

Polish sound spelling cards

A phonics tool for English speakers learning to decode written Polish

Frank Groffie, November 2020



There are numerous sets of sound spelling cards, produced by various publishers, for teaching the English alphabet. These cards demystify the often strange manner in which letters and words are pronounced and written in English. The cards allow for decoding (reading) and encoding (writing) of English—i.e., phonics—and are typically used in kindergarten through 2nd grade. On each card, a sound (a phoneme) is linked to a picture (a mnemonic) and to its single spelling (a grapheme) or its multiple spellings.¹ Polish phonics is simpler than its English equivalent.

Key to the Polish sound spelling cards

- This set of Polish sound spelling cards (below) presents all thirty-two letters of the Polish alphabet in their correct, alphabetical order.²
- The spelling or spellings of each sound in Polish are shown in the blue box at the bottom of each card.
- Vowels are shown in red, consonants in black. A red box represents a vowel, any vowel. For example, in the choo choo card, “ci■” indicates that the letter combination *ci* when followed by a vowel is pronounced /ch/ as in *cherry*.
- An underlined blank, “_”, indicates that another letter must be present there to produce the specified sound. Thus, “_ę”, in other words *ę* at the end of a word, is pronounced /ɛ/, whereas “_ę_”, or *ę* with letters on both sides, is pronounced /ew/ (actually, the nasalized /ɛ/).

Simplifications

- Some of the pictures (mnemonics) don’t correspond perfectly with their proper Polish sounds (phonemes). For example, the Polish letter *ą* has no equivalent sound in English. For expediency, the /ong/ sound, as in *gong*, is used as a close equivalent, whereas *ą* when pronounced properly is usually a nasalized *o*, as is *on* in the word *bon* in French.³
- Similarly imperfect cards are the Alps, ew, olive, robot, myth, and giraffe cards. An asterisk and note with these cards explain these issues.
- Strictly speaking, the card set is incomplete, mostly because the letters *ą* and *ę* each produce subtly different sounds depending on the consonant that follows. The Polish *y* sound is a bit *mysterious* (ha! pun there). The giraffe card is a grab-bag of Polish spellings denoting subtly different sounds hovering among the English /j/, /ch/, and /zh/, pronounced “soft” or “hard”, vocalized or not, depending on who one listens to. Those subtleties may be topics of advanced practice among native speakers of Polish.

But, perfection is the enemy of the good, as they say. And you could now decode a *polski* word of moderate difficulty like *dziewczyna* and pronounce it just about correctly by saying “*jevchena*”, which means *girl*.

¹ Although I haven’t done so here, teachers often accompany each card with a hand signal for students to perform, which provides them with an additional, tactile sensory cue. For example, the English ball card, *B*, is accompanied with a hand, palm facing downward, moving up and down a few times to simulate the dribbling of a basketball.

² Simpler than the forty-six sounds/cards in a complete English set. Yes, Óó (oompah card) and Uu (spoon card) in Polish denote the same sound, /oo/. And no, there’s no letter *q*, *v*, or *x* in Polish.

³ Three cards that look problematic but aren’t are the tsunami, chutzpah, and Jean-luc cards. Most English speakers have, one time or another, properly pronounced the /ch/ in *chutzpah*, and all English speakers have often voiced the /t/s/ blend in the middle of *Betsy* and often voiced the middle consonant /zh/ in *vision*.

Aa



*A*lps

a

* Midway between an English ä and ö.

ą



*g*ong

ą

* Usually a nasalized ö, as in the French *bon*.

Bb



*b*rown

b

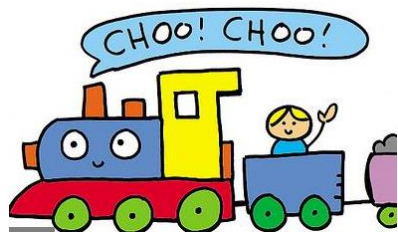
Cc



*ts*unami

c

Ćć



*ch*oo choo

ć ci■ cz

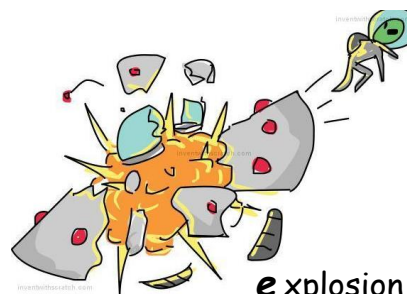
Dd



*d*octor

d

Ee



*e*xplosion

e _ ę

ę



ew

_ ę _

* Nasalized short ě, usually

Ff



flannel

f

Gg



guitar

g

Hh

CHUTZPAH

Unmitigated gall or nerve. The classic example is a man who kills his parents and then demands mercy from the court because he's an orphan. Also used to mean having great fortitude.

chutzpah

h ch

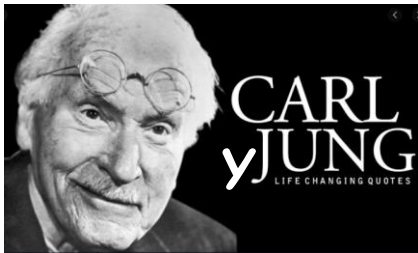
Ii



Igor

i

Jj



Jung

j

Kk



ketchup

k

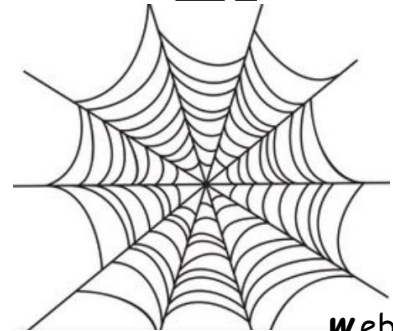
Ll



lion

l

Łł



web

ł

Mm



music

m

Nn



neon

n

Ññ



onion

ñ ni ■

Oo



olive

o

* Beginning of long õ, spoken crisply like short õ.

Óó



oompah

ó u

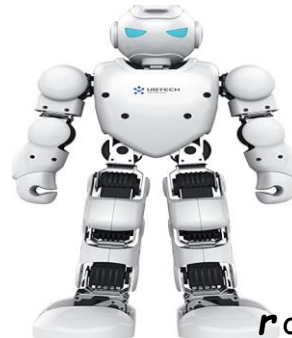
Pp



panda

p

Rr



robot

r

* Rolled, like the R in Spanish.

Ss



salt

s

Śś



shampoo

ś sz si■

Tt



toaster

t

Uu



spoon

u ó

Ww



vanilla

w

y



myth*

y

Zz



zebra

z

ž



giraffe

*

ž zi■ dž
dž dzi

Žž



Jean-luc

ž rz

* Imprecise variable blend of English ě, ĭ, and ů.

* Variably "soft" or "hard" or close to zh or ch.