

## Thinking about Minimal Pairs

Think back to the times that native speakers have misunderstood you because of the way you pronounced a word. They might have said something like “did you say “hit” or “heat””? Native speakers may not typically offer you pronunciation tips, but usually if they don’t understand you, they will stop you for clarification. Often, this is because you produce two words that should sound different in the same way. In most cases, these words are minimal pairs – words that differ in just one sound. Although these misunderstandings can be frustrating at the time, when working on your pronunciation, you can use them to your advantage. This is because we can use minimal pairs to identify troublesome sounds and then work on producing them more accurately.

## How to Use Minimal Pairs

We can collect words that are different in one sound only and put them in a chart. For example, the chart below would be useful for working on the different beginning sounds in “chip” and “ship”.

	A. “ch” /tʃ/	B. “sh” /ʃ/
1	chip	ship
2	chew	shoe
3	chore	shore
4	chin	shin
5	chop	shop

We will be using minimal pairs in our sessions, but it’s also important to practice them at home. Usually, you have to be able to hear the difference between two sounds in order to produce them distinctly, so you might want to start by working with a partner who can produce the sounds well. Your partner can pick a word from either column, and then you can decide whether you heard a word from column A or B. Work until you are 100% accurate.

You should also use this idea to work on the way you say the sounds, so in this case you will pick a word and read it to your partner. Work until your partner picks the right column every time.

If you want to try something more advanced, do the following. Say two words, and have your partner decide if you said “AB”, “BA”, “AA”, or “BB”. For example if you say “ship, chip” your partner should say “BA”, and if you say “ship, ship”, your partner would say “BB”.

Remember that your partner does not have to be a native speaker – just someone who can identify and produce the two sounds accurately.