

English Accent Coach

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Title	English Accent Coach
Author	Ron Thomson
URL	http://www.englishaccentcoach.com/
Type of Product	Website and iOS apps
Minimum Hardware	(Apps require iOS 4.0 and later)
Price	Free

Introduction

Pronunciation is an important aspect of language learning, but it can be challenging for instructors to meet students' varied pronunciation needs. In contexts where classrooms include students from several different first language backgrounds, the vowels and consonants that are easy for one student to master may present a major challenge for another student. Although instructors in such contexts can teach classroom lessons on aspects of pronunciation, such as stress and intonation, they need to find a way to provide students with more personalized work on individual sounds. This is especially important, because making changes in vowel and consonant pronunciation requires a great deal of practice.

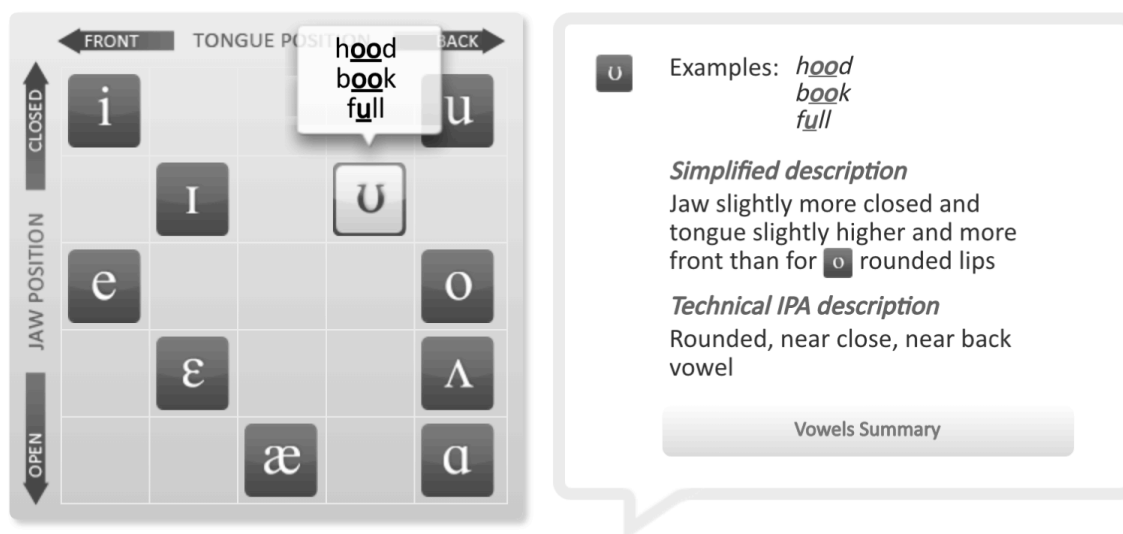
Electronic resources are one way to provide personalized work on the vowels and consonants that challenge each student. Working individually on a computer or mobile device, individuals can focus on the sounds they wish to study, and adjust time on each task as needed. There are a number of websites, programs, and apps that promise pronunciation improvement, some unrealistically. *English Accent Coach* promotes more realistic expectations, stating that "this program will help you recognize and produce English sounds more clearly, but it will not eliminate your accent." The product offers sustained, repeated practice in recognition and distinction of English sounds and tracks student progress via a website and mobile app. This review will focus on the use of the English Accent Coach website for L2 English language pronunciation development.

Description

With English Accent Coach, students play games using the vowels and consonants in English. Because the games use IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols that may not be familiar to learners, users are initially directed to brief lessons that connect the symbol, sample words, and simple articulation instructions for each sound (see Figure 1 for the site's homepage, and Figure 2 for a sample IPA lesson).



Figure 1. Welcome page



Click the symbols in the grid above to hear sample sounds.

Figure 2. Vowel lessons

Learners can then move on to two different kinds of games. In the vowel and consonant games (see Figure 3 for an example), students listen and click to indicate which sound they think they heard. In the Echo game (see Figure 4 for an example), students must remember increasingly longer sequences of sounds and click to recreate the same sequences. These games train students' perception and awareness of English sounds, which can help them speak more clearly via the ability to accurately monitor their own production. These lessons and the Level 1 games are available without requiring

learners to sign in. To move beyond Level 1 and to access features that track their progress, users must register for a free account.



Figure 3. *Consonant Game*

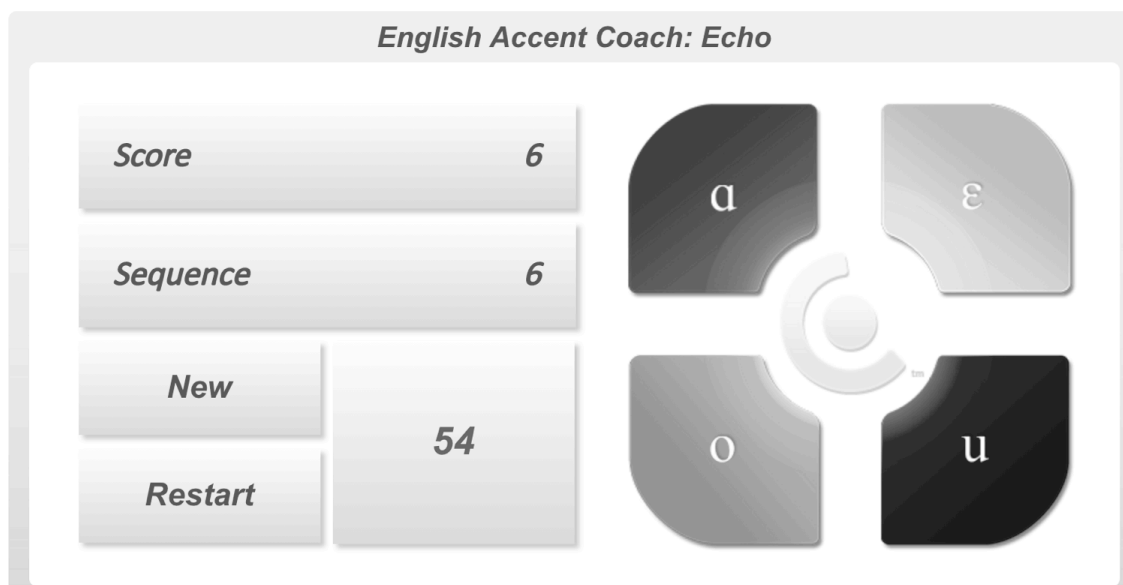


Figure 4. *Echo game*

A number of features allow learners to personalize their experience with English Accent Coach. Users can select any number of specific vowel or consonant sounds to practice (see Figure 5 for example of vowel activity). They can also select a “level” for their practice, which sets the contexts in which they will hear the target sounds. For example, in Level 1, target vowels are heard in simple syllables such as “he,” “ha,” “hi,” and “ho.” Simple open syllables with a greater variety of initial consonants are used in Level 2, and further levels introduce closed syllables, consonant clusters, and stressed/unstressed syllables of authentic words.

In the vowels and consonants games, users can also select whether or not to see key words when they hover over each sound, and can adjust the number of wrong attempts allowed before the system gives them the right answer. For vowels, users can choose between the IPA symbols and color blocks aligned with the color vowel chart (see Figure 6).

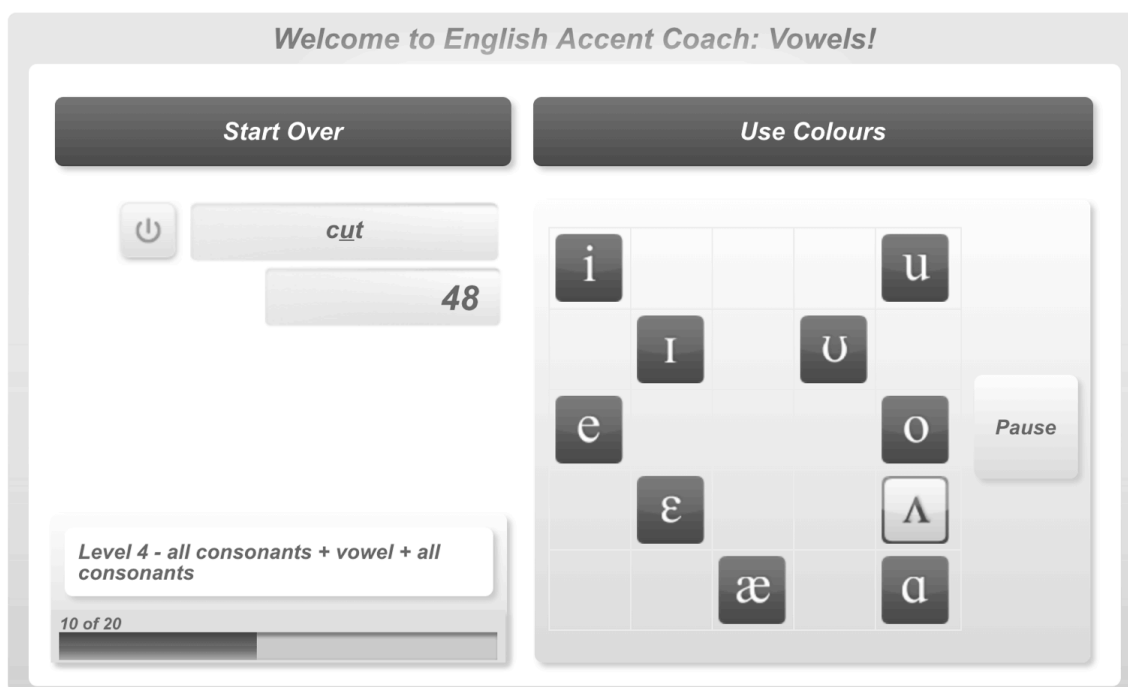


Figure 5. Vowel game with symbols

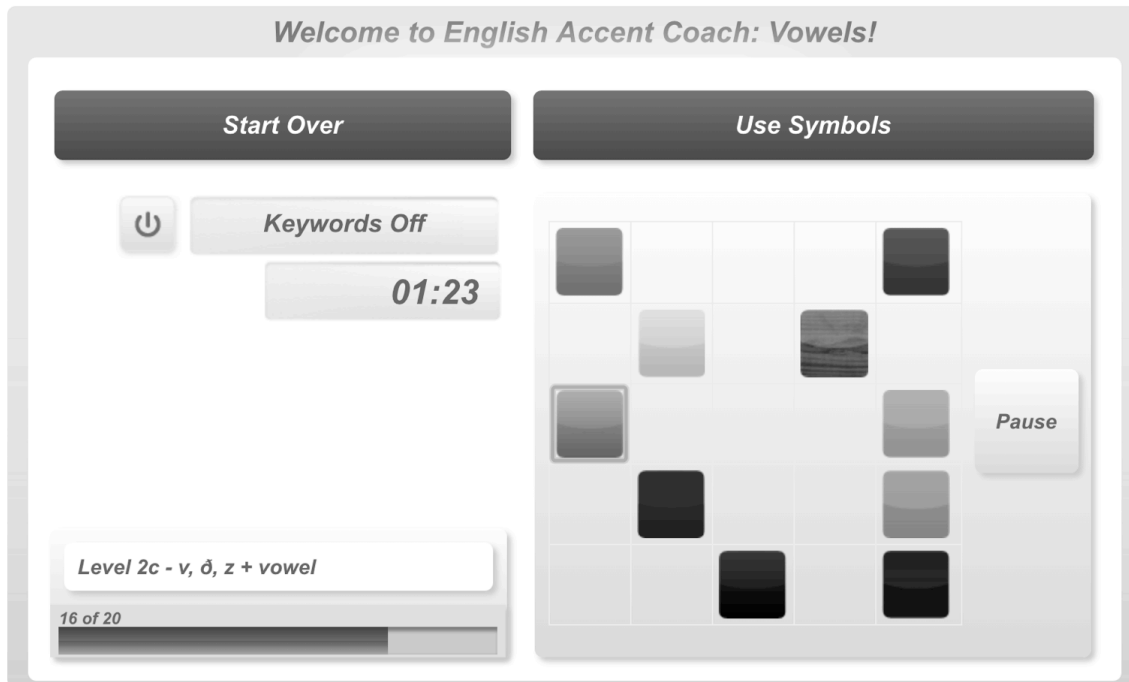


Figure 6. *Vowel game with colors*

In the Echo game, users can choose exactly which four sounds they would like to practice, or let the game decide. Levels are defined as described above, but difficulty can be further refined as users choose the degree of variety in voices they will hear and decide whether or not to add a visual clue for the sounds.

Finally, English Accent Coach tracks each learner's progress. A report after each game details overall accuracy and speed, along with accuracy and mastery levels for each sound (see Figure 7 for an example). These individual "report cards" can be exported as pdfs, and learners can also track their progress over time on a line graph that includes data from the vowel, consonant, and Echo games, together or separately. (Figure 8).

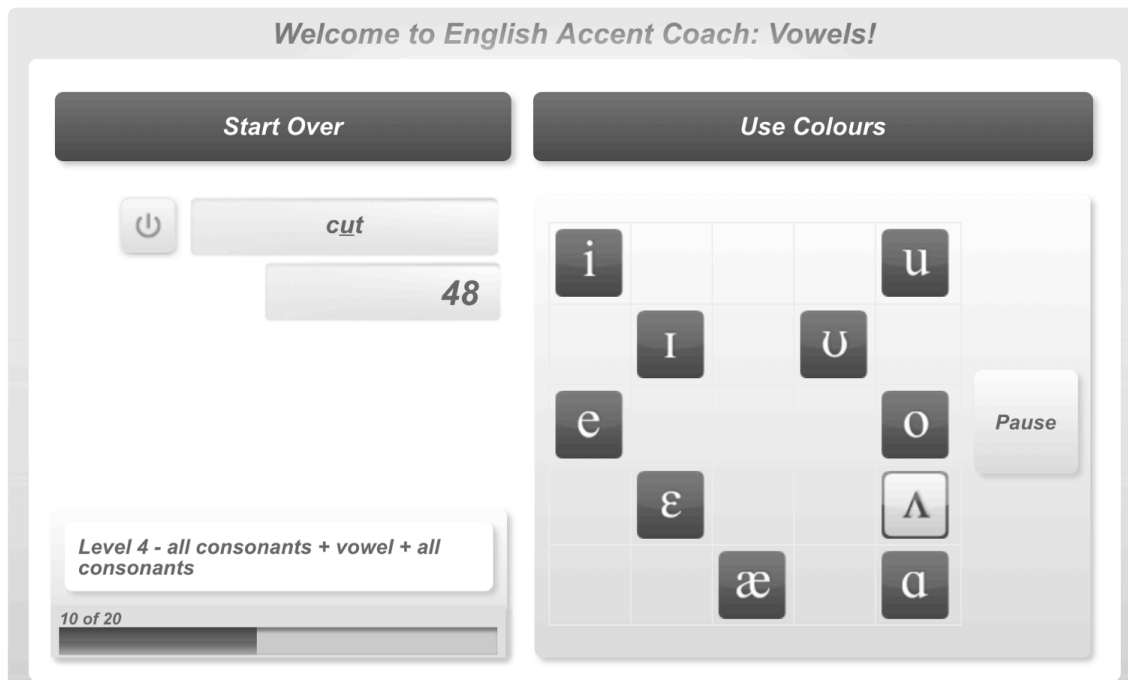


Figure 7. Progress report from vowel game

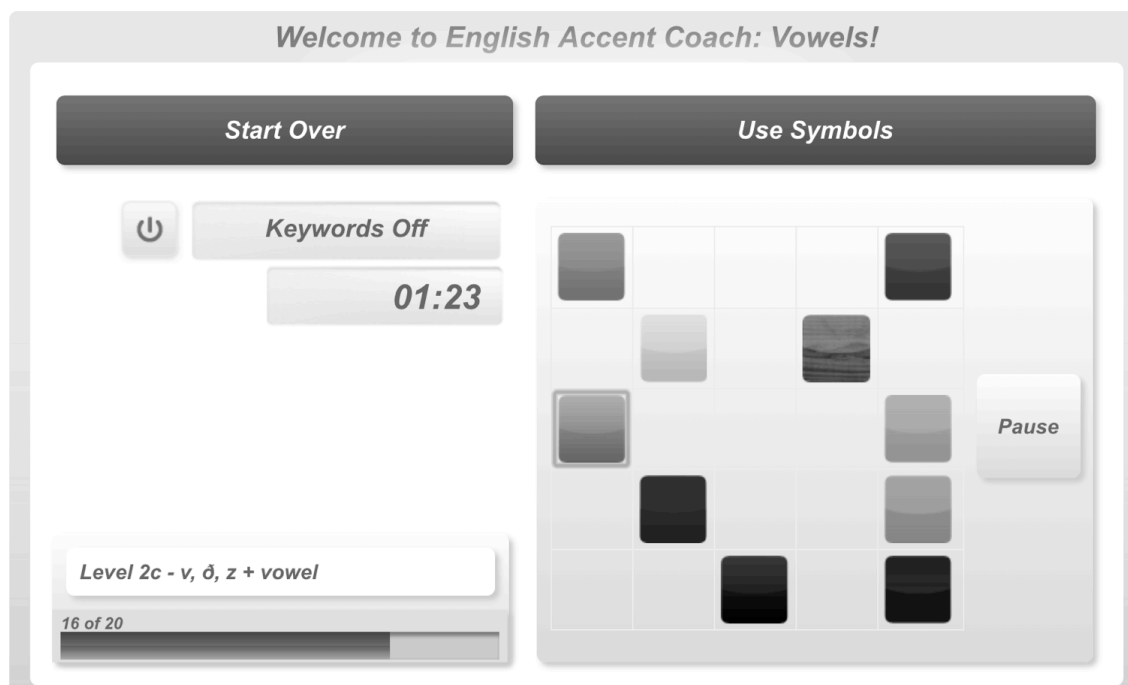


Figure 8. Tracking progress over time

Evaluation

English Accent Coach has many obvious strengths. The interface is simple and clear with no bugs, and game design choices are based on principles from pronunciation research.

For example, the game uses a variety of voices in the recorded syllables and words. Learners are exposed to many different speakers' voices, so they learn to recognize the vowels and consonants independent of individual differences (Logan, Lively & Pisoni, 1991).

When a user clicks incorrectly after hearing a sound, a tone indicates the error, and then the sound is played again and the correct response is highlighted. The user must acknowledge the error by clicking the correct response in order to continue. This draws learners' attention to the sounds they struggle with, and keeps them engaged in the activities.

The FAQ feature explains that, while the consonant game explicitly encourages learners to select a few sounds to work on, the default vowel game practices all ten vowels at once to avoid distortions in vowel perception that have been found in research activities when learners were exposed intensively to a few vowels (Nishi & Kewley-Port, 2008).

There are a few weaknesses worth noting. The mobile versions are available only for iOS, not Android operating systems. The games also do not seem to adapt automatically to players' strengths and weaknesses (although they do give users the data and options to make the needed adaptations themselves). The pacing on the Echo game seemed too slow for this native speaker of English to remember the patterns, but perhaps the pacing is more appropriate for non-native speaking audiences.

Finally, learners do not necessarily practice speaking in these games, and of course speaking practice and instructor feedback on production are still essential parts of pronunciation instruction (e.g., Saito & Lyster, 2012). English Accent Coach can complement, but not replace, human instruction in pronunciation.

Summary

English Accent Coach is an excellent resource for students and teachers of English. In particular, it is a great self-paced product for students to supplement formal classroom pronunciation instruction. By hearing targeted vowels and consonants many times and in different voices, identifying the sounds, and tracking their progress, learners can become more familiar with the vowels and consonants of English and gradually increase their ability to categorize and pronounce those sounds in context.

References

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- Nishi, K., & Kewley-Port, D. (2008). Nonnative speech perception training using vowel subsets: Effects of vowels in sets and order of training. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 51, 1480-1493

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About the Reviewer

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