

## Sounds: The Pronunciation App

Macmillan, 2011

REVIEWED BY NICHOLAS DE WILDE

The school where I work devotes one hour a week to specialised pronunciation lessons. Very often we hand out printed versions of the phonemic chart and try to familiarise our students with the symbols and the sounds they represent. During one of these sessions I was attempting to bring the phonemic chart to life with a variety of games and activities. Midway through the lesson a student turned to me, waving the chart, and asked, 'Why do I need this? I have Google!'

I couldn't help but think he had a point. Why should he study symbols when Google can tell him how to pronounce every word? That evening I thought of a few replies, like the need for students to isolate difficult sounds, and the unreliability of Google as an English teacher, but at the time I just mumbled something about the chart being 'very important'. However, I am sure Adrian Underhill would have had a wonderful reply.

Underhill is, of course, author of the phonology bible, *Sound Foundations* (first published in 1994) and the creator of the version of the phonemic chart that most teachers recognise, which has been circulating since 1982. In Underhill's chart, the phonemes are carefully arranged to represent the physicality of the sounds, according to the shape of the mouth as it produces them. For instance monophthongs (single vowel sounds) are grouped on three different lines with each line representing the degree to which the mouth is open when making them, so /i:/ is at the top (more closed) and /æ/ is at the bottom (more open). Each row of this arrangement represents the position of the lips, the sounds on the left being those where the lips are furthest back, and the sounds on the right are where the lips are furthest forward, so /i:/ sits furthest left and /u:/ furthest right.

The *Sounds* app is based around Underhill's phonemic chart, making it very useful for both teachers and students attempting to get to grips with the phonological symbols. Users can touch one of the symbols to hear the sound it represents, and hold their finger down to hear a word that contains the sound. They also have the option of American or British English, although unfortunately the unique

variants of Australian pronunciation are nowhere to be found. Another feature is a list of common English words in alphabetical order written both normally and in phonemic script, again with the option to touch the word to hear it pronounced. A recording feature allows users to record themselves saying the word and then play it back to compare their attempt with that of the recording (NB: first time users may think the feature is faulty but in fact there is a four-second delay after you hit the record symbol).

The practice section provides every opportunity to master the phonemic chart. The READ, WRITE and LISTEN activities are basic but challenging and very useful: READ shows a word in phonemic script and users are required to spell it normally; WRITE provides written words for users to transcribe phonologically; and LISTEN requires users to hear a word then transcribe it. In each case, users can choose to isolate and practise one particular sound, or all of them together. For ESL/EFL students, trainee teachers, and practicing teachers who simply want to get to know the chart better, this is a great opportunity to isolate individual English sounds and see how they group together to form words. I found in doing these exercises I really had to say the sounds out loud; it was more than just a mental exercise. They really force the user to identify the sounds accurately.

If practice is not enough fun, things are made more interesting with the QUIZ feature. The exercises are the same as for (READ, WRITE and LISTEN) but without the option of choosing one sound to focus on, plus an added element of suspense: users can pick either 'three lives', which allows three errors before ending the game, or '3 minutes', in which they race the clock to beat their personal best.

Another useful feature is TYPE. As many teachers are aware, phonemic symbols are not readily available on word processors, and typing them usually involves sourcing them on the Internet and copying and pasting them into the document. TYPE is a handy tool that allows you to type using phonemic script; the symbols can then be pasted into any compatible program available to your phone. Yes, this includes SMS. Impress your fellow teachers by sending them texts in phonemic script and watch with glee as they attempt to decipher the /hɪdən mesɪdʒ/!

Finally the MORE section provides links to pronunciation resources and Macmillan publications. For teachers there are tips for using the app and the chart in class, including a link to Underhill's blog. For students there are tips to help improve their pronunciation. For me, one of the most impressive extras here is a one-hour workshop on teaching the phonemic chart by Underhill himself, modestly tucked away under MORE ABOUT PHONETICS>FOR TEACHERS>VIDEO. As he explains at the beginning, his goal is to take pronunciation out of the head and into the

mouth, and the result is a fascinating guided tour of your own mouth and the way the muscles work to produce speech. His teaching approach focuses on visualising the sounds through mime and becoming aware of the muscles that produce the different sounds. Rather than the standard listen and repeat formula, Underhill's audience are conducted like a choir to produce sounds themselves, using his gestures to guide their mouths. As they travel from /i:/ (as in feel) to /u:/ (fool) they discover /ɪ/ (fill) and /ʊ/ (full) along the way, with Underhill's hand movements turning the long sounds into short ones. The audience is paused at each sound to note the position of their mouth, the shape of their lips, the position of their tongue. Teachers intending to use this app would be well advised watch this tutorial carefully to see how the chart can really be brought to life both for teachers and students.

The *Sounds* app is a marvellous self-study application that allows both teachers and students to really master the phonemic chart in ways that are far less tedious than reading or repeating audio tracks. Exploring this app develops an intimate awareness of English sounds and allows users to identify, isolate and practise those that need the most work. But what Underhill himself shows us is that there is no substitute for good teaching, only supplements.

*Version 2 of Sounds is available now with additional features and downloadable lesson plans.*

**Nicholas de Wilde** is a General English teacher at Greenwich College, Sydney.

Sounds: The Pronunciation App is the most comprehensive English pronunciation tool, for both students and teachers. The app is created by Macmillan Education, one of the leading publishers...  
Based on the best-selling book "Sound Foundations"™ by pronunciation expert Adrian Underhill, the app features a fully-interactive Phonemic Chart for both British and American English™. The app is flawless and we awarded it with the top EAS Certification of 5 stars. Teacher Review. Sounds: The Pronunciation App has an interactive phonemic chart which will allow users to hear the corresponding sound of each phonemic symbol by simply tapping on one – you can use tap and hold to also hear an example word. Sounds: The Pronunciation App helps you study, practise and play with pronunciation wherever you are. This free version includes Interactive Phonemic Charts for British English and American English. Tap to hear a sound, or tap and hold to hear the sound and an example word. In the Premium version (now available) you can look up, listen to and record words in the WORDLIST; PRACTISE your pronunciation skills; test yourself with the pronunciation QUIZZES; and LEARN with Top Tips, videos and more! Free version features: - Interactive Phonemic Chart with high quality audio - Work in British or American English  
Tim reviews the Pronunciation Workshop series and gives a final piece of advice. Tim's Pronunciation Workshop: Assimilation of /t/ followed by /j/. Episode 74 / 29 Aug 2017. What happens in pronunciation when one word ends in a consonant sound and the next word begins with a vowel sound? Tim explains Tim's Pronunciation Workshop: 'was' and 'were'. This is the second diphthong programme in our series of 45 pronunciation videos that explore the sounds of English. The Sounds of English: Diphthongs - 1. Episode 2 / 23 Sep 2014. This is the first diphthong programme in our series of 45 pronunciation videos that explore the sounds of English. Introduction to The Sounds of English. Episode 1 / 23 Sep 2014.