

Native speakers of Spanish learning English:

The phonetic problems that may arise and some possible solutions

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AL6110 Research Paper

Corey Gonzales

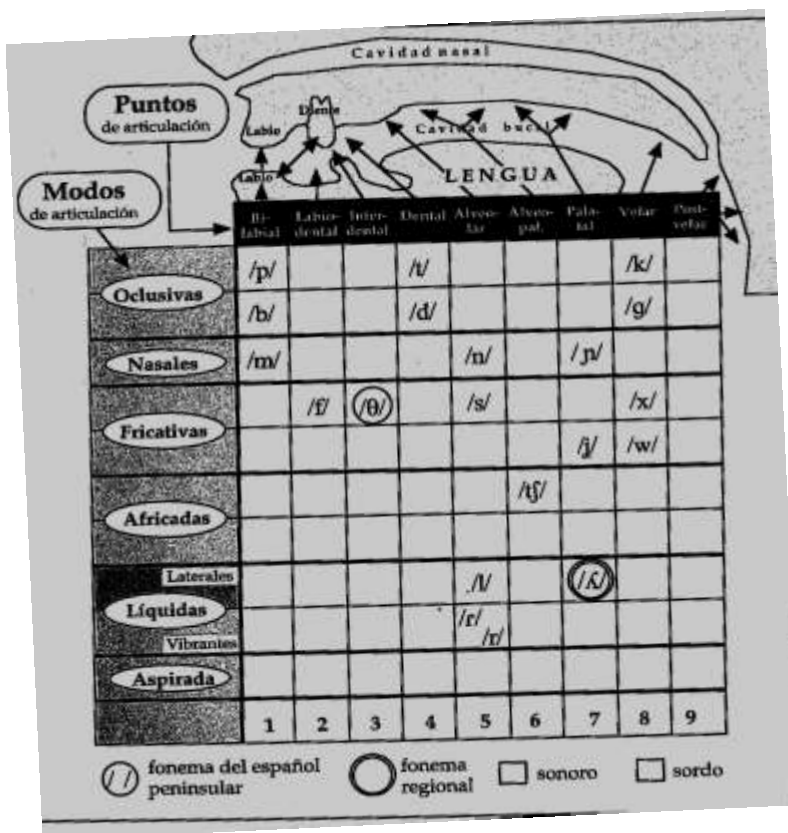
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It goes without saying that learning a new language is difficult for most who try to attempt it. There are new grammar rules, an untold range of new vocabulary, pragmatics that often come along with the new language, and, occasionally, the knowledge of an entire new alphabet or writing system. One facet of language learning that may often be overlooked by language learners *and* teachers is the difficulties learners of a new language have with phonological aspects. In the case of Spanish speakers who are learning English, some might assume that learning English might not be too difficult as the alphabet is practically the same and often cognates appear within the vocabulary. Realistically, however, Spanish speakers learning English come across many difficulties with the phonological aspects of the English language that are different from Spanish. This paper attempts to examine a few of the more prevalent differences including the difference between English [r] compared to the [r] and [r̄] in Spanish, Spanish [l] verse English [l] and [ɫ], the [v] verse [b] sounds, a quick examination of the vowel systems between the two languages, and the difficulty of multiple consonant clusters. Finally, some possible solutions for the [v] verse [b] difficulties, vowel sound distinction, and difficulty of multiple consonant clusters are offered to help Spanish speakers who are learners of English become more successful with the language.

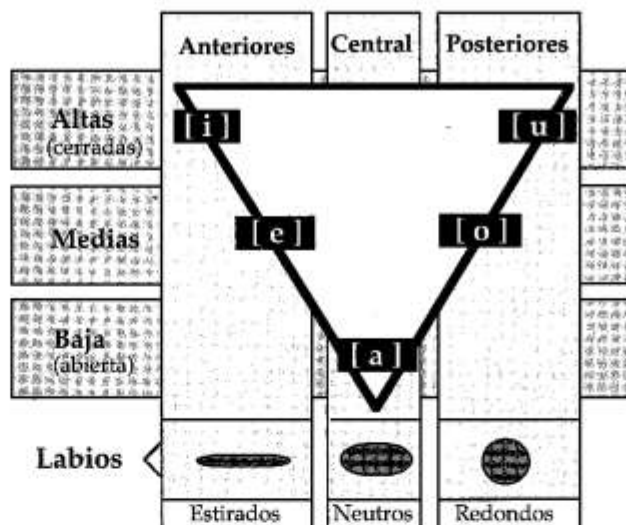
While English and Spanish share very similar alphabets, the phonological systems vary. In North American English (NAE) there are 25 consonant sounds. For Spanish, there are 18-20 consonant sounds, depending on region and dialect. NAE has 11 simple vowels or vowels with glides and three diphthongs. Spanish has only five pure vowel sounds and two semivowels, which can be paired with the pure (or strong) vowels to create the numerous diphthongs or triphthongs found in Spanish.

Below is a phonemic consonant chart for Spanish:



(Schwegler, & Kempff, 2007, front cover).

The following chart shows the vowels of Spanish:



(Schwegler, & Kempff, 2007, frontispiece).

For literate Spanish speakers, learning English can present many difficulties as “Spanish is a language with a highly recoverable orthography, because (with minor exceptions) each symbol in its alphabet represents only one phoneme, whereas English is non-transparent because of its irregular orthography-to-phonology mappings” (Vokic, 2011, p. 395-396). While it could be argued that teaching English should not focus on the spelling of words for pronunciation purposes, Mann, 1986, and Read et al., 1986 argued that “phonological awareness is developed only through acquisition of orthography” (as cited in Vokic, 2011, p. 395). This fact makes the teaching of pronunciation that much more important for students who are learning English as native Spanish speakers, especially if those learners already have an understanding of the orthography of their L1.

Considering the consonant sounds in Spanish and English, many may be close in sound and prove no difficulty for the learners. On the other hand, some consonants vary enough that learners of English have difficulty in knowing which sounds are appropriate in various environments. There are also variances that may occur in different consonant groupings between the two languages. The authors of *Teaching Pronunciation*, explain that two of the most difficult English consonants are the liquid [r] and [l] sounds (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010, p. 57).

The [r] sound that occurs in English is known as retroflex, where “the tongue tip curls back into the mouth behind the alveolar ridge and the lips are slightly rounded” and is listed as palatal (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010, p. 60). In Spanish there are two different “r” sounds: the simple “r” is /r/, called the “flap” or “tap.” The multiple “r” is /r̄/ and is said to be rolled or trilled. While both sounds occur as liquids and are alveolar, or even alveopalatal, the sounds created are quite different. Often the sound created depends on where

the [r] occurs in the word. The /r/ occurs in an intervocalic position (as in *caro* or *pero*) and following a consonant, as long as it does not occupy the initial position in a syllable, e.g. -Cr (as in *dra-ma* or *tres*). The [r] occurs in the beginnings of words (as the first sound in *Ramón* or *rojo*) and in three different consonant clusters: “lr” “nr” and “sr” (as in *al-rededor*, *En-rique*, and *Is-rael*). In English, the [r] is almost always pronounced as a retroflex (as in *ready* and *Aaron*.) This does not seem to be as difficult for Spanish speakers to pronounce, but adult learners of English will most likely have the most difficulty adapting this new singular sound instead of breaking it up into two sounds. An example of words that might cause these learners some difficulty might be the words “error” or “mirror” where adult learners mispronounce the /r/ as a trilled /r/.

As with the lateral [r], the lateral [l] may pose some difficulty for Spanish speakers. While the lateral “light” [l] sound does occur in Spanish, the “dark” or velarized [ɫ] allophone in English does not. In Spanish, the [l] has three different allophones, depending on the sounds surrounding it, but none are velarized. For example, the [l] is dental when it occurs before /t/ or /d/ (as in the words (*alto* or *sueldo*); [l] is alveopalatal when it occurs before /tʃ/ (as in *salchida*); and [l] is palatal when it occurs before /ʎ/ (as in the phrase *al llamar*) or when it occurs before /i/ (as in the word *salieron*). In none of these examples does the /l/ sound close to the dark [[ɫ]] in the English words *bell* or *call*.

Other consonant sounds that may give some speakers of Spanish difficulty when learning English are the sounds [b] and [v]. In Spanish both of these sounds are bilabial. This is usually an orthographic problem for these learners of English as words that are written with a *v* are pronounced as [b] in Spanish. For example, the word *invitar* would be pronounced as /Imbiytar/ as opposed to /Inviytar/. When Spanish speakers hear words in English with [b], it could be quite

difficult for them to decide whether or not what they are hearing is in fact the [b] sound or rather the [v] sound.

Some activities for learners working on differentiating between the two aforementioned sounds could be the following tongue twisters and work with minimal pairs:

Tongue Twisters and Sentences

Ban vans! Ban vans! Ban vans! Ban vans! Ban vans!

I'm going to wear my best vest.

Studying vowels irritates my bowels.

Dear Valerie, will you be my Valentine?

I moved from Venezuela because it was very hot.

Minimal Pairs

bale/veil

bane/vein

bat/vat

beer/veer

bent/vent

bid/vid

bile/vile

bolt/volt

bowl/vole

broom/vroom

curb/curve

dub/dove

jibe/jive

While these students may have difficulty with the consonants when learning English, there are also examples of difficulties when looking at differences in vowel sounds. As stated before, NAE has 11 simple vowels or vowels with glides and three diphthongs; Spanish has only five pure vowel sounds and two semivowels. This is reason enough to realize that Spanish speakers are going to have some difficulty when attempting to pronounce words in English. To begin, the vowels found in Spanish are /i/, /ɛ/, /a/, /o/, and /u/. The semivowels are /j/ and /ɥ/. The pure vowels are also known as 'strong' vowels, while the semivowels are referred to as 'weak' vowels (Swegler & Kempff, 2007, p. 49). A combination of strong and weak vowels can

be used to create diphthongs. The ‘strong’ vowel can appear either before or after the semivowel. In the case of triphthongs, three vocalic symbols appear in the same syllable. Some examples of this are the words *buey* [b̥ue̞j̥], and *Paraguay* [paraɣuaj̥]. In these examples the *y* represents the semivowel [j̥].

In English, there are six more vowels than just the five found in Spanish. So while English has [i], [ɛ], [a], [o], and [u], it also contains [ɪ], [æ], [ʌ], [ɔ], [ʊ]. Some of the simple vowels just listed can also appear as vowels with glides: [iy], [ey], [ow], and [uw]. Finally, there are three diphthongs in English: [ay], [aw], and [ɔy] (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010).

It is easy to see the difference when the two lists of vowels are compared side-by-side:

Table A: English Vowel Sounds

/iy/ → heat, beat, meat
 /ɪ/ → bit, fit, tin
 /ey/ → rain, may, made
 /ɛ/ → get, hen, pest
 /æ/ → cat, pan, after
 /a/ → ma, hot, Tom
 /ʌ/ → cut, son, butter
 /ɔ/ → thought, law, caught
 /ow/ → sew, boat, open
 /ʊ/ → look, wool, put
 /uw/ → blue, room, united
 /ay/ → pie, fine, idea
 /aw/ → blouse, how outside
 /ɔy/ → boy, choice, oyster

Table B: Spanish Vowel Sounds

/i/ → ti, y, mí
 /e/ → sé, saber, también
 /a/ → mama, lana, sábana
 /o/ → ojo, lo, posición
 /u/ → su, música, una
 /i/ → pierde, aire, serio
 /u/ → puesto, auto, sauna

The differences between the Spanish and English vowels can cause difficulties for Spanish speakers. “Learners find difficulty in differentiating English vowels, especially where length is a part of the difference. Typically, at least two English vowels share the ‘phonetic space’ occupied by one Spanish vowel, so one-to-one correspondences are practically impossible” (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 91). For example, the Spanish /i/ corresponds to both the English vowel sounds /i/ and /I/, therefore words like *sheep* and *ship* become confusing for Spanish speakers. Another example would be the Spanish /u/, which corresponds to both the /u/ and /o/ vowel sounds in English. This can make words with these sounds, like *pull* and *pool*, difficult for Spanish speakers to differentiate or sound the same when being produced.

The previous examples of difficulties for Spanish speakers when learning English are just some of the possible problems that may arise. A final example of a problem that typically occurs for Spanish speakers learning English happens within various consonant clusters. While consonant clusters do occur in Spanish, they are, in general, much rarer than there are in English. Words in Spanish that contain consonant clusters can be divided six different ways, and while up to four consonants may occur as a cluster, the cluster is divided. If the word contains VCV (vowel-consonant-vowel) the word is divided as V-CV. Words that contain CC clusters can be divided two different ways: C-C (as in *en-ci-ma*) or as -CC (as in *ne-gro*.) Consonant clusters made up of CCC (or CsC—s refers to the letter *s*) are broken up as C-CC and Cs-C (respectively, as in *in-cre-í-ble* or as in *ins-pi-rar*.) Finally, words that contain four consonants, CCCC are broken up in the middle of the cluster as CC-CC (as in *ins-tru-men-to*.) An example where this could bring problems for English learners occurs in English words that contain clusters that do not follow the same rules, as in the English words *tempts*, *splints*, or *strengths*. Often, Spanish speakers have difficulty when pronouncing words that begin with consonant clusters starting

with *s-* (as *strengths* and *Spanish* and *school*) since words do not start with such clusters in Spanish. Often, these students invoke the use of epenthesis and will insert an initial vowel sound, producing such words as /ɛskuwl/ “school” or /ɛstriyt/ “street” (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010, p. 101).

When considering the difficulties mentioned above that arise for Spanish-speaking learners of English, there are many different activities to help students improve their pronunciation of the new target language. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner explain that with the reduction of the final consonant clusters, it would be important for teachers to explain the importance of grammatical endings and that native speakers simplify difficult syllable-final consonant configurations without dropping the grammatical markers (2010, p. 101). It is important for Spanish speakers to learn some of the different strategies native English speakers use when simplifying consonant clusters, so teachers may want to consider some possible remedies to teach their students to help them with these sounds.

A very simple activity that can be done in class for beginning learners is the repeated pronunciation of the sounds that will occur in English consonant clusters. For example, since the /sp/ sound is quite difficult for students to pronounce without it being broken up, students can practice producing the sound /sp/ repeatedly: /spspspspsp/. Following this, students should practice saying the consonant cluster within words, as in *wasps* or *crisps* or even in words like *special* and *expensive*. An example of an activity for more intermediate speakers is the idea of a sound chain. In this activity, students are to create a chain of words in which the initial cluster has one of the sounds, but not both of the sounds, that had appeared in the previous word. The first word chosen may be done by the teacher or a student. This activity may appear as follows: green – brick – blue – play – flower – friend – etc (Kelly, 2000, p. 62). Another easy activity is

to have the students focus on and elongate words that begin with an initial /s/ followed by other consonants. Since Spanish speakers want to insert a sound before the /s/, like /ɛ/ or /ə/, focusing on the /s/ sound could be quite helpful. Some example words for students to try are: *state* /ssssteɪt/, *school* /ssssskuwl/, and *Spanish* /ssssspænɪʃ/.

The students should be able to see all the ways that consonant clusters may appear in English. The following table is adapted from Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner to help students better understand the possibilities of how clusters in English that include vowels are divided (2010, p. 103):

Table C: English Consonant Clusters and Vowel Division

CV	VC	CVC	VCC	CCV	CVCC	CCVCC
we	up	but	eats	fly	sink	slips
buy	at	Cap	arm	snow	burn	trust

Once students have some understanding of consonant clusters and how to produce them, it would be a good idea to present the following table to explain the different combinations that may occur and examples of words that include those specific cluster combinations (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010, p. 99).

Table D: Consonant Cluster Combination

Initial		Clusters	Final	
CC	CCC	CC	CCC	CCCC
dry	strip	ink	basks	lengths
/dr/	/str/	/ŋk/	/sk/	/ŋkθs/
through	scrape	bird	parked	worlds
/θr/	/skr/	/rd/	/rkt/	/rldz/
glow	spry	shark	linked	sixths
/gl/	/spr/	/rk/	/ŋkt/	/ksθs/
crow	split	bend	ends	waltzed
/kr/	/spl/	/nd/	/ndz/	/ltst/

Mentioned earlier was the idea of teaching students cluster reduction, especially the strategies used by native speakers. This could be explained to students as the deletion of “one of the consonants in order to make the cluster easier to pronounce” (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010, p. 100). Generally, a middle consonant is dropped in final clusters of three or four consonants. An example of when native speakers employ this strategy occurs when there are grammatical endings added to create clusters, i.e. asked /æskt/ is simplified to /æst/ and facts /fæktz/ is simplified to /fæks/.

Another activity that can be done in the classroom for students to work with consonant clusters is the use of dictation. In this type of activity, students will write what the teacher is reading, as he or she reads it. This will allow students to practice listening for consonant clusters that may appear between words, as in the sentences “She moved it.” and “He cleaned Art’s office.” Since these sentences, when spoken by a native speaker, would involve resyllabification between words, as in /ʃi·muwv·dIt/ or /hi·kliyn·dart·sɒfis/, it will be important for learners to focus on where each word in the sentence begins and ends.

In conclusion, speakers of Spanish are going to have difficulty when learning English as the languages are quite similar in some aspects, but quite different in others. The vowel and consonant systems are relatively the same and also quite different, which can make it difficult as Spanish speakers attempt to learn English. Although the alphabet is generally the same for both languages, this can still cause some difficulty for learners. The varying characteristics of the consonant system, which are too dissimilar between the languages, may cause confusion and frustration for learners. The different [r] and [l] sounds, the difficulty knowing when a [b] or [v] has been pronounced, and quite frequently, the new consonant clusters are among examples of items that may cause Spanish speakers difficulty when learning English. Overall, teachers need

to be more aware of the phonological difficulties that these learners are going to have; teachers must acquire a vast knowledge of activities and strategies that can be used when teaching these learners their new language.

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