

Enhancing ESL Learners' Phonemic Awareness: A Comprehensive English Letters and Sounds Chart as a Teaching Tool

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Abstract

Mastering English pronunciation is a complicated, confusing and difficult task for English as a Second Language (ESL) learner at Sri Lankan universities as one English letter consists of different sounds and there are irregularities between English spellings and pronunciation. Therefore, effective English pronunciation learning and practice depend on every learner's ability to recognize and produce accurate sounds. English letters produce various sounds based on their position in a word, adjoining letters, stress pattern, or etymological origin. For example, the letter 'A' could be pronounced like / æ/ in cat, / eɪ/ in cake, / ɑ:/ in father, or as a schwa / ə/ in unstressed syllables like sofa. In the same way, consonants in English such as 'C' and 'G' produce hard and soft sounds and digraphs like 'th' and 'ch' have further differences. Because of these irregularities, poor spelling, lack of confidence and pronunciation difficulties occur in oral and written communication among ESL learners. This research aims at designing a comprehensive chart of all twenty-six of the English alphabet with basic phonemic understanding and relevant examples for each sound to enhance Sri Lankan standard pronunciation. The chart classifies letters into vowel variations, schwa sounds, hard and soft consonants and irregular phonemes. Also, the chart comprises generally complicated sounds like /ʊ/ (book) vs /u:/ (food) and /æ/ (cat) vs /eɪ/ (cake), directing learners towards targeted pronunciation practice with minimal pairs. The chart was designed for classroom practices to facilitate teaching and learning process in the ELS classes. To examine the efficiency, the chart was introduced in the ESL classes among the Business studies first year undergraduates in the faculty of Business studies at University of Vavuniya, Sri Lanka. Pre and post-intervention pronunciation tests, observation of learner engagement and feedback questionnaire were used to collect data for the study. Preliminary results revealed the significant improvement among the learners to correctly recognize and pronounce the English sounds, to be confident in reading the words aloud and to maintain correct spelling patterns. Moreover, the 83% of the participants stated that visualizing all the English letters, sounds-transcription (IPA) and examples in a single visual format helped them to pronounce with

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correct spelling systematically and to reduce their cognitive load related to remembering irregular patterns. In ESL instruction, the chart visualization of English letters and their phonemic differences may be an effective teaching and learning material. This material is different from traditional teaching tools that often display letters and sounds in a separated or non-systematic files. In addition, the chart could be used for diverse proficiency levels, facilitating separated instruction in ESL classrooms and personalized learning process. To conclude, this study reveals the significance of incorporating the phonemic chart tool in the English language teaching to improve Sri Lankan standard pronunciation among ESL learners. The inclusive letters and sounds diagram facilitate to build learners' pronunciation and accurate spellings as well as to enhance their overall confidence and engagement in the language learning. However, future research in this field may focus on digital adaptation of the chart incorporating interactive audio features to further reinforce correct pronunciation and facilitate autonomous learning in ESL/EFL context.

Keywords: English Pronunciation Chart, English alphabets, English Phonemic Awareness