Teaching Spoken English with the Color Vowel Chart
Karen Taylor & Shirley Thompson

Changing the way we talk about the Sounds of English
Shirley Thompson & Karen Taylor
Co-authors of
The Color Vowel Chart
The Color Vowel Chart

green tea
silver pin
gray day
red dress
white tie
black cat

purple shirt
a cup of mustard
olive sock
auburn dog
turquoise toy

blue moon
wooden hook
rose coat
brown cow

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Written English vs. Spoken English

Written English. . .
- consists of individual *words* separated by spaces
- adheres to a *narrow range* of acceptable spellings
- is evaluated on its *correctness* (of spelling and punctuation, etc.)

Spoken English. . .
- consists of connected words delivered as *phrases*
- includes a *wide range* of national, regional, and cultural accent differences
- is primarily judged by its *comprehensibility*
American English Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• a</td>
<td>• approximately 15 sounds (depending on the variety of English one speaks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• e</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• i</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• o</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• u</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and sometimes $\text{y}$ (as in “sky”)
The Vowel Sounds of Spoken English
Letters vs. Sounds

- to
- so
- on
- of
- woman
- women
- work
- dress
- friend
- bread
- any
- said

One letter ➔ many sounds
One sound ➔ many letters
TRUST YOUR EARS, NOT YOUR EYES

Help students learn to LISTEN to how something is pronounced and NOT be misled by the spelling.

How do we pronounce “a” in English?

- gray
- black
- mustard
- auburn
- about
- any
The chart allows us to talk about sounds without the use of letter names.
Why focus on stress?

Spoken English is based on combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables.

The use of stress in spoken English is essential. When stress is absent or inaccurate, one’s speech is less comprehensible and may result in misunderstandings – even if all of the individual sounds are correct!

Stress is a “deal breaker” in spoken English!
Where’s the produce?

Judy Gilbert’s Prosody Pyramid
[prosody = melody + rhythm]
another way of looking at the importance of stress.
The vowel sounds in peak syllables are crucial. Other parts of the thought group can (and should) be muffled, but the vowel sound at the center of the peak syllable needs to be extra long and extra clear.

Judy B. Gilbert
Stress in English impacts meaning.

Of words: CONvict vs. conVICT, REcord vs. reCORD, PROduce vs. proDUCE

In conversation:
A customer at a fast food restaurant ordered as follows: “Two double cheeseburgers, an order of fries and a lemonade, please.”

After looking at his order he says: “Excuse me. I asked for two double cheeseburgers.” What’s the problem?

What if he said: “Excuse me. I asked for two double cheeseburgers.” What’s the problem?
Different languages use different techniques to indicate what is most important, so using stress may not come easily for your students, but it’s perhaps THE most important thing in helping students speak more clearly!

1. What are you doing? I’m listening.

2. Who’s listening? I’m listening.

3. Why aren’t you listening? I am listening.
Stress starts at the word level, so let’s get started!
Listen to Karen pronounce each of the color-keyword combinations.

• Make sure you are producing the same vowel sound for both words.

• It is important that you and your learners feel comfortable saying each color-keyword phrase, as you will use these familiar words as a bridge to learning and remembering the pronunciation of new words.
Identifying the “color” of new words:

Each word has one primary stressed syllable.
At the heart or peak of that syllable is a vowel sound which will be lengthened.
Using The Color Vowel Chart, we can say that each English word has exactly one “color”.

The Color Vowel Chart
americanenglish.state.gov colorvowelchart.org

Key Word Version
2nd Edition

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Deciding what “color” a word is.

One-syllable words

\[ \text{soup} \text{ is blue} \]
\[ \text{bread} \text{ is red} \]
\[ \text{knife} \text{ is white} \]

Multi-syllable words

\[ \text{education} \text{ is gray} \]
\[ \text{classroom} \text{ is black} \]
\[ \text{biological} \text{ is olive} \]
What color is that **WORD**?

**Super**

**Good**

**Interesting**

**Friendly**

**Nice**

**Impressive**

**Happy**

**Strong**

**Fantastic**
What **color** is your **name**?

“**Shirley** is purple.”

- Names are the most **personal words** we know
- Personalizing spoken English helps us acquire the sounds of spoken English
- Our name takes on different pronunciations depending on the speaker’s first language
- Let’s use our own names to explore the sounds of English!
What color is each name?

- Ana – BLACK or OLIVE
- David – GRAY
- Isabelle – RED
  - OR: Ísabelle - SILVER
- Michael – WHITE
- Eshetu – RED or GRAY
- Kofi – ROSE
- José - GRAY
Here, beginning students have collected their OLIVE names on a wall poster.
This class completed the NAMES activity and added their names to their wall chart.

- Ingrid
- Mirian
- Cheese
- Tangerine
- Peanut

- Purple Shirt
- Green Tea
- Blue Moon

- Guadalupe
- Raul
- Do
- Soup

- Silver Pin
- Cup of Mustard
- Wooden Spoon
Identifying the "color" of phrases.

feed the cat
See you later. . . is gray
Let’s get together. is red
on the table. . . is gray
I like it. . . is white
Nice to meet you. . . is green
Thank you. . . is gray
in the evening. . . is green
I don’t know. . . is rose
Teaching Vocabulary: Study by Color
Strategy:
Create a **Color Vowel Word List**

This graphic organizer helps learners visualize how words sound.

- Use one per topic or lesson
- Collect them
- Review often
Color Vowel Word List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GREEN TEA</th>
<th>WHITE TIE</th>
<th>BLUE MOON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nice</td>
<td>super</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SILVER PIN</th>
<th>TURQUOISE TOY</th>
<th>WOODEN HOOK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>interesting</td>
<td></td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRAY DAY</th>
<th>PURPLE SHIRT</th>
<th>ROSE COAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>friendly</td>
<td>impressive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RED DRESS</th>
<th>A CUP OF MUSTARD</th>
<th>BROWN COW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>happy</td>
<td>fantastic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLACK CAT</th>
<th>OLIVE SOCK</th>
<th>strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
# Color Vowel Word List: Food

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green Tea</th>
<th>White Tie</th>
<th>Blue Moon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>peaches</td>
<td>papaya</td>
<td>cucumbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beans</td>
<td>pineapple</td>
<td>noodles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peanut butter</td>
<td>rice</td>
<td>soup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zucchini</td>
<td>limes</td>
<td>tuna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Silver Pin</th>
<th>Turquoise Toy</th>
<th>Wooden Hook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chicken</td>
<td>oil</td>
<td>cookies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fish</td>
<td>oysters</td>
<td>sugar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a carton of milk</td>
<td></td>
<td>pudding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gray Day</th>
<th>Purple Shirt</th>
<th>Rose Coat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mangoes</td>
<td>turnips</td>
<td>goat cheese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grapes</td>
<td></td>
<td>oatmeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a dozen eggs</td>
<td></td>
<td>soda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grapes</td>
<td></td>
<td>coconut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grapefruit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Red Dress</th>
<th>A Cup of Mustard</th>
<th>Brown Cow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a head of lettuce</td>
<td>mushrooms</td>
<td>flour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a loaf of bread</td>
<td>onions</td>
<td>flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a bottle of ketchup</td>
<td>a jar of honey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Cat</th>
<th>Olive Sock</th>
<th>Auburn Dog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>apples</td>
<td>hotdogs</td>
<td>sausage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yams</td>
<td>avocados</td>
<td>oranges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cabbage</td>
<td>pasta</td>
<td>strawberries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radishes</td>
<td>squash</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a bunch of bananas</td>
<td>almonds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategy: Focus on Word Forms

- photo, photograph = rose
- photographer = olive
- photographic = black
Vocabulary practice that’s **auditory**, **visual** and **kinesthetic**.
Strategy: Flooding for Sound Awareness
Create Color Vowel Posters

Collect words by Color.

- Practice all words of the same color together.
- Notice the variety of spelling patterns that can create that Color Vowel
Examples: Color Vowel Wall Charts

GREEN TEA

dream we're
disagreeing we'll
sneakers employee
media freezer
clean routines
ingredients retail
sleepy cheapskate
disease cheat
diabetes treat
teacher feel
hear

Black Cat

rash hazard
understand Cabbage
vocabulary angry
mathematical
mathematical
hammer
Salvador
personality aspirin
irrational
strategies Scratch
manageable cracking
amateur rash
amateur
anthem
anthem
amnesty
amnesty
classifieds
classifieds
handyman
handyman
tab
haggle
value
valuable
branch
Simplifying Classroom Discussions
Students add new words to the posters and to their personal word lists.
Another example: a word wall from a lower level class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green Tea</th>
<th>Silver Pin</th>
<th>Gray day</th>
<th>Red dress</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tea</td>
<td>chicken</td>
<td>cake</td>
<td>eggs</td>
<td>crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meat</td>
<td>nickel</td>
<td></td>
<td>dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jeans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sweater</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>head</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some teachers like using colored markers, but once students have learned the vowel sounds associated with the colors, you don’t need colored markers.
More examples:

Color Vowel Word Lists

Different classes have different styles.
Here students are surrounded by Color Vowel wall charts.
By practicing all of the words of the same Color Vowel, learners form greater sound awareness.
The Shape of the Color Vowel Chart

- green tea
- silver pin
- gray day
- red dress
- white tie
- black cat
- olive sock
- auburn dog
- turquoise toy
- blue moon
- wooden hook
- rose coat
- brown cow
- a cup of mustard

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**Vowel Yoga**: Understanding the Shape of the Chart

Begin at **Green Tea**, the high front vowel. Notice how Karen’s mouth is “smiling” and wide as she says **Green Tea**.
Move down to **BLACK CAT**. Notice the shape of Karen’s mouth. The jaw is lower, as is **BLACK CAT**’s position in the chart.
Notice the shape of the mouth for the high back vowel **BLUE MOON**.
You can help students form the challenging American English /r/ sound by beginning at OLIVE SOCK, moving through A CUP OF MUSTARD and PURPLE SHIRT to the superscript /r/.
Schwa:
the most common sound in English

a Cup of Mustard
banana  ba **NA**na

Listen to how the two unstressed vowels reduce to schwa. A great example of how one letter - “a” - can behave in two different ways in the same word!
Let’s talk about the y’s and the w’s.

**GREEN, GRAY, WHITE, ROSE, BLUE. BROWN AND TURQUOISE** are moving vowels, 
The Color Vowel Chart indicates this movement by the superscript \( ^y \) or \( ^w \) which indicates the direction of the movement.
All of these vowels are moving vowels (sometimes called tense vowels, diphthongs, glides).

The Color Vowel Chart indicates that movement by the superscript $\text{y}$ or $\text{w}$ which indicates the direction of the movement.
STILL VOWELS

- These vowels are still, non-moving vowels (sometimes called lax vowels or monophthongs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ɪ</th>
<th>ɨ</th>
<th>ə</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>ɔ</th>
<th>ʌ</th>
<th>ʊ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>ae</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>ö</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILVER</td>
<td>RED</td>
<td>BLACK</td>
<td>OLIVE</td>
<td>AUBURN</td>
<td>MUSTARD</td>
<td>PURPLE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notice again how the chart uses watermarks (y r w) at the top and superscripts $^y$ and $^w$ to remind students of the direction of the movement.
LINKING WITH /y/ AND /w/

• The \( y' \)s and \( w' \)s also serve as a reminder about vowel-to-vowel linking, both within words and between words.

Examples

• Within words: \( vari^yation, situ^wation \)
• Between words: \( see^yit, do^wit \)
What is the “r” for?

Try identifying the color of these words:

- *here*
- *there*
- *far*
- *fare*
- *sorry*
- *blurry*

**Answers**

- *here* = green → purple
- *there* = red → purple
- *far* = olive → purple
- *fare* = red/gray → purple
- *sorry* = olive → purple
- *blurry* = purple
there, care, bear, stair
Using the Chart in a Grammar Class

Teacher: So what color is “read” in the present tense?
Student: green

Teacher: What color is “read” in the past tense?
Student: red

Teacher: What color is “said”?
Student: red

Teacher: What about “say”?
Student: gray
A few suggestions for introducing the chart. . .

• With very low level students, you don’t need to talk about it much, just use it.

• More advanced students will benefit from some explanation of the shape of the chart and the movement.

• Look for lessons on how to introduce the chart on the back of the Color Vowel poster.
Indonesia
color vowel cards are taped to the whiteboard

Haiti→
Students will write their words on colored pieces of paper

The Color Vowel Chart adapts to its teaching environment!
Thank you!

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