An easy way to learn to pronounce French vowels - for English speakers

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Introduction

I am amazed how few language teachers know the principles of phonetics! In particular, I am amazed how few of them have ever seen - let alone know how to use - the International Phonetic Alphabet. This alphabet covers the sounds in all languages, whereas the phonemic script is a simplification for a specified named language. Often 'phonetic script' is used by language teachers to refer to the phonemic script used for their language.

The only method ever used at school to teach me the French sounds was the 'listen and repeat' method. I frequently could not hear the French sounds, and if I could, my efforts to pronounce them were erratic failures. No one ever tried to systematically teach me the sounds through explaining their phonetic basis. Yet, phonetics is a relatively easy subject.

In this article I want to do now what my teachers of French should have done over thirty years ago - should have done, because while the symbols may have changed a little over the years, this subject has been known about for nearly a century. I want to study the French sounds, in particular the French vowels, from the point of view of someone speaking RP English. I will show that while at first sight only six sounds are similar, in practice another six can be said just by making minor changes in an English sound, and in fact, only two sounds are particularly difficult to learn.

Language teachers need to know their phonetics, and they need to be able to apply their knowledge, firstly to the explanation of how to pronounce the new sounds, and secondly they should be able to the diagnosis faults, and systematically correct them through careful comparisons and explanation. I have done the work in the table below.

Because French symbols are perhaps less well known than English ones, certainly this is so for me, I have provided the sound and examples of the French sound in the table below, which is taken from one of the Larousse dictionaries of French. Alongside it I have explained how to get from the nearest English equivalent to the French sound.

			French vowels and how to say them, from an English viewpoint
1.	i	il, vie, lyre	similar to /i:/, 'beat'. May need to shorten the English sound. [ɪ] as in 'bit' should be consciously avoided, since French ears (though not English ears) could confuse it with [e] 'bet'.
2.	e	blé, jouer	similar to /e/ 'bet', but with the danger of using a diphthong /ei/ in *jouer*.
3.	ɛ	lait, jouet, merci	This sound is very similar to [e] to English ears, hence *jouer* and *jouet* cannot be distinguished easily. Practice this pair, then apply it to other words. Another approach is to use [3:] 'bird' and shorten the vowel if needed.
4.	a	plat, patte	This is very similar to /ɑ:/ 'cart'. Shorten the English sound. Or, take the /æ/ sound, as in 'bat' and open the mouth a little more.
5.	ɑ	bas, pâte	Shorten the English [ɑ:] 'cart' if needed
6.	ɔ	mort, donner	Shorten the English [ɔ:] 'cord' sound as needed
7.	o	mot, dôme, eau, gauche	This sound is exactly half way between [u:] 'boot' and [ɔ:] 'cord' or 'bought'. The French sound will also need shortening. Try saying the sound in between 'boot' and 'bought' and keep it short.
8.	u	genou, roue	Shorten the English [u:] 'boot' sound as needed
9	y	rue, vêtu	Say the English [ɪ] as in 'bit', but round the lips
10.	ø	peu, deux	English [e] and round lips
11.	œ	peur, meuble	Shorten [3:] 'bird' shorten the vowel and move it more to the front, and round the lips. OR, take the /æ/ sound and round the lips (this is an approximation that may work for beginners)
12.	ə	le, premier	Similar to English
13.	ɛ̃	matin, plein	Nasalise. This sound is very similar to [e] to English ears, hence *jouer* and *jouet* cannot be distinguished easily. Practice this pair, then apply it to other words. Another approach is to use [3:] 'bird' and shorten the vowel if needed.
14.	ɑ̃	sans, vent	Nasalise. Shorten the English [ɑ:] 'cart' if needed
15.	ɔ̃	bon, ombre	Nasalise. Shorten the English [ɔ:] 'cord' sound as needed
16.	œ̃	lundi, brun	Nasalise. Shorten [3:] 'bird' shorten the vowel if needed, and round the lips

Long and short vowels
French pays no attention to the distinction between long and short vowels (with a few humorous exceptions such as mètre (short) and maître (long)), whereas this is crucial in English. Therefore in comparing the sounds I have sometimes taken a long vowel in English and suggested that it be shortened. This is a skill in its own right, and worth practicing within English before tackling French. Long ago I discovered that if I played with my own language for a while, I could make a temporary change, then export it to another language. So here, with sound 1 - /i/, the vowel exists in English in long form /i:/, whereas in French it is often short. In French, it is the context which determines vowel length and it is not a distinguishing feature. The circumflex can sometimes indicate a long version of a vowel as in '*pâte*'.

To take another example. In order to practice the Parisian R, I made a point of using it in English for a few weeks. I thus gave myself a lot of practice, and it was simple enough to stop using it in English later. For a time, I used the Parisian R while singing English songs. Odd, but it worked, and I have dim memories of my music teacher instructing us to exaggerate the English sounds when singing and when doing public speaking.

Making use of allophony
An allophone is an acceptable variant of a sound in a named language. Allophones are sounds which sound similar in a named language. This human property of speech, which exists because of habituation to sounds in the languages children are exposed to, can be exploited in language teaching. When a new sound is particularly difficult to pronounce, and there is a sound which is indistinguishably similar, then it can be used in place of the target sound.

Of course, learners often, perhaps without realising it, over-rely on this. They too easily assume that the sounds they make are close enough to the target language that it does not matter. But I still maintain that used sparingly, allophony is a great, though dangerous tool.

French has four vowels which are nasalised equivalents of a non-nasal vowel. In practice this nasalisation is only a small problem to English speakers, but it does have to be noted and learned.

Even as I was putting this chart together I noticed several of my own bad habits. For instance, *lait* I had been saying as a diphthong as in the English 'bait', and *lundi* I have habitually said with the same vowel as in 'peu'.

My argument is that this chart is very easy to use. It took me less than 30 minutes of work to set out in its initial version in pencil, and any language teacher worth their salt should be able to make similar comparisons for any language pairs, and to explain to students how to say new sounds in a way which taps into their natural linguistic background.

Useful information on the web, and writing a document which uses phonetics

For au up to date, clean, and copiable version of the IPA chart, in whole or in parts, see http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/ipachart.html and the full chart, 2005 edition, is available as a small pdf file from http://www.langsci.ucl.ac.uk/ipa/IPA_chart_(C)2005.pdf which is ultra clear and has permission to copy provided full acknowledgment is given. When I printed it, I needed to use a printer with a PS driver - for some reason the PCL6 gave rectangles for some symbols. If that had failed, since they displayed perfectly on the screen, I would have reduced it in size to fit the screen, then screen printed it, and enlarged it as needed with the photocopier. Individual language sound files may be downloaded free of charge for personal use at http://web.uvic.ca/ling/resources/ipa/handbook_downloads.htm and this includes Arabic and French.

Sometimes it is difficult to display and write the symbols. For help see http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/wells/ipa-unicode.htm which recommends several fonts that display phonetic symbols well, including Arial Unicode MS, Charis SIL**,** and DejaVu Sans**.** This document was first written in Word Perfect 8, Times Roman font, and I found the symbols in various places. To get the nasalisation mark above the letter, I inserted it on the line above then reduced the line spacing to 0.2. Finally, when the document was finished, I converted it into pdf using PrimoPDF.