

## Problems with Vowel Pronunciation

### **Introduction**

In teaching Spanish vowel pronunciation to college students who are native speakers of English, teachers must know predictable areas of possible trouble so that they will be able to avoid and solve them. In this paper I am going to focus on problems with vowel pronunciation, what the difference is between Spanish and English vowel systems, what kind of problems students might face because of that difference and how the teacher can help him/her to develop their pronunciation.

### **Vowel System in English and Spanish**

The quality and quantity of the vowel system is different between English and Spanish. English has a minimum of eleven to twelve basic vowels, depending on which variety of English is being described. They are:

- |                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| 1) /i/ - see [si]  | 7) /ɔ/ - fall [fɔl]                        |
| 2) /ɪ/ - sit [sɪt] | 8) /o/ - snow [sno]                        |
| 3) /e/ - day [de]  | 9) /ʊ/ - put [pʊt]                         |
| 4) /ɛ/ - met [mɛt] | 10) /u/ - true [tru]                       |
| 5) /æ/ - ask [æsk] | 11) /ə/ - but [bət]                        |
| 6) /a/ - hot [hat] | 12) /ʌ/ - when /ə/ is stressed or accented |

Spanish, on the other hand, has five basic vowels (they are also listed above- number 1, 3, 6, 8, 10) as in:

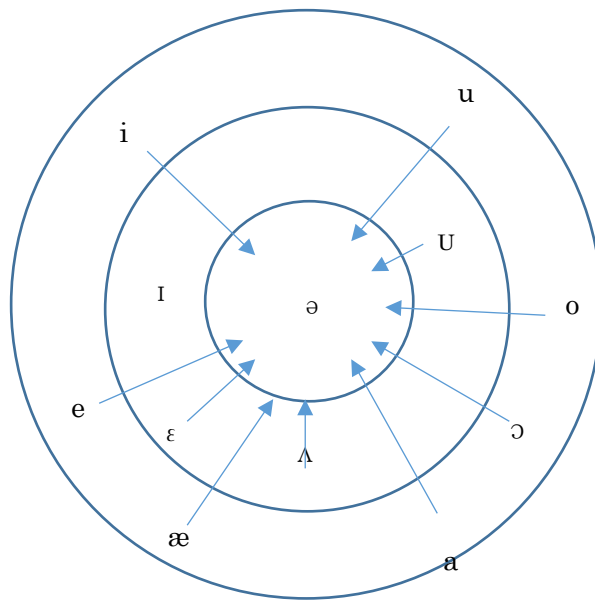
- 1) /i/ - piso
- 2) /e/ - peso
- 3) /a/ - paso
- 4) /o/ - pozo
- 5) /u/ - puso

The natural vowel /ə/ schwa, is a typically characteristic feature of English, but very uncharacteristic feature of Spanish. In Spanish, the same vowels (/i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /u/), occur in both stressed and unstressed syllables. In English, on the other hand, the only vowel which normally occurs in unstressed syllables which is the schwa. The instructions for teaching English speaking learners of Spanish can be summarized as follows: In Spanish, all vowels are pronounced clearly and distinctly, even in unaccented syllables of words. The schwa /ə/ does not exist. Many students have

problems with pronouncing clear vowels because of the schwa, they have a hard time to countermanding it. To make clear vowels, students must have the idea that when they pronounce vowels, they have to open their mouths so the vowel sounds come out more clearly. The student can do exercises over and over again saying a, e, i, o, u with a model (teacher) or just looking at his/her own mouth movement in a mirror. In English, unstressed vowels should receive much less force than unstressed vowels do in Spanish. Spanish does not use relaxed and colorless vowels analogous to the mute e of French or the unaccented e of Portuguese and Catalan.

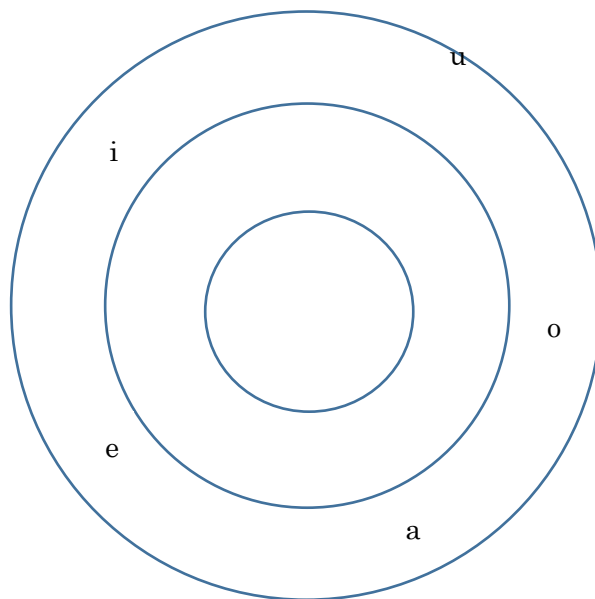
English has vowels with at least three phonetic lengths typically represented by /i/, /ɪ/, and /ə/. This is because of English having three vowel systems in different environments within words whereas Spanish has only one system that does not vary significantly from one position in a word to another. Probably, most important of all for English is the fact that schwaization (turn into schwa sound or close to schwa sound) can pull almost all vowels to the center, thus reducing their tenseness and length to the minimum. Statistics reveal that 90% of the unstressed vowels turn to some sort of schwa. Thus, English has a system that tolerates a wide variety of vowels ranging from very tense to very lax and from very long to very short. Such a vowel system is best labeled as centripetal, because the vowels have a strong tendency to move to the center of the vowel area where the schwa is located. English speakers are under the impression that they are making distinctions which they in fact are not making. About, select, and connect all have different vowel letters in the first syllable, but the sound is the same in normal speech.

Differences in unstressed vowels are not used in English to distinguish one word from another. In Spanish, however, such differences signal important features of structure (e.g., Bueno/Buena; comieron/comeran; pesito/pisito). Hence it is particularly important for English speakers to avoid the use of schwa in Spanish unstressed syllables. To counteract this tendency, the student should concentrate on giving all stressed vowels the same phonetic quality they would have in stressed syllables and on making unstressed vowels as long as the stressed ones. Figure 1 below shows a schematic plotting of the vowels of English. They fall into three general categories: /ə/ schwa is in the center, some are near the periphery, while others are in between. The length of the arrows indicates the extent of reduction in vowel quality (schwaization) and reduction in vowel quantity (longer to shorter and/or tense to laxer).



(Odisho, 1992)

Fig. 1, The English vowel system, a typical centripetal system in which vowels of different quality and/or quantity move between the periphery and the center of the vowel area. The arrows show drastic internal movement.



(Odisho, 1992)

Fig. 2, The Spanish vowel system, a typical centrifugal system in which vowels tend to

retain their stable quality and/or quantity with minimum change.

By contrast the schematic diagram in figure 2, shows the Spanish vowel system which is best labeled as centrifugal in which the vowels are located near the periphery of the vowel area and resist any movement to the center.

It is a system of tense vowels with no tolerance for lax vowels. This is why in Spanish all vowels in all syllables are pronounced almost equally; syllables are rarely lost or reduced as they are in English.

### **Stressed Vowels**

Vowels have variation in which and intensity, which play an important part in making stress in Spanish. Stressed vowels are more prominent than the other syllables of the word. The prominence is marked especially by the loudness of the vowel but the stressed vowel also usually has a change in pitch and is slightly longer than the unstressed vowels. This is important in Spanish because in many Spanish words that are distinguished by having a stressed vowel, the stressed vowel also usually has a change in pitch and is slightly longer than the unstressed vowels. Furthermore, many Spanish words are distinguished by having the stress on a different syllable. Also, an English stressed vowel is relatively long in comparison with the Spanish stressed vowel:

título = title

titulo = I entitle

tituló = He intitled

Here is an exercise to avoid the schwa:

1. listen and compare
2. listen and decide (either Spanish or English)

<b>English</b>	<b>Spanish</b>
atomic	atómico
buffalo	búfalo
canal	canal
banana	bananá
paternal	paternal

### **Teaching Strategies**

As for the teaching strategies there are several that are foremost in importance. First, teaching pronunciation does not begin with teaching the production of sounds. This phase, especially in the case of adults, should be preceded by intense ear-training

in the perception and recognition of sounds as whole units or as features that jointly occur to generate the whole units, because if a student cannot distinguish the difference, it is impossible to produce the correct sound. The perception and recognition phases prepare the brain to recognize, accept and internalize the sound features. Once the sounds and the features are internalized, the brain will be in a better position to program the appropriate articulatory commands and fire them to the vocal organs to generate the targeted sounds or features. Most of the failures that we as teachers experience in teaching pronunciation seems to be the direct result of bypassing the perception and recognition phases and immediately plunging into the production phase; this is a shortcut that often leads to mispronunciation.

Second, as an extension of the first strategy, the dynamics of the vowel system may require further exercises and drills that enable the learners to master the basics of those dynamics before even concentrating on the units of the system. This will provide the learners with the skill of articulatory maneuvering to allow the tongue and the lips to assume a wide variety of vowel postures. For English speakers learning Spanish, the training in perception and recognition should focus on how to avoid schwaization and vowel reduction since Spanish is a typically nonschwa language whereas English is a typically schwa language. Using a mirror to watch your mouth movement will help to eliminate schwaization.

Third, the predominant misconception in the field of teaching pronunciation is the belief that pronunciation is strictly taught through a model-produce technique i.e., the teacher models the problematic sound and the learner repeats after him/her. This often implies that pronunciation is the exclusive function of the auditory channel. Whereas in actual fact, teaching pronunciation is greatly facilitated and reinforced through visual observation and tactile sensing. One can even solidly state that all sounds, both vowels and consonants, in which the lips (and occasionally the tip of the tongue) are involved may be described as visible sounds. For instance, the production of /i/ vs. /u/ displays maximum visual distinction.

To avoid students having incorrect pronunciation, the teacher has to have correct pronunciation. If the teacher is not a native Spanish speaker, he/she should not be a model (If he/she speaks like a native speaker, there is no problem). Instead of the teacher producing the sound, the student can listen to a CD or watch a video. It is very important that the teacher recognizes and correct students' wrong pronunciation before it becomes fossilized.

For English speakers, producing Spanish vowels does not seem difficult because the five vowels in Spanish are also in English, but the problem is that [e] [i] [o] [u] are

pronounced as [ey] [iy] [ou], and [ow]. During the production of English vowels, the tongue and lower jaw change position so that the vowel begins as one sound and then glides into another. These English vowels are thus diphthongs (double vowels). In contrast, Spanish vowels are monophthongs rather than diphthongs. When English speakers see a word like “sale”, they tend to pronounce it [sail] instead of [sale], or when they hear the word like “tabu”, they tend to spell it “taboo”. If a student has discarded his/her English vowel system, this problem will not occur. The students must become accustomed to the Spanish vowel system where a, e, i, o u are always pronounced as /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/.

The teacher can use pronunciation exercises to make the student feel comfortable with Spanish vowels. For the exercise, the teacher will read the following pairs of words. The student will then repeat them just as he/she hears them or they can pronounce them by themselves once they feel comfortable pronouncing them.

/a/	/e/	/a/	/i/	/a/	/o/	/a/	/u/
mesas	españoles	paquete	piquet	cara	caro	lagar	lugar
sobras	meses	panal	pinal	habla	hablo	pajar	pujar
mercado	sobres	matad	mitad	derecha	derecho	canada	cuñada
preguntas	mercado	pasar	pisar	esposas	esposos	sabido	subido
españolas	preguntes	charlar	chirlar	hermanas	hermanos	palidez	pulidez

After the student masters the vowels, the teacher can produce a word and let the student spell what he/she heard, or let them pronounce a list of words. That way, the teacher will be able to know if the student is able to differentiate the sound of vowels and to pronounce vowel sound correctly. Here is an exercise to differentiate English diphthongs and Spanish monophthongs. The process is as follows.

1. listen and compare

English	Spanish
bay	be
say	se
no	no
sue	su
too	tu
boo	bo
fay	fe

2. listen and decide (sither English diphthongs or Spanish monophthongs)

※Teacher reads underlined words in Spanish monophthongs.

<u>se</u>	no	low	<u>fe</u>	<u>so</u>	ro	<u>bo</u>	<u>fi</u>
tea	me	so	sea	<u>mi</u>	nu	<u>cu</u>	

After the students master the vowel sounds, they will probably not make mistakes in spelling because they need only spell the language as it is pronounced (Hadlich and Holton 1968).

### **Conclusion**

Teaching pronunciation is not a mechanical process in which isolated sounds keep moving to and fro between the mouth and the ear. To put it differently, it is not a process that is singularly based on the auditory channel. Teaching pronunciation is a far more sophisticated process in which the auditory input is reinforced by input from other senses. Without a multisensory approach coupled with some cognitive orientation, it is extremely difficult to teach pronunciation to adult learners of second language who usually display considerable psycholinguistic resistance in their acquisition of new sounds due to native language constraints and long regimentation within those constraints.

## Reference

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