

Practicing Short Vowel Sounds

Being able to hear the difference between, and produce, the English short vowel sounds is a very common challenge, particularly for Hebrew speakers. Many of the sounds simply do not exist in Hebrew

- the **short a** of "apple" does not exist in Hebrew.
- the **short i** of "in"; Hebrew speakers tend to pronounce short i like long e. This is the closest, though not accurate, Hebrew transliteration for cognates (think of the Hebrew versions of Indian and igloo).
- the **short u** of "bug" is generally transliterated into Hebrew (English word written using Hebrew characters) using an aleph and kamatz vowel, like the store name BUG לאב - but that is not an accurate representation of the sound.
- the **short oo** of "book" or "push" is softer than the long oo sound of "food," which exists in Hebrew, and often used as an approximation.

Some of the short vowels do exist in Hebrew:

- the **short e** of "elephant" is like the Hebrew vowel segol under the letter aleph.
- the **short o** of "olive" is the same as the Hebrew vowels kamatz and patach (like in the Hebrew word "abba" אבא, which has both) - but since usually the short o sound is transliterated (Hebrew word written in English characters) using the letter "a" this is not immediately obvious to learners.

Repeated practice and attention will gradually improve phonemic awareness and the learner's ability to both hear and identify, and produce, the differentiated sounds, but it takes a lot of practice to form; those new neuron paths in the brain!

Some activities to help practice differentiating/producing short vowel sounds:

- Have the learner hold a mirror up to his/her mouth to watch the different shape the mouth takes when it makes the different sounds. Exaggerate the mouth movements (opening mouth up and down for (a), widening lips for (e), drawing up lips for (i)) when you show the learner how to produce the different sounds.
- Make little vowel signs on ice-cream sticks for the learner to hold up. You say a word containing a short vowel; s/he has to hold up the sign for the vowel s/he hears.
- Then have the learner say the words and you hold up the vowel signs!
- There is a sheet on the website in Lesson 10 with words that have all three vowel sounds that have been learned to that point, together with the other letters that have been covered up to that lesson. (You can add words to the list to include the

letters up to whichever lesson you are on.) Have the learner just read the three words with different vowel sounds off the list, trying to differentiate the sound s/he produces. Also, you read the words and have the learner point to the one you read and said ("read" and "said": both unusual spellings of the short e sound!).

- Make out of construction paper a selection of words with sliding vowels or consonants, to hear the common vowel with changing consonants around it (cat, man, black, rat; bed, test, desk, pen, etc. - the a sound is consistent, the consonants change) or the common consonants with changing vowels (bed, bad, bid...using the list from Lesson 10 - the consonants are consistent, the vowels change). Slide and read! (This emphasizes which sounds are the same and which are different in the selected words.)

- Word sorts: Physically manipulate word cards (with pictures for meaning) to sort them into categories stressing the point you are trying to help the learner master. Or you can have the learner copy words into columns depending on which category they belong to. Again, words can have a common vowel or consonants.

- For a learner who had trouble getting the long vowel/magic e concept, a Hickey tutor made up a Go Fish/Happy Families game (you can find it on the website). She reported that the learner played it with his family members all weekend long. He dedicated a good chunk of practice time, never thinking of it as "practicing" - he was just playing a game!

You can make up a similar short vowels game - with families that contain three words from the list (bed, bad, bid). That way, in order to get the right card, the learner will have to struggle to pronounce the vowel he has in mind. (If you make up such a game I will gladly put it up on the web site!)

-Make up other games to practice short vowels: board games, "Hop to the top" ladder games, etc.

-Your ideas and feedback are welcome!