

OVERCOMING PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES IN ENGLISH: IDENTIFICATION, ANALYSIS, AND SOLUTIONS

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Resumen. *Most Spanish students of English lack a sense of pronunciation when they finish college, and oftentimes, that makes them sound uneducated, impolite and even disrespectful when speaking in English. Pronunciation is a very important issue when learning a foreign language, which needs to be properly taught in secondary schools. This research project will provide interesting and useful information for other teachers willing to improve their students' pronunciation and listening abilities, because it will show them a step-by-step plan they can use and tune according to their classroom and students' needs. Academically speaking, there are many books on the teaching of pronunciation and accent reduction, and this project is not going to discover anything new on that matter. However, it will contribute to develop the teaching of pronunciation in the foreign language classroom showing that, if carefully planned, it can be a motivating learning and teaching process. Moreover, with regular practice, and fun and entertaining activities, students can develop better pronunciation and listening skills, making their English sound more natural.*

Palabras clave: Phonetics, EFL, English, Pronunciation, Research.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

This project has been carried out at the European Career College of Madrid having the first-year students of Business Administration and Finance as participants. There were 17 students whose ages ranged from 18 to 23.

The methodology chosen for this project consisted in listening and repetition exercises of the target sound(s) and language, one hour per week. The receptive skills activities (listening and reading) were based on ear training work such as: identification of sounds, minimal pairs, word and sentence stress, connected speech, intonation patterns, and identification of speaker's attitude through intonation. On the other hand, the productive skills activities (speaking) were based on activities like drilling of the target sound / language (vowels, consonants, consonant clusters, word and sentence stress, intonation patterns, etc.), chaining (front and back), and substitution drilling.

The diagnosis test was recorded twice; at the beginning of the study and at the very end, to contrast pronunciation and reach a conclusion for the project, providing the students with some exercises for further practice.

2. OBJETIVOS GENERALES

- To identify the main reasons why students leave college without having a minimum knowledge of pronunciation after studying English for at least five or more years.
- To improve the pronunciation and listening skills of 17 students of English for Banking and Finance (vocational education) at the European University of Madrid.
- To analyse students' pronunciation performance (articulation of sounds, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, connected speech – assimilation, elision, linking and intrusion, juncture and contractions – and the ability to convey attitude in the message).
- To analyse students sound perception skills (minimal pairs, weak forms, etc.).
- To identify the major problems in the classroom concerning production and perception of sounds.
- To design classroom material to tackle pronunciation issues and improve listening skills based on each of the topics mentioned above.
- To compare the final results with the original information to contrast and measure progress.
- To create an action plan for each student based on his/her performance, for further practice.

3. OBJETIVOS ESPECÍFICOS

- To identify the possible causes for the lack of pronunciation and listening skills the students have prior to the study.
- To identify the most common pronunciation errors and listening problems for students after leaving college.
- To analyse students' pronunciation abilities in order to devise a plan to tackle pronunciation and listening issues, both individually and as a group.
- To work on the pronunciation and listening problems obtained from the needs analysis test, by means of productive and receptive skills activities.
- To analyse students' pronunciation and listening abilities after the project to contrast and measure improvement.
- To prepare an individual plan for further practice for each student concerning his/her needs after the project.
- To describe possible educational solutions to improve pronunciation and listening skills for secondary education students.

4. METODOLOGÍA

The research project I planned is based on a qualitative basis, i.e. I wanted to prove that with the right amount of work and time my students could learn to pronounce correctly or at least better than when they joined the course.

The first impression when I met the students was that they had never been taught pronunciation, or given any kind of feedback in terms of oral productive skills, and if they had, they never tried to correct them. It was their poor pronunciation level what motivated me to start this project. Something must have gone wrong during my students' English education because it is not possible that after nearly 10 years of school, high school and college education, no one was able to read the diagnosis text

correctly. In order to know their opinion concerning the teaching of English as a foreign language, I used a questionnaire from Martin Hewing's *Pronunciation Practice Activities* (2012, p.189) and some questions of my own, which were quite revealing. The questions are the following:

Questions (Hewings)	1 = high 5 = low
How good is your English pronunciation?	Average 4
How important is it for you to have a good English pronunciation?	Average 1
When you talk to your fellow students?	Average 2
When you talk to your teacher?	Average 1
When you talk to native speakers of English?	Average 1
When you talk to other non-native speakers in English?	Average 1
How would you like to sound when you speak in English? Why?	Average 1.5

Table 1. Questionnaire from Martin Hewing's *Pronunciation Practice Activities* (2012, p.189)

How long have you been studying English? Average: since primary education
Why do you think your pronunciation is so poor / good? Average: never have been taught pronunciation
What do you think of EFL in secondary education? Average: Teachers focus on grammar but not speaking.
Have you studied in a private, or public school? Average: Public school

Table 2. Second questionnaire

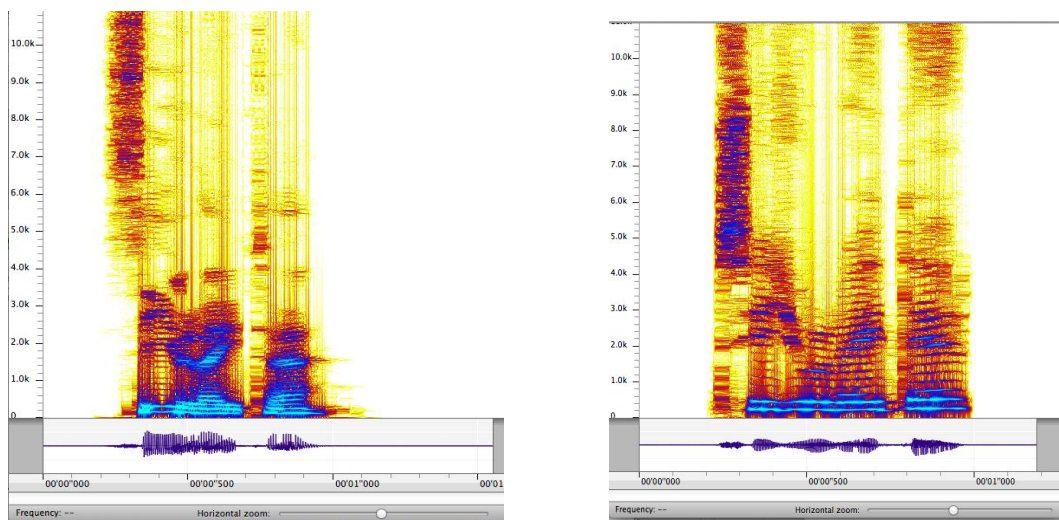
A diagnosis test was used to check their pronunciation level, which consisted of reading a short paragraph and 10 spare sentences. The diagnosis test was recorded for further analysis to identify each student's difficulties and the most common pronunciation issues within the class. The paragraph is shown below.

Script (Hewings 2012, p. 189): "In here, the dearest things were the electrical appliances - things like a dishwasher, a fridge and a stove. There was no cutlery, so I bought some knives, forks and spoons. I'd been given some bowls, but no cups and saucers, so I bought six of each. I needed furniture, too, and curtains for some of the rooms. I had to make some difficult choices. I bought purple curtains for the dining room. That wasn't my idea, but they should look really good in there."

In order to analyse the students' pronunciation I used two audio files voiced by two fluent speakers of English. Speaker 1 is an English native speaker with a south-east accent, or RP English, which is considered to be the neutral English pronunciation. Speaker 2 is a Spanish native speaker who has lived in the UK for the last 25 years and who speaks English with a slight Spanish accent, and who will be taken as the target model by the students.

Sonographs are excellent tools to analyse and compare pronunciation patterns. The sonograms below show the differences in terms of energy (colour), and frequency, which is displayed on the vertical axis. The phoneme /s/ is performed differently by

both speakers in terms of energy and frequency. The native speaker's /s/ starts getting blue at almost 7 kilohertz, while the student's one starts at 4 kHz. The phonemes /i: ju leɪ/ are also different in energy and length (horizontal axis). Speaker 1 emphasises /leɪ/, which is the pale blue spot around 2 kHz, and that is the stress nucleus of the sentence. However, the Spanish learner does not stress this syllable and uses a flat intonation in the entire sentence, which is probably the result of the lack of training during the learning years.



's i:ju 'leɪ t ə	's i: ʌ u 'leɪ t er
Speaker 1 (Native English)	A2 Learner of English (Pilar)

Figure 1. Sonogram analysis

After analysing the recordings of each student and identifying the commonest mistakes, a pronunciation plan was devised in order to tackle these issues. Amongst the phonemes and pronunciation features that caused most trouble were the following:

Vowel sounds	Consonant sounds
/æ/ /ɔ:/ /ɒ/ ʌ /ʊ/ /u:/ /ɜ:/ /ɑ:/ /ə/	/ʃ/ /tʃ/ /dʒ/ /ʒ/ /j/ /s/ /z/ /v/ /ŋ/ /ð/ /h/
Diphthongs	Consonant clusters
/ɪə/ /ʊə/ /eə/ /eɪ/ /ɔɪ/ /aɪ/ /əʊ/ /aʊ/	/spl/ /scr/ and /spr/
Weak forms	-ed Regular verb endings
are / am was / were can do / does have / has had	/t/ /d/ /ɪd/
Sentence stress	Tone
	Fall / Rise / Fall-Rise

Table 3. Commonest pronunciation issues

Considering the pronunciation level of the class, it was not difficult to find the way to prepare the material for the pronunciation lessons. In pronunciation teaching there are three types of lessons: Integrated, Remedial, and Practice. This project was based on practice lessons because it was intended to tackle the commonest pronunciation errors that these students made when speaking in English. Therefore, I prepared one-hour lessons based on the segmental and suprasegmental features shown in table 3. Students practiced different phonemes, identified the possible spellings, worked on word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and connected speech issues like linking and elision. There are several books which helped me to prepare the exercises and examples for the lessons, like *Get Rid of Your Accent*, *Ship or Sheep*, *Sounds English*, and *Pronunciation Practice Activities*. I based my lessons following the *Get Rid of Your Accent* and *Pronunciation Practice Activities* because their activities are very straight forward and that was exactly what my students needed. Each lesson the students were given a sheet of paper with the sounds to be learnt and practised. They noticed the phonemic symbols, the sounds, and the possible spellings for the given phonemes.

Session 2: Consonant sounds /dʒ/ and /j/ and consonant sounds /ʃ/ and /z/

SPELLING /dʒ/

All J	Job, jam, janitor, jail, jungle
All G before E	Gel, Gerry, agent, manage, age
All DGE	Judge, edge
Some G before I	Gin, ginger, imagine, Gibraltar

SPELLING /j/

All Y	Yesterday, yatch, yellow, yankee, young, you
Some U	Use, university, union, confusion, resume, abuse, queue
EW	Few, new, Kew, interview, Knew

Figure 2. Extract from lesson 2

Listen and repeat. Then listen again and identify the target sound.

/dʒ/	/j/	/ʃ/
jam	yam	1
jet	yet	2
joke	yolk	3
Jess	yes	4
Jack	yack	5
Gin	yin	6
Jean	yeen	7

Listen to the following sentences and underline the word you hear:

- He's not very fond of jokes / yolks.
- Jess / Yes, she's never coming back.
- Don't forget to bring the jam / yam tonight.
- There's just one word missing, and it's yet / jet.

Figure 3. Extract from lesson 2

Most of the activities were based on productive and receptive skills, i.e. listening and speaking. Choral drillings were essential to help students overcome any shyness and to warm up. Some of them felt embarrassed when asked to pronounce certain phonemes in isolation, so it was important to know who felt comfortable doing it alone and who did not. Dictations were also important to train students' ears and get them used to the normal flow of English, because they were able to identify the sounds in their head and then reproduce their spelling on a piece of paper. Although dictations are often seen as a problem instead of helpful resources by students, it is worth doing them.

To illustrate all the examples for the target sounds and pronunciation features of each lesson, I was helped by two voice overs (speaker 1 and speaker 2) from London to help me out with this project by recording each example (word, sentence, paragraph) so that my students could listen to two models of English and practice at home.

A folder with all the classroom materials was created on Moodle, where I uploaded all the documents and audio files so that my students practised at home listening to the two models of pronunciation. Besides, whenever I recorded my students I uploaded their

audio files too so they could listen to them, and compare them to the two speakers' versions.

5. RESULTADOS

The results of the project were quite satisfactory in terms of sound recognition and production. Most students identified the target sounds correctly in dictations of random words and were able to reproduce them suitably along the project. However, their reading skills did not improve as much as I expected. Most students do not stop when there is a comma, a colon, semi-colon, or full stop, but that is a problem they also have when reading in their mother tongue, but that would need further analysis. Having said that, I think it was a positive experience for the students, who for the first time were shown how to pronounce in English, and ultimately, the importance of pronouncing correctly to communicate effectively with others.

6. CONCLUSIÓN

As a result of the project, it is worth noticing how students perceive -a priori- the learning and teaching of foreign languages. For them it has always been a matter of studying grammar rules and doing fill in the gap exercises, which for them is a consequence of how English exams are devised. If one thinks about English tests such as the FCE, CAE, IELTS, etc. they all are based on a use of English part with grammar and vocabulary, which is the most difficult, and the most important -apparently- for examiners. Consequently, all the teaching of English has evolved around these sorts of examinations, and teachers have devoted most of their lessons to practice these sorts of activities. However, we teachers should keep in mind that communication is the ultimate goal of learning a language, and that when our students go to a foreign country they want to make themselves understood when they speak, and they want to understand what they hear; that is why pronunciation should play a bigger role in English classes in primary and secondary education.

REFERENCIAS

Hewings, M. (2012) [2004]. *Pronunciation Practice Activities*. A resource book for teaching English pronunciation. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.