

At the talk face 7

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Minimal Pair games

Minimal pairs are pairs of words which are exactly the same except for one phoneme, for example *slip* and *sleep*. They are commonly used in pronunciation teaching for the following reasons:

- They are great for awareness raising: minimal pairs show in a very concrete, memorable way how the difference of one phoneme can completely change meaning.
- They provide a good test of listening discrimination: students have to identify which word of the pair they think they hear. The word may be isolated or in the context of a sentence.
- They are good practice for speaking accuracy: student A says one of the two words, or a sentence containing it, and student B (or the teacher) identifies which they think student A said.

Simple minimal pair exercises are very useful then, but they can become monotonous. However, it is possible to vary the format by embedding minimal pairs into game-like activities. Here are three examples.

1 Minimal Pair Journey

Take a set of four target minimal pairs and place them in a table like this:

	1	2	3	4
up	rice	place	ice	peace
down	rise	plays	eyes	peas

Give out the journey diagram. Now read out the number and one of pair, for example: "1 rise, 2 place, 3 ice, 4 peas"

Students listen and follow the route on their diagram. At each junction, they go up if the word is from the top row and down if the word is from the bottom row. When you have finished, they must identify which letter they have arrived at. In the example above, they should arrive at

letter J. Now students can repeat the activity in pairs or groups, with one reading out the words and the other(s) following the route.

2 Listening Maze

Make a 5x5 grid and write "start" in the top left square and "finish" in the bottom right square. Fill the rest of the grid with words containing minimal pairs. In this example, the pairs are words ending in /d/ or /t/. I've tried to put minimal pairs so that they occur in squares near one another. Give students copies of the completed grid. Now read out a path through the grid, from start to finish. Moves may be horizontal, vertical or diagonal. Here is an example route:

start - hard - white - write - wrote - road - coat - hurt - heard - set - said - lend - finish.

Students listen and follow the route on their maze. Then check answers. If students have gone the wrong way, they should identify where they took the wrong turn. Then students can repeat the activity in groups, with one of them reading out a route and the others following.

3 Street Map

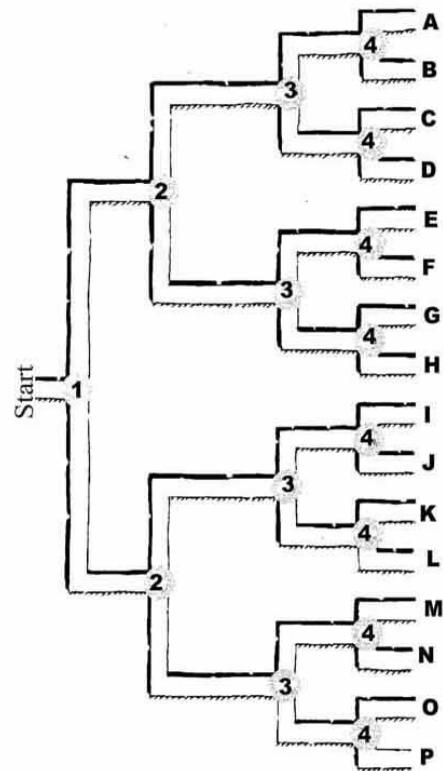
Take a simple grid pattern street map and give the streets names which include minimal pairs. Students listen and identify which place is being described. The example here is based on the minimal pair /i/ and /ɪ/.

You or a student says, for example: "It's on the corner of Cheap Street and Ship Lane". The other students identify the place, for example: "F!" This can be done as a whole class activity or as pairwork.

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1 Minimal Pair Journey



2 Listening Maze

start	hard	road	right	sad
heart	wrote	white	sat	plate
road	wide	write	played	lent
code	coat	ride	said	lend
hurt	heard	set	lent	finish

3 Street Map

