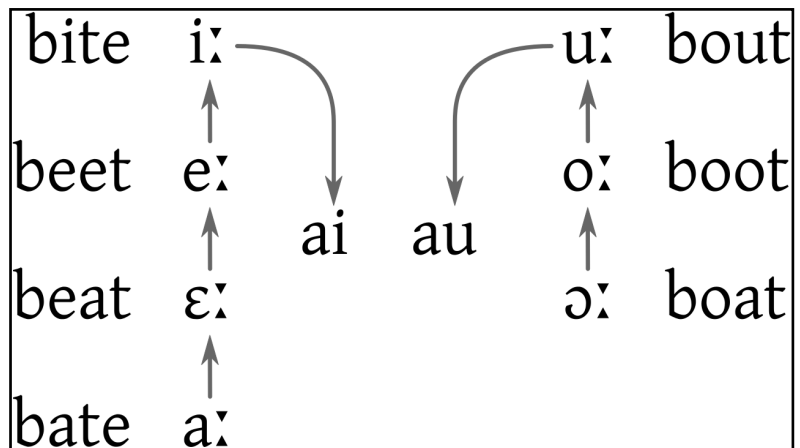
Secondly, I believe that teacher training in this area is neglected. Even though on both CELTA and Cert TESOL courses, trainees learn about phonology, the time dedicated to it and, more importantly, emphasis put on it, isn't sufficient to allow teachers to be comfortable using the IPA or motivated to develop in this area. It takes a high level of motivation, determination and a post primary qualification to become confident teaching with it. It also seems to be deprioritised by new teachers who invest significant time in learning about grammar, which they are expected to have a good knowledge of by both the institution and the learners.

Pronunciation, on the other hand is so elusive that it appears to be of lesser importance. I strongly believe that, if teachers are able to learn how to teach grammar, which is a much more complex system, they can also learn how to use a phonemic chart. Just like with grammar, at the start using it requires careful planning and preparation but after a while, it becomes a natural integrated part of teaching.

To conclude, it is apparent that there are immense benefits of using the IPA in the classroom. Not only does it help transform pronunciation into a visual and more teachable system, it also helps teachers cater for learners with different pronunciation difficulties. Moreover, the use of the IPA can help learners improve their spelling and facilitate the development of metacognitive learning strategies. It is our role as teachers to use all means possible to support our learners in the challenging journey of language learning. It is also our responsibility to help them become more autonomous learners of English pronunciation.

Further Reading:

Hewings, M. 2004. Pronunciation Practice Activities. Cambridge: CUP
 Lightbown, P.M. & N. Spada. 2006. How Languages are Learned. Oxford: OUP
 Meyer, C. F. (2009). Introducing English Linguistics. UK: Cambridge University Press.
 Underhill, A. 2005. Sound Foundations: Learning and Teaching Pronunciation. London: Macmillan Education
<http://www.icaltefl.com/ipa-international-phonetic-alphabet>



Beware the vowels:
 Minimal pairs help to identify the differences.

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