

Teaching Spanish pronunciation



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Week 1 Why teach pronunciation?

Introduction

We start the week by thinking about why we teach pronunciation and what pronunciation to teach. You will also familiarise yourself with the main features of pronunciation. You will be asked to reflect on concepts such as intelligibility, fluency, foreign accent, language variation, articulation and acoustics.

By the end of this week you will have:

- considered the differences between intelligibility and foreign accent
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

1 Why teach pronunciation?

It can hardly be denied that languages differ from one another in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, word order, etc. Pronunciation is no exception. English and Spanish share a common ancestry and, as a result, have a number of grammatical features in common. They also share a considerable amount of vocabulary. Nevertheless, their pronunciation is rather different.

When a language is learnt, educators address differences to make sure students acquire competence in the various characteristics of the target language. However, not all aspects tend to receive the same attention from scholars and teachers. While vocabulary and grammar, to mention two of the most substantial areas, receive considerable attention and become important foci in the process of teaching and learning a language, pronunciation is somehow side-lined and treated as an extra ingredient. Many Foreign Language (FL) teaching materials do not include the systematic teaching of pronunciation.

It is the intention of this course to provide professionals with a range of reflective tools to better understand how to address different situations linked to the divergences between the phonetic and phonological systems of English and Spanish. We aim to help Spanish language teachers teach the prosodic and segmental characteristics of Spanish to learners whose mother tongue is British English. We pay special attention to those elements of pronunciation that British English speakers find most challenging. The materials are complemented by ideas for activities.

Activity 1

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Make a list of the reasons that you think make teaching pronunciation worthwhile.

1.1. Reasons for teaching pronunciation

Pronunciation is the materialisation of language, it is its physical side. Underhill (2010) makes the following list of reasons why teaching pronunciation cannot be left in the background:

1. Pronunciation is involved in and has impact on all four language skills. Pronunciation is not just an aspect of speaking aloud. Pronunciation is active whenever the inner voice is active; when reading silently or rehearsing a phrase internally, when writing, when listening to an interlocutor and even when thinking. It is present in such simple tasks as remembering a phone number.
2. Pronunciation improves listening. The mouth teaches the ear. Learning pronunciation “in the mouth” improves discrimination “in the ear”. According to a behaviourist view of language learning, the ear teaches the mouth so that listening comes before speaking, but the reverse is also true. Students of languages become aware of this when they have learned to pronounce something correctly and suddenly start to hear it clearly. For instance, when a student of Spanish has learnt how to say a rapid

colloquial expression such as *p'alante* and finds she can suddenly hear and understand it. What the mouth can say becomes accessible to the ear to hear.

3. Pronunciation is the physical aspect of language. It is partly the result of muscular coordination. It's not so different from learning to dance or drive a car. While grammar, vocabulary and meaning are often taught cognitively, pronunciation is very much a physical activity. Use the natural muscular memory of the body to provide memory hooks for words and phrases. It will provide the experience of living the language and bringing it to life.
4. Pronunciation affects self-esteem. The impact of feeling a more competent speaker and a more competent listener gives a sense of capability, a taste of potential mastery. All language learners are capable of modifying their pronunciation in order to be better understood, to better understand, and perhaps to enjoy the new language to a greater extent. Learners often have a good sense of areas of L2 pronunciation that they avoid, so it is very important that the teacher can give them systematic help.

For all the reasons above, we can claim that teaching Spanish pronunciation to teenage and adult learners from the beginning should be taken as seriously as teaching grammar and vocabulary. Learning the basics of pronunciation through phonics, students will not only learn to speak more comfortably and confidently, but this will enhance their communicative skills in general: production, perception and interaction.

Reference: [Underhill, A. \(2010\) Four reasons to teach pronunciation](#)

Speaking with an accent

When learning a new language, our mother tongue undoubtedly exerts an influence over our pronunciation, which is perceived by native speakers as a foreign accent. The divergent pronunciation might be due to segmental errors (i.e. errors related to individual sounds), as well as incorrect suprasegmental patterns (for example, errors related to intonation or rhythm), or a combination of the two. While most learners aspire to a native or native-like pronunciation, achieving this after a certain age is very difficult, if not impossible. Most professionals agree that the goal is, rather, intelligibility and comprehensibility in the target language, that is, a quality of speech that can easily be understood.

Intelligibility involves the following pronunciation features:

1. *Segmental pronunciation* Pronouncing a sound correctly in a given position in the word and making it sufficiently different from other sounds. See [Week 2](#) for more details on positional variants (allophones) of contrastive segments (phonemes).
2. *Stress* Placing the stress on the right syllable and realising the vowel accordingly, e.g. *amo* ['amo] (first person singular of the present tense) vs. *amó* [a'mo] (first person singular of the past tense). See [Week 3](#).
3. *Intonation* Realising appropriate rise and fall in melody throughout the utterance. In some cases, this is the only way to distinguish the intention of the speaker in Spanish, e.g. a question differs from a declaration by using a different melodic pattern; *Pepe viene mañana* vs. *¿Pepe viene mañana?* See [Week 3](#).
4. *Fluency* Pronouncing syllables and phrases with appropriate rhythm and speed without too much hesitation and too many silent pauses. Disfluent speech might discourage interactivity and thus hinder communication.

In sum, oral intelligibility requires exposure to target language speech, focused instruction, and a good deal of practice.

Ideas for exercises

Using drama and theatre in the classroom allows students to experiment with the spoken word. This might involve using more emphatic language, playing with tone of voice, getting used to their own voice in Spanish, practicing pronunciation with the help of gestures and body language. At beginner levels, you can use very simple texts and a lot of movement.

1.2 What pronunciation to teach?

Spanish is spoken by nearly 600 million people worldwide. Of these, more than 450 million speak it as their mother tongue, distributed across four continents. This geographical spread has produced multiple variations in the language, not only in vocabulary and grammar, but also in pronunciation. These differences do not create major problems in terms of native speakers being able to easily understand each other. However, as Spanish is spoken so extensively, a complex task facing any teacher is deciding which variety or varieties to teach to their students and which linguistic features of the multiple varieties of this pluricentric language to present in the classroom. The variety with the greatest number of speakers? The one generally considered the most “respected”? The variety spoken by the teacher? All varieties?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR by the Council of Europe) refers to dialectal variation as part of sociolinguistic competence, which includes awareness of dialect and accent. The Instituto Cervantes Curricular Plan (*Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes*) takes the cultivated norm of north-central Peninsular Spanish as its preferred dialect when it comes to selecting language resources. This choice is partly based on its association with other educated norms in Hispanic culture and on its prestige, although emphasis is placed on the pluricentric nature of Spanish. The treatment of dialectal varieties in the classroom generally depends on three main factors; where teaching staff come from, who is authoring teaching materials, and the students’ needs and expectations.

Since the majority of teaching materials in Britain come from Spain, standard written Spanish tends to be based on the varieties present in Spain (and, within these, mainly *español septentrional*). Nevertheless, there is great interest among scholars and course material developers in producing materials that include the global perspective of the language. Among practitioners, there is some interest in teaching a “general” Spanish, a variety that is not regionally marked in terms of grammar and pronunciation and which incorporates the most widely used vocabulary. Needless to say, teachers can change their approach to teaching different dialects depending on the problems and needs that arise in the course of their work. The choice will ultimately depend on students’ needs and interests, and teachers’ skills.

References

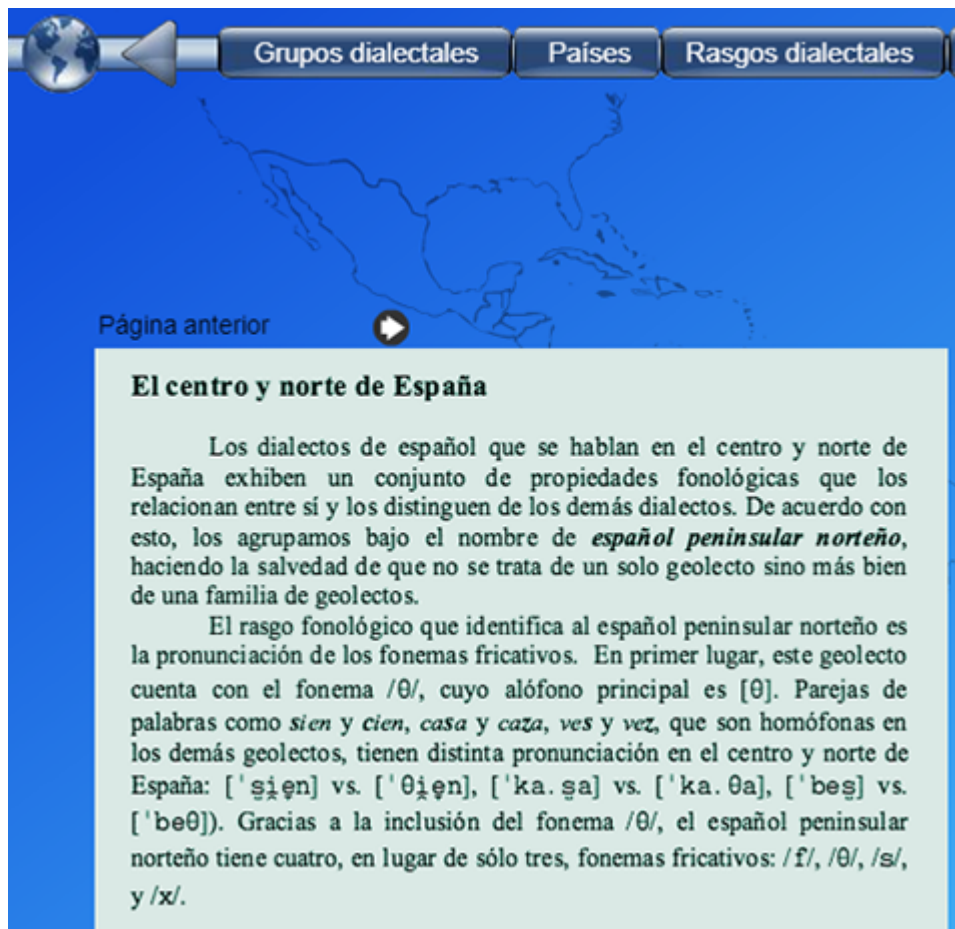
Bárkányi, Zsuzsanna and Mara Fuertes-Gutiérrez. 2019. “Dialectal variation and Spanish Language Teaching (SLT): perspectives from the United Kingdom”, *Journal of Spanish Language Teaching*, Vol. 7. 1-18.

Moreno Fernández, F. 2010. *Las variedades de la lengua española y su enseñanza*. Madrid: Arco/Libros.

Ideas for exercises

A great tool to get learners acquainted with the phonetic features of the major Spanish dialects is the Dialectoteca del español developed by Prof. Carlos-Eduardo Piñeros at the University of Iowa: <http://dialects.its.uiowa.edu/main.html>

Students at level B1 can familiarise themselves with the similarities and differences of the major dialectal blocks (Peninsular norteño, Terraltense and Terrabajense). You can find a brief description of the distinctive phonetic characteristics of the dialectal areas, as well as samples of the given accent.



Grupos dialectales **Países** **Rasgos dialectales**

Página anterior

El centro y norte de España

Los dialectos de español que se hablan en el centro y norte de España exhiben un conjunto de propiedades fonológicas que los relacionan entre sí y los distinguen de los demás dialectos. De acuerdo con esto, los agrupamos bajo el nombre de *español peninsular norteño*, haciendo la salvedad de que no se trata de un solo geolecto sino más bien de una familia de geolectos.

El rasgo fonológico que identifica al español peninsular norteño es la pronunciación de los fonemas fricativos. En primer lugar, este geolecto cuenta con el fonema /θ/, cuyo alófono principal es [θ]. Parejas de palabras como *sien* y *cien*, *caja* y *caza*, *ves* y *vez*, que son homófonas en los demás geolectos, tienen distinta pronunciación en el centro y norte de España: ['s̺i̺en] vs. ['θ̺i̺en], ['ka.̺a] vs. ['ka.θa], ['be̺s̺] vs. ['beθ]. Gracias a la inclusión del fonema /θ/, el español peninsular norteño tiene cuatro, en lugar de sólo tres, fonemas fricativos: /f/, /θ/, /s/, y /x/.

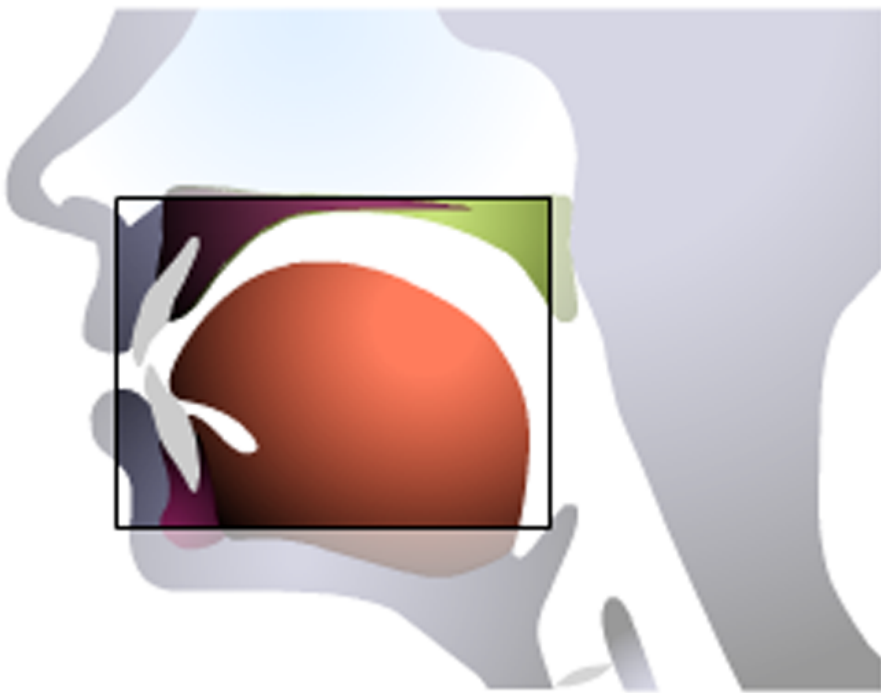
Screenshot from Dialectoteca del Español

For higher levels, you might show samples from various dialects – you can search Dialectoteca by country as well as by phonetic feature – and students can guess which area the given sample belongs to. You can then analyse the characteristic features of the samples together.

2 Vowels

Speech sounds are generally categorised into two main groups: **vowels** and **consonants**. Vowels are produced without an obstruction in the oral cavity and are described on the basis of the vertical and horizontal movement of the tongue, while consonants are produced by obstructing the flow of air coming out of the lungs in some way. Consonants are categorised according to their manner and place of articulation and the activity of the vocal cords. The area of linguistics that deals with the articulation of speech sounds is called articulatory phonetics. All this might seem irrelevant for language teachers at first glance, but if you have a basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics coupled with basic phonological knowledge – the phonology of the target language and ideally your students' mother tongues – you will find it much easier to identify and correct pronunciation mistakes.

Spanish has a simple, symmetrical five-vowel system. Based on the vertical movement of the tongue, which is the height dimension, Spanish vowels are either high (closed), or mid, or low (open). Along the front-back dimension, Spanish vowels are either front, central, or back. So for instance, when pronouncing /i/ as in *piso* (flat), the front of the tongue body is raised towards the palate. (The back vowels of Spanish are articulated with lip rounding).



Animated cross-section of the articulation of Spanish /i/. Sounds of Speech, University of Iowa <https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/main/spanish>

Activity 2

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Fill in the following chart with the five Spanish vowels. You can jot it down on a piece of paper.

Table 1 Spanish vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		
Mid			
	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>
Low			
	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>

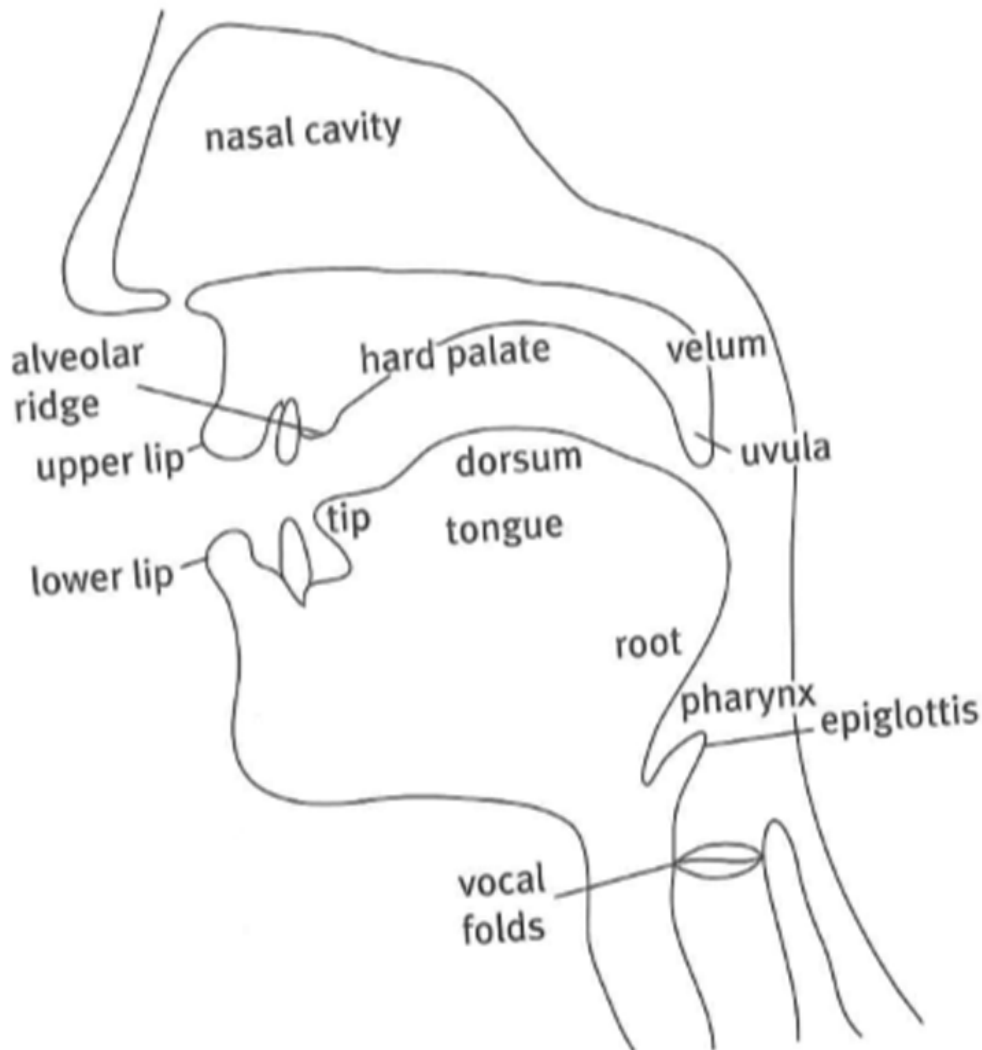
Answer

**Table 2 Spanish vowels
(answers)**

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

3 Consonants

In the production of consonants, articulatory organs are moved in such a way that they make contact or produce a constriction.



Main articulators used in the production of Spanish speech sounds. (Hualde 2005, 42)

Manner of articulation

The manner of articulation refers to the type of obstruction that is created during the articulation of the consonant. The following classes are distinguished (the phonetic symbols used in this course are those of the International Phonetic Alphabet):

Stops (plosives): The airflow is stopped completely before the consonant is released, as in /p/ pata (leg) or /d/ doy (I give). See [Week 5](#) for a detailed description of all the Spanish consonants.

Fricatives: During the production of fricative consonants, air leaks through a narrow constriction between the articulators producing turbulent noise, e.g. /f/ or /s/ as in fonética (phonetics) or sapo (toad).

Affricates: The articulation of these consonants includes two phases: first, the flow of air is blocked just like in stops, but instead of an abrupt release, the second phase consists of a fricative-like release. The only affricate in Spanish is /tʃ/ as in chico (boy).

Nasals: Nasals are similar to stops in that they are produced with a complete closure in the oral cavity, however, they differ from stops in that air can flow freely through the nasal cavity. This is achieved by lowering the velum. The only difference between the following three Spanish words – cama (bed), cana (grey hair) and caña (cane) – is the place of articulation of the nasals.

Liquids: The articulators are positioned in such a way that airflow is obstructed without causing friction. Liquids are further classified into laterals and rhotics.

Laterals: In the production of these consonants, contact is made along the central axis of the mouth, allowing the flow of air through the sides, as in lado (side).

Rhotics: These sounds are produced with one or more quick contacts of the tip of the tongue against the alveolar region. Spanish has a tap (*vibrante simple*) as in caro (expensive) and a trill (*vibrante múltiple*) as in carro (cart).

Approximants: In the case of approximant consonants, the articulators approach each other but neither touch nor make a narrow enough constriction to produce turbulence. Spanish /b d g/ in certain positions – mostly between vowels – are pronounced as approximants [β ð ɣ], e.g. lado (side).

Activity 3

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

- What's the difference in the articulation of the words *bar* and *mar*?
- What's the difference in the articulation of the first sounds of *jabón* and *carbón*?
- What's the difference in the articulation of the first and second /d/ of *dedo*?

Answer

- /b/ is a plosive, the flow of air is completely blocked for a moment in its production and then released with a burst, while /m/ is also produced with lip closure, but the flow of air is uninterrupted through the nose.
- They are produced in the same place, but *jabón* starts with a fricative /x/ while *carbón* starts with a plosive /k/.
- The first /d/ of *dedo* is a stop, while the second is an approximant consonant.

3.1 Place of articulation

The place of articulation refers to the articulators that are involved in the production of the consonant.

Bilabial: These sounds are articulated with both lips e.g. /β/ and /m/.

Labiodental: The lower lip makes contact with the upper teeth, as in /f/.

Interdental: In these consonants, the tip of the tongue is placed between the upper and lower teeth e.g. /ð/.

Dental: In dental consonants, the tip of the tongue touches the base of the upper front teeth as in /t/ and /d/. Note that in the articulation of /t/ and /d/ in English, the tongue is more retracted, the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar region and might also be curled back a little.

Alveolar: In alveolar consonants, the tongue touches or approaches the alveolar ridge, the area just behind the upper teeth, as in /n/ or /s/.

Prepalatal: The area just behind the alveolar ridge is usually called palato-alveolar, postalveolar or prepalatal. The obstruction or constriction is formed between the alveolar ridge and the hard palate, as in chico (boy).

Palatal: The articulation of palatals involves raising or touching the hard palate with the tongue body (also called dorsum), as in yo (I) and ñandú (rhea).

Velar: Velars are articulated by the back part of the tongue touching or approaching the soft palate (also called velum), e.g. jabón (soap) and carbón (carbon).

Glottal: In some areas (e.g. the Caribbean, parts of southern Spain, Colombia, etc.), jabón starts with a soft sound, the same as English hi [h]. The noise in the production of this sound comes from the glottis, the space between the two vocal cords (also called the vocal folds).

Voiced or voiceless?

The third feature used in the classification of consonants, after the manner and place of articulation, refers to the activity of the vocal cords. Vocal cords are sets of tiny cartilages and muscles on both sides of the larynx. The space between them is called the glottis. If the vocal folds are brought together and the flow of air repeatedly forces them apart, a periodic vibration is produced and we speak of voiced sounds, for instance zzzzz, the first sound of English *zebra* or *zoo*.

If the vocal folds are separated, air can flow through the glottis without producing vibration, and the result will be a voiceless sound like ssss, the first sound in the Spanish word *sapo*. The contrastive use of the feature voice in Spanish occurs in the stop series only; *par* (pair) – *bar* (bar), *tía* (aunt) – *día* (day), *corro* (I run) – *gorro* (cap). In English, this is more systematic and also occurs in the fricative series and affricates, e.g. *fan* vs. *van*.

Activity 4

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Place your fingers on your Adam's apple and feel the vibration (or lack of it). Decide whether the following sounds are voiced or voiceless.

1. /a/
2. /f/
3. /k/
4. /l/
5. /h/

Answer

- a. Voiced (all vowels are voiced)

- b. Voiceless
- c. Voiceless
- d. Voiced
- e. Voiceless

International Phonetic Alphabet

In this course we are going to use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The International Phonetic Alphabet is a system in which each symbol is associated with a particular sound.

By using IPA, you can know how to pronounce a word in any language.

Table 3 IPA

	Bilabial		Labiodental		Dental		Interdental	
(Voicing)	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
Nasal		m						
Plosive	p	b			t	d		
Fricative		(β) f			(ð)		(θ)	
Affricate								
Tap/Flap								
Trill								
Lateral								

Table 4 IPA

	Alveolar		Post alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
(Voicing)	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
Nasal		n				ɲ			(ŋ)	
Plosive							k	g		
Fricative	s	(z)	(ʃ)				x	(ɣ)	(h)	

Affricate	tʃ (dʒ)
Tap/Flap	ɾ
Trill	rr
Lateral	l (ʎ)

The consonantal sounds of Spanish. The sounds in brackets only occur in some varieties of Spanish or in specific phonetic contexts.

Activity 5

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Find the voiced counterpart for each of the voiceless sounds in the left-hand column. This exercise involves the sounds of English.

Table 5 Voiced counterpart

Voiceless	Voiced
t – too	z – zip
θ – think	v – very
s – sip	ð – they
k – came	d – do
f – ferry	g – game

Answer

Table 6 Voiced counterpart (answers)

Voiceless	Voiced
t – too	d – do
θ – think	ð – they
s – sip	z – zip
k – came	g – game
f – ferry	v – very

Hulade, José Ignacio. The Sounds of Spanish, 2005, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4 Week 1 summary

Congratulations on completing Week 1!

You should now have:

- considered the differences between intelligibility and foreign accent
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

Now get started with [Week 2](#).

Week 2 The building blocks to pronunciation

Introduction

This week you will explore orthography and pronunciation (phonetics and phonology), as well as the emotional side of speaking a foreign language.

By the end of this week you will have:

- developed an understanding of the relationship between orthography and pronunciation
- developed a basic understanding of the differences between phonetics and phonology
- reflected on what can be the main barriers to pronunciation and the role of emotions in speaking and pronouncing a foreign language
- familiarised yourself with some methods of teaching pronunciation
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

1 Orthography and pronunciation

Read the following words which are very similar in Spanish and English.

Table 1 Comparison

<i>Tranquilo</i>	<i>Tranquil</i>
Language: Spanish	Language: English
Origin: Latin	Origin: Latin
Grammatical category: Adjective masculine singular (feminine singular <i>tranquila</i> , masculine plural <i>tranquilos</i> , feminine plural <i>tranquilas</i>)	Grammatical category: Adjective
Meaning: calm; peaceful; tranquil (without motion or sound)	Meaning: free from disturbance; calm
tranquil (free from emotional or mental disturbance)	
Example: <i>el mar tranquilo</i>	Example: <i>her tranquil gaze</i>
Synonyms: <i>pacífico, relajado, calmado</i>	Synonyms: <i>peaceful, restful, reposeful, calm, quiet, still, serene, placid, relaxing, soothing, undisturbed, idyllic, halcyon, mild, pleasant</i>
Pronunciation: [traŋ'kilo]	Pronunciation: ['træŋkwɪl]

Both words come from Latin. They both fall into the same grammatical category; adjective. They have very similar meaning and use; *El mar tranquilo* (the tranquil sea), and *her tranquil gaze* (su mirada tranquila). They also share very similar orthography (spelling). Yet, when we examine how we pronounce these words in each language, we realise their pronunciation is quite different (incidentally, you may have noticed by now that the IPA symbol ' indicates stress. It is placed before the stressed syllable).

This difference in pronunciation will happen with many other cognate words (words that have a common ancestry, are spelt in a similar way and whose meanings are very close) e.g. ENG *equivalent* and SP *equivalente*, or ENG *hero* and SP *héroe*.

Graphs exist that systematically represent sounds that are different in Spanish compared to English. The letter 'z', for instance, corresponds to the sound [s] in Spanish (or [θ] in some varieties of Peninsular Spanish), e.g. *zapato* [sa'pato] (shoe), while it generally corresponds to the sound [z] in English e.g. *zinc* pronounced [zɪŋk]. The varying pronunciation of cognate words can produce negative effects when learning a foreign language.

Ideas for exercises

Depending on your students' level, ask them to make a list of cognate words and analyse the differences in the pronunciation of the consonants in the word-pairs. This will make students aware of the differences between words which they might consider identical.

English spelling: many-to-many

English is well-known as a language in which the same spelling may allow for a number of different pronunciations, as well as one in which different spellings may correspond to the same pronunciation. There are many cases of words in which the same spelling has different pronunciation (e.g. *read* [ri:d] as in "to read" and [red] as in "I read a beautiful

poem last night”), or in which different spellings are used to produce the same sound, i.e. the graphs ‘f’, ‘ph’ and ‘gh’ in words such as: *film*, *phantom* or *laugh* are all pronounced [f].

Spanish spelling: one-to-one

In comparison, Spanish spelling is more phonemic and shows relative stability between the orthographic form and pronunciation. It is a language in which there is a more direct correlation between the spelling of words and their pronunciation. The correspondence between the orthographic form and the physical realisation is not one-to-one, but close, even if some sounds can be spelt in various ways. An example is [x] as in *Getafe* and *Jérez*. Similarly, ‘qu’ and ‘c’ can both represent the sound [k], as in *queso* (cheese) and *casa* (house). Nevertheless, pronouncing a written text is relatively straightforward.

1.1 Phonetics and Phonology

Phonetics and phonology both deal with the study of human speech sounds. Phonetics is concerned with the physical side of speech, such as the actual production of speech sounds (articulatory phonetics), the acoustic properties of speech sounds (acoustic phonetics), and how sound waves are converted into linguistic information (auditory phonetics). On the other hand, phonology studies sound patterns; the organisation of sounds in a language. For example, in English, /nt/ and /dm/ can appear within or at the end of words (*rent*, *admit*), but not at the beginning. Diachronic (historical) phonology examines and constructs theories about the changes and modifications in speech sounds and sound systems over a period of time. For example, it is concerned with the process by which the English words *sea* and *see*, once pronounced with different vowel sounds (as indicated by the spelling), have come to be pronounced alike today. Naturally, there is a strong interdependency between these two areas of linguistics. So, to sum up, phonetics studies the sounds in speech while phonology studies how these sounds are used to create words in a given language.

The distinctive accents that many learners of a foreign language have while speaking the target language result from differences between the phonological and phonetic systems of their languages and those of the target language. From birth, and possibly before, until the moment we establish our own stable phonological system in our mother tongue, we learn to recognise and produce the distinctive sounds of our own language. As native speakers, we do not need to think about how to modulate our vocal tracts, or any of the other organs involved in speech, to produce sounds. This, however, might not be the case when speaking a foreign language.

1.2 Contrastive segments

Human languages in general use a rather small number of contrastive segments to construct words. These contrastive segments are called **phonemes**. The vowels /e/ and /a/, for instance, are phonemes of Spanish, as they differentiate meanings as in *peso* (weight) and *paso* (step); /p/ and /k/ are also phonemes of Spanish; *peso* vs. *queso* (cheese). Although Spanish orthography is quite phonemic as described above in Orthography (that is, a letter represents a phoneme), this is not always the case. The phoneme /k/, for example, has various orthographic representations; c– *casa* (house), qu– *queso*, k – *kilo*.

Spanish, English, German, Chinese and any other language may have segmental contrasts in their own systems that do not exist in other languages. The native speakers of those languages will have no difficulties producing or perceiving those distinctive sounds, while the native speakers of languages in which those contrasts do not exist, will encounter some difficulties. The words *eat* and *it* in English, for instance, are pronounced differently; [i:t] and [ɪt] respectively. /i:/ and /ɪ/ are in phonological opposition in English, while in Spanish there is no such opposition. Therefore, the Spanish speaker of English might have difficulty trying to make a difference between the two.

A further difficulty for language learners is that a given phoneme is not always realised in the same way. The actual pronunciation may depend on various factors such as the speed of speech, surrounding sounds, or the position in the word or syllable. Foreign language learners must be made aware of this variation in order to be able to perceive and pronounce the sounds of Spanish accurately.

Activity 1

Allow approximately 25 minutes.

Explain the pronunciation of the phoneme /d/ in Spanish

Answer

In word-initial position and after *n* and *l*, the phoneme /d/ is pronounced as a stop consonant [d]. In other word-medial positions, it is pronounced as an inter-dental approximant [ð], as in *hada* (fairy). Word-finally, it has many pronunciations depending mostly on the dialect of Spanish. It can be pronounced as a voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ] “*Madrid*”, or [t], or it can simply be deleted.

Listen to the phrase *the day* pronounced by a native speaker of Spanish. Does she pronounce the consonants correctly?

Audio content is not available in this format.

the day

Answer

No, she pronounces it [də ðej], that is, she swaps the two consonants around.

2 Pronunciation and context

The pronunciation of a phoneme might vary depending on where it occurs in the word. The phoneme /d/ in Spanish, for instance, is pronounced as a stop [d] in initial position and after *n* or *l*, while in other contexts, especially between vowels, it is pronounced as a voiced inter-dental approximant [ð]. Positional variants of a phoneme are called **allophones**.

A common source of pronunciation mistakes is the mismatch between the phonemic-allophonic status of speech segments between Spanish and English. While /d/ and /ð/ are two phonemes in English – as demonstrated by pairs of words (called minimal pairs) like day and they– they are allophones of the same phoneme in Spanish.

The acquisition of these differences might be complicated further by orthography. Let's take the graphs 'b' and 'v'. In English, the first will be pronounced [b] as in Bath and the second will be pronounced [v] as in veto. In this case, the correlation of these two graphs and their pronunciation is very stable in English. However, both these graphs will be pronounced [b] in Spanish when in absolute-initial position e.g. Barcelona, Valencia, but they will be pronounced [β] in other environments, especially between two vowels e.g. ave (bird), pensaba (I/he/she was thinking).

It seems logical to imagine that the average English speaker will not perceive this difference, especially because the sound [β] does not exist in English. It's likely that students will pronounce *Barcelona* [b] and *Valencia* [v], and *ave* [v] and *pensaba* [b]. This is further complicated by the fact that students will often perceive [β] as 'v', that is, it will be categorised as the phoneme /v/ rather than an allophone of the phoneme /b/. It is important that language teachers explain and correct these typical mistakes early on, before they become fossilised.

Some other graphical interference will occur, especially in cases related to vocalic sounds. The word *ve*to looks exactly the same in Spanish and English, but it is pronounced ['vi:təʊ] in English and ['beto] in Spanish. The vocalic sounds in Spanish and English will be analysed in more detail in [Week 4](#), and the role played by stress is discussed in [Week 3](#).

The pronunciation of sound segments may vary according to their position in the word, and neighbouring sounds. This variability is language-specific, e.g. the pronunciation of /b/ varies in Spanish, but is quite stable in English. It is also common for certain sound sequences to be possible in one language while they do not occur at all in another.

Activity 2

Allow approximately 25 minutes.

Do all geographical varieties of Spanish have the same number of phonemes? Try to justify your answer.

Answer

Most varieties of Spanish have one alveolar sibilant in their phoneme inventory; /s/, which can be represented by the letters 's' and 'z' and the combination 'ce' and 'ci', in words such as **salsa** (sauce), **centro** (centre), or **zapato** (shoe). In some varieties of Peninsular Spanish, the letter 's' will correspond to the phoneme /s/ realised as [s], while the letter 'z' and the combination 'ce' and 'ci' will represent the phoneme /θ/ and be pronounced as [θ]. The two segments are contrastive, as they form minimal pairs such as **casa** (house) and **caza** (hunt).

How do you think native speakers of Spanish would pronounce the English words *spray* and *stay*, and why?

Answer

They would probably pronounce them [espraj] and [estej] or [estaj]. Focusing on the initial consonant cluster, they would add an [e] sound before the initial s+consonant sequence because although all these consonants occur in Spanish, the sequences never occur in Spanish in word-initial position.

Reference: Hualde, José Ignacio. *The Sounds of Spanish*, 2005, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009, 8th ed., s.v. "Phonotactics" Chicago.

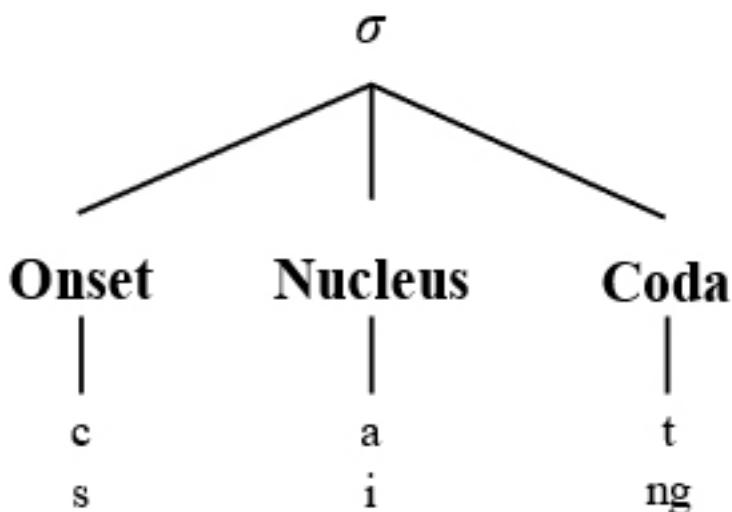
3 Phonotactic constraints

The Collins English Dictionary defines phonotactics as the study of the possible arrangement of the sounds of a language in the words of that language. Phonotactics is the branch of phonology that deals with the restrictions in a language on the allowed combinations of phonemes (contrastive sound segments). At its simplest, it is concerned with the freedoms and restrictions that languages allow in terms of syllable structure and sound sequences within a syllable, or the constituents of a syllable. Phonotactic constraints vary from language to language.

For example, the clusters /kn/ and /gn/ are not permitted at the beginning of a word in Modern English, but they are in German and they were permitted in Old and Middle English, hence the spelling of words such as *knight* and *gnome*. Spanish, on the other hand, does not allow s+consonant sequences at the beginning of a word, while these sequences were allowed in Latin (and are allowed in most modern Romance languages). For this reason, Spanish speakers will apply some kind of a “repair strategy” when confronted with such a sequence. Most frequently, they will “save” the cluster by attaching an e before it and pronouncing, for example, “*espray*”.

3.1 Syllable

A common source of mispronunciations are phonotactic constraints related to the syllable. Syllables are units of organisation for sequences of speech sounds. Syllabic writing dates to the third millennium BC, so several hundred years before the first letters. Syllables are considered by phonologists to have a hierarchical structure. They are made up of a syllable **nucleus** (generally a vowel) which can be preceded or followed by consonants. The preceding consonants are called syllable **onset**, and ones that follow form the **coda**. The behaviour of speech segments may vary according to their position in the syllable. Languages vary in their syllabic structure.



Syllable Source: [Gringer, Wikipedia](#)

3.2 English syllable

English allows the following monosyllabic words (words consisting of one syllable); the colon shows that the vowel is long:

Table 2 Syllable complexity in English

Word	Syllable shape	Description
See	CV:	simple onset, no coda
Seat	CV:C	simple onset, simple coda
Tree	CCV:	complex onset, no coda
Street	CCCV:C	very complex onset, simple coda
Treats	CCV:CC	complex onset, complex coda
Strengths	CCCVCCC	very complex onset, very complex coda

We can see that the maximum size of the onset in English is three consonants, as is the maximum size of the coda. It is relevant to examine the kinds of consonants that can occur in different positions; these examples show the privileged status that liquid consonants enjoy as the second element in onset clusters, and the privileges that are associated with /s/ as the “outermost” (furthest from the vowel) member of clusters, both in the onset and in the coda. Phonotactic knowledge is generally not conscious, it demands consistent awareness-raising. Many of the above combinations are not possible in Spanish and Spanish speakers will therefore have difficulties pronouncing them.

3.3 Spanish syllable

The syllable structure in Spanish is simpler, that is to say, Spanish allows fewer segments in the syllabic constituents than English does. However, many phonological processes – especially the weakening of consonants in syllable coda – are best described in the light of syllable structure.

A sequence of two consonants forms a syllable onset if the first consonant is a stop or /f/ and the second a liquid (in Latin these groups were known as *muta cum liquida*), e.g. *o-tro* (other), *Á-fri-ca* (Africa), and *car-ta* (letter), *al-to* (tall).

Spanish is quite restrictive with regard to codas. Very few consonants are common in the coda. These are the dental and alveolar consonants; *n*, *l*, *r*, *d*, and *z*, as in *ciu-dad* (city), *car-ta* (letter). Stops are much rarer and often simplified or weakened in colloquial speech, e.g. *ac-to* (act), *sig-no* (sign). In complex codas, the second consonant is always *s*, e.g. *trans-crip-ción* (transcription).

It is interesting to note that while words such as *vaho* [ba-o] (mist), *búho* [bu-o] (owl) – where two adjacent vowels belong to two different syllables – are fairly frequent in Spanish, they are very rare in English.

4 Barriers to pronunciation

When students try to speak a foreign language, they encounter certain barriers in doing so. These barriers may have a number of different origins, ranging from psychological or physical characteristics, to aspects mostly related to the different characteristics of the student's mother tongue. It is also worth noting that pronunciation is generally taught through the medium of written language, by asking students to read a text aloud. This is not really teaching pronunciation, although many teachers might believe it to be doing so. Reading aloud requires certain intonation skills that are not present in spontaneous speech and for this reason, in general, it is quite unproductive.

In what follows, a number of factors are listed that can affect language learners' pronunciation.

Age

There is a noticeable difference in good pronunciation in the target language depending on the learners' age. The younger learners are, the easier it is for them to achieve accurate pronunciation. It becomes increasingly difficult with age, as the brain's original plasticity diminishes. That said, this does not mean adult students should give up trying to improve their pronunciation. It just means they have to work harder. If you teach adult learners, be ready to plan and devote some of your class time to targeted pronunciation practice.

Phonological deafness

This is perhaps one of the most decisive barriers that a student can face when attempting the pronunciation of the foreign language. The listening/perception system of the learner of a foreign language is influenced by the selective habits acquired from childhood through the perception of the sounds in the mother tongue. When students hear the sounds of another language that does not exist, at least in a phonological opposition to other sounds, in their native tongue, they behave as if they had not heard them. Certain sounds might not be perceived, while others will be perceived wrongly. Students are not sensitive to the peculiarities of these "different" sounds and will tend to confuse them with sounds in their mother tongue that are close to the perceived ones in some way. Think of the phrase *the day* – mentioned earlier – and how it is perceived and pronounced by a native speaker of Spanish.

This "deafness" will create *Native Language Interference* in learning the target language. Students of different mother tongues have varying degrees of difficulty in learning proper pronunciation in Spanish. Students may have difficulties articulating certain sounds because:

- the given sound (phoneme or allophone) simply does not exist in their native language e.g. [x] as in *Jaén* is difficult for native speakers of English;
- there is no contrast between "similar" sound segments, so they are merged into one phoneme by the learner such as the vowels *eat* and *it* in English when spoken by native speakers of Spanish;

- both segments exist in both languages, but their phonemic status is different e.g. /d/ and /ð/ as in *the day*;
- the phoneme exists in both languages, but the actual phonetic realisation is different. For instance, the phoneme /p/ exists in both Spanish and English, but while in English it's a strongly aspirated sound, in Spanish there is no aspiration (see [Week 5](#)).

It is important to bear these factors in mind when preparing targeted pronunciation practice.

Insufficient input

Students who live in a Spanish-speaking environment are likely to acquire better pronunciation more quickly, because they are immersed in the language. However, not all students are immersed in a Spanish-speaking environment. The degree to which students are exposed to Spanish on a daily basis will determine how fast they will be able to improve their pronunciation. If you have students who do not have enough exposure to Spanish, encourage them to increase it, either by listening to authentic audio or socialising with Spanish-speaking locals.

No explicit instruction

One of the factors that may be affecting your students' ability to acquire proper pronunciation is quite simply that it is not being explicitly taught in the classroom and there is little room for correction. Reflect on your teaching practices. Do you correct pronunciation mistakes? Do you give specific pronunciation exercises that target certain phonemes or allophones? Be sure to devote some class time specifically to targeted and systematic pronunciation practice.

Learners' attitudes

Research consistently show that emotions are a very important aspect of language learning and can positively or negatively affect students' achievement in the production of a foreign language. Students with a positive attitude towards learning the target language learn faster. Similarly, students who are genuinely open-minded and interested in improving their pronunciation often do improve it.

There might be a number of reasons for students to aim for better pronunciation. They might simply want to fit in; they don't want to be discriminated against because they have a "funny" accent. Adult learners often need to speak clearly and effectively for professional reasons. If you have students who seem to lack motivation, try to identify the reasons for this and use their goals to help nurture their motivation and passion.

5 The role of affect

It has been long acknowledged that emotions play an important role in foreign language acquisition. Certain emotional factors can have a positive effect on students' oral production, like happiness, self-confidence, or high levels of self-esteem. Other emotions, such as anxiety, fear, or low levels of self-esteem, can become a real barrier for students' pronunciation in the target language. Therefore, it seems to be essential to make sure that students get to produce foreign speech and especially problematic sounds in the most positive environment possible and under the most positive conditions.

Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety can be defined as a mental and physical state characterized by specific emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioural symptoms. It is an adaptive reaction which mobilises a person's organism and helps it defend, attack, or avoid an anxiety-provoking stimulus.

Anxiety, when associated with learning a foreign language, is termed *Foreign Language Anxiety* (FLA), referring to learners' negative emotional reactions towards foreign language acquisition. FLA is generally viewed as a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon of self-perception, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to foreign language learning. In some cases, it can become a fairly stable characteristic trait, but most often, it's a temporary state, a situation-specific anxiety clearly linked to (inter)acting in a foreign language. Although a certain degree of anxiety can be helpful for high achievement, most professionals concur that it is mainly negative for learners. FLA is more of a psychological (identity-based) construct than a linguistic (competence-based) one. Strictly speaking, this means that extra-linguistic factors affect FLA more intensely than linguistic competence.

Most studies conclude that reading is the least anxiety-provoking activity in a foreign language, while speaking is the skill most affected by FLA. It is often perceived as a threat to people's self-identity and ego, which they have formed in their first language as reasonable and intelligent individuals.

Probably the most prominent concern is over foreign language pronunciation. Pronunciation is seen as the most salient aspect of the language ego and the most difficult aspect to acquire in a new language. It is strongly related to identity and the learner's level of self-confidence. Moreover, pronunciation plays a dominant role in the way communication partners see us.

6 Reducing levels of FLA

In practice, there is no one single approach to adopt in all situations. Several factors might play a key role in a learner's FLA. Therefore, it is important to understand what these factors are in each case before targeting the issue. Nevertheless, there are some general measures a language teacher can take to help students overcome anxiety when speaking the target language.

Detect and understand the fear

What exactly is the student afraid of? Is it fear of failure or fear of being negatively evaluated? You can ask students to reflect on how they feel when a Spanish person makes an effort to speak in English. Students might realise that people tend not to judge others negatively when they are making this kind of effort, so why should it be different in their case?

The desire for perfection

Some students will feel a compelling desire to achieve perfection while speaking in the target language. It seems advisable to make students understand that nobody starts speaking a foreign language fluently without first speaking a broken version of it. It is also very common for learners to aspire to native-like pronunciation. It is the teacher's task to help them set realistic goals and explain that the goal should be intelligibility and comprehensibility, rather than passing for a native speaker. It is important to make students aware of the fact that they may feel frustrated when they are making mistakes, but mistakes form part of the overall process of acquiring the language. Grammatical and vocabulary mistakes are perfectly normal, as is incorrect pronunciation.

Listening skills

When students are not used to conversing in a foreign language, their brain needs time to process the incoming words, understand them, think of a response and deliver it; not to mention endeavouring to produce the desired sound. All this requires significantly more thought and effort than conversing in their native language.

Are students struggling more with formulating their sentences or with understanding what is being said to them in response? Very often it is the latter, which then has an impact on the former.

- Learners can improve their listening skills by exposure to target language media. Depending on their level, they can listen to native speech. Familiarity with the topic under discussion is very helpful and reduces the cognitive burden.
- Shadow reading improves both listening and speaking skills.

Meaningful conversations

Insist on creating situations in which students will need to interact in the target language with their peers. Create a positive environment in the classroom, be it face-to-face or virtual, by promoting interaction in the target language among students. Let the classroom become a "country" in which the target language is the official language used.

Promote realistic conversational situations, but insist on the fact that if students speak slowly and clearly, this should encourage their conversational partner to speak slowly and clearly too, which will facilitate both understanding and production. Make students aware

that some native speakers they encounter will be more cooperative than others, some more understanding, some simply better at understanding foreign accents. This should not put them off. Make sure they understand this also happens to some degree when speaking their mother tongue.

When a group of native speakers get together, the conversation will usually speed up and become more difficult for non-native speakers to follow. This is normal. One-to-one conversations are easier, therefore, and one-to-one lessons are a way to ensure the student gets this experience, while also benefitting from input from an expert.

Many conversations will come up again and again in everyday life, for example, ordering food in a restaurant or drinks in a bar, shopping, asking for information etc. Most interactions stick to an established routine. Prepare your students to predict situations in which they will be using spoken Spanish. Learning these types of conversations helps build confidence and might be a way to experience interaction in the language. Tell students that when native speakers find out they are learning Spanish, they will probably be asked where they are from and why they are learning it. These conversations will help develop students' confidence, which supports them in moving on to broader topics.

In summary

You can decrease students' anxiety by creating situations in which the use and pronunciation of Spanish are part of the natural process of communication. Insist on the use of Spanish as a necessary tool to achieve communication. Make sure students do not over-estimate the "negative" outcome of making mistakes. Insist on the fact that mistakes are necessary to test their own speech in real situations and address them in order to achieve better results. Always be positive about their output and help them find ways to better pronounce the target language.

References

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ESL Stories, [blog]

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7 The verbo-tonal method

Many approaches have been proved effective as ways of teaching pronunciation. Among these are some that privilege the link established between the perception (or non-perception) of sounds and their production. One of these is the verbo-tonal method, also known as the SUGAV method, which was first created for the rehabilitation of people with severe communication problems. It was developed in the 1950s by Professor Petar Guberina, a Yugoslav linguist who was particularly interested in speech perception.

Guberina's research found that people with hearing impairments were unable to produce certain sounds in their mother language, not because they lacked the physical ability to produce them – their phonatory organs were unaffected – but because they could not hear them. Guberina argued that these people were suffering from deafness in the same way a speaker of another language suffers from phonological deafness when confronted with the phonemic system of the target language.

For example, if an English speaker is confronted with the Spanish word *pavo* (turkey) – a word, let's say, that the learner has never seen written down – and we ask the student to repeat it after the teacher, they will probably produce something like ['pavəʊ] or even ['pabəʊ] instead of ['paβo]. The reason for this is that the English phonological system does not contain the sound [β] and has a tendency to diphthongise the phoneme /o/ in word-final position.

The method is based on the conviction that language evolves from spoken language, so orthography is not taken into account, and that speech is a social event. Thus, the speaker is both a producer and perceiver of speech, which means that the auditory and visual information in students' production reflects how they perceive speech. If their perception changes, their speech will also change. If their speech is corrected, their perception has also been corrected.

How does it work?

- a. The teacher identifies the phonological origin of the student's error and determines the cause of the mistake.
- b. A mechanism of correction based on optimal pronunciation models is established.

In order to achieve correct pronunciation, the teacher will:

- build up the sentence gradually;
- use nuanced pronunciation;
- make use of allophones or coarticulation to find the best phonetic context for the acquisition of the given segment.

In nuanced pronunciation, the idea is to confront students with a model that is the opposite of the error, in other words, to offer a new “in-transition sound” that will gradually bring the students' mistaken pronunciation towards the target sound.

For example, the Spanish phrase *una botella de cava* should be pronounced ['unaβo 'teʎaðe'kaβa]. The learner will receive input where the sound [β] is not fully articulated; the articulation is relaxed by merely approaching the organs involved in its production to the place of articulation, but not fully articulating the sound. This is done in an attempt to make the learner “divest” the [b] or [v] sound of its English qualities, so that the realisation of this segment is brought towards a more native-like pronunciation.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio: [Una botella de cava](#)

8 Week 2 summary

You have now completed Week 2.

You should have:

- developed an understanding of the relationship between orthography and pronunciation
- developed a basic understanding of the differences between phonetics and phonology
- reflected on what can be the main barriers to pronunciation and the role of emotions in speaking and pronouncing a foreign language
- familiarised yourself with some methods of teaching pronunciation
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

Now get started with [Week 3](#).

Week 3 Stress, rhythm and intonation

Introduction

This week you will learn about the *suprasegmental* or *prosodic* features of speech and you will find out about the most important differences between Spanish and English prosody. Suprasegmental features are phonetic characteristics that apply to groups that are larger than a single segment, for example speech features that apply to a syllable, a word, a phrase or even a whole utterance. These are typically *stress*, *tone*, *rhythm* and *intonation*. As teachers of Spanish, we would like our students to have an understanding of these prosodic features and their functions too and not to limit their interest and knowledge to word meaning only. Students can start recognising and practicing the intonation patterns and rhythm of Spanish very early in their studies with little actual knowledge of the language.

By the end of this week you will have:

- developed an understanding of the importance of prosody in L2/FL acquisition
- considered the differences between stress, rhythm and intonation in Spanish and English
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

1 What is stress?

Stress is the relative prominence of a syllable in comparison with the other syllables in a given domain, typically a lexical word.

Phonetically speaking, stress is realised by changing the fundamental frequency (i.e. the pitch), the duration (i.e. the length) and the intensity (i.e. the volume) or any combination of these phonetic features. Thus stressed syllables receive greater prominence by means of pitch, duration and intensity. Research shows that in Spanish the most important correlate of word stress is pitch.

Functions of stress

Stress can have various linguistic functions. It helps group speech sounds into words. In languages like Spanish and English, stress has a *distinctive function*, that is, it differentiates word meanings: ESP *ánimo* 'mood', *animo* 'I encourage', *animó* 's/he encouraged'; ENG *record* (verb), *record* (noun). In other languages stress might have a *delimitative function*, e.g. in Hungarian or Czech it always falls on the first syllable of the word which helps listeners to segment running speech into words.

2 Comparing stress in Spanish and English

Stressed syllables receive greater prominence by means of pitch, duration and intensity. In some languages, including English, the prominence between stressed and unstressed syllables is further enhanced by reducing vowels (i.e. changing vowel quality) in unstressed syllables. In this way, the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is even more prominent. In Spanish, on the other hand, the difference in vowel quality between stressed and unstressed vowels is minimal. Think of the Spanish word *banana* and its English equivalent *banana*. Stress in both languages falls on the penultimate syllable, but in Spanish all three vowels are pronounced [a], while in English, the first and third vowels are reduced to a neutral vowel called the schwa, (the phonetic symbol for which is [ə]). Stress might also affect consonants, but again, in Spanish the effect of stress on consonants is minimal, while in English it is quite prominent. Think of the two t's in the English word *title* and the Spanish word *título*. In Spanish both t's are pronounced the same, while in English the first t (the one in the stressed syllable) is strongly aspirated, while the second tends to be pronounced as a glottal stop (a moment of closure).

Activity 1 The effect of stress in cognates

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Make a list of (10-12) cognate words like ENG potato – SP patata, and compare the position of the stress and what effect it has on the vowels and consonants in the word. Your list can be a good starting point for developing an activity in class, or you can ask your students to make such a list.

Answer

We compiled the following list:

ENG – SP
area – área
radio – radio
idea – idea
banana – banana
debate – debate

And in the following, stress falls on different syllables:

capital – capital
continent – continente
dragon – dragón
information – información
artist – artista

Stress and orthography

The orthographic accent mark should not be confused with stress, that is, prosodic prominence. The aim of the accent rules in Spanish is to unambiguously indicate the position of lexical stress in every Spanish word. It would be very straightforward if every word had an accent mark, however, it would not be a very economical system, so stress is marked only on those words that do not conform to the general pattern. The general pattern is to place stress on the penultimate syllable if the word ends in a vowel, *n* or *s* and to stress the final syllable if the word ends in a consonant other than *n* or *s*. In this course, we will not deal with orthographic stress in any further detail.

Ideas for exercises

1. Ask your students to find nouns and adjectives that don't follow the general pattern with regard to the position of stress (stress on the penultimate syllable of the word if it ends in a vowel, *n* or *s*; stress on the final syllable if the word ends in a consonant other than *n* or *s*).
2. Ask your students to make word lists with pairs of words which only differ in the place of the lexical stress (e.g. *bebe* vs. *bebé*).
3. At higher levels: What's the difference in the pronunciation and meaning of phrases like *él vino* vs. *el vino*? (Think of grammatical words vs. content words; words that are never stressed; you might consider here the use of personal pronouns in Spanish and English.)
4. Make a dictation of words with and without accent marks.

3 What is rhythm?

In order to give a very simple definition, we can say that rhythm in music is the arrangement of sounds as they move through time. It is no different in speech. By rhythm, we refer to the patterns of sounds and the auditory impressions these patterns produce. English and Spanish clearly differ in rhythm. It is generally claimed that Spanish is a *syllable-timed* language, while English is a *stress-timed* language. This means that in Spanish, the duration of syllables, independent of stress, is more or less constant, whereas in English the duration of intervals between stressed syllables, independent of the number of unstressed syllables in between, is more or less constant. This is also reflected in the poetic traditions of the two languages. Although there is phonetic truth in this classification, it's more of an auditory impression that the two languages produce, since the duration of a syllable also depends on the number of segments it is composed of and their intrinsic duration. Undoubtedly, Spanish has a strong tendency towards open syllables (syllables that finish in a vowel) and a less complex syllable structure than English. The lack of vowel reduction in Spanish also contributes to this perceived difference.

Why do Spaniards speak so fast?

Rhythm and tempo are not exactly the same thing. The rate of speech, or tempo, varies greatly depending on the context. In an informal register, we generally speak faster than in a formal one. If we are enthusiastic, we tend to speak faster than when we are sad. These extralinguistic factors influencing speech rate are present in all languages, for all speakers. If a student is slow and disfluent, native speakers might interpret this to mean she is sad or uninterested. It also seems that tempo is the main feature that determines fluency in a foreign language.

Why do most foreigners still think that Spaniards speak extremely fast? It seems to be the case that Spanish speakers pronounce more syllables per minute than English speakers. However, it also seems to be true that they don't really convey more information. Think of the English word *strengthens*, it is just two syllables: streng.thens, whereas its Spanish equivalent consists of four: for.ta.le.ce.

Other factors that contribute to the perception of accelerated speech rate are the so-called connected speech phenomena like resyllabification and syllable contraction (discussed in [Week 4](#)) that are characteristic features of Spanish.

Ideas for exercises

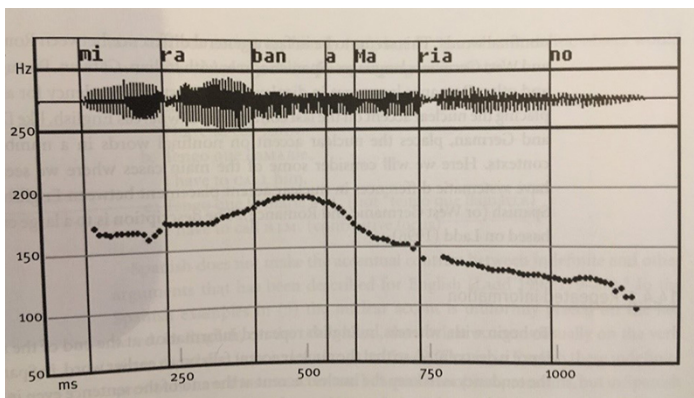
Shadow reading is a very efficient way to practice prosodic features in Spanish (and any other foreign language).

4 What is intonation?

Pitch variation is caused by the rise and fall of the voice when we speak. Phonetically speaking, pitch is determined by the rate of vibration of the vocal folds; the faster they vibrate, the higher the pitch. In all languages, pitch variation is used for linguistic purposes. In many languages (e.g. Chinese, Vietnamese) pitch is used to differentiate words or grammatical meaning. For instance, in Mandarin Chinese, *ma* pronounced in a high tone means mother, while if it is pronounced in a circumflex tone (high-low-high) it means horse. These are examples of *tone languages*. Pitch in Spanish and English does not differentiate word meanings, it is employed to convey discourse-related meanings. That is, different pitch contours specify different types of utterances (e.g. question vs. statement) and are spread over the whole utterance, whether it be short or long. Such a use of pitch is called *intonation*. Intonation – generally in combination with tempo – is also used to express emotions. The expression of emotions also varies between cultures, and it is worth practising, or at least practising interpreting our interlocutors' emotions. In this course, we will focus on the pragmatic meanings of intonation only.

4.1 Basic intonation patterns in Spanish

In both Spanish and English, there are two main turning points or signposts for the realisation of intonation: lexically stressed syllables and ends of phrases. Tonal contours associated with stressed syllables are known as *pitch accents*. In Spanish, in neutral declarative sentences, the last pitch accent is generally perceived as having greater prominence than the preceding accents, despite the fact that it normally has a smaller actual rise in pitch. Linguists call this pitch accent the *nuclear accent* of the phrase (indicated by small capitals in the examples below), and the other pitch accents of the phrase are called *prenuclear accents*.



Miraban a Mariano (They were watching Mariano). An example of a declarative with falling nuclear accent. Notice the displacement of the prenuclear peak to the posttonic. (Hualde, 2005: 257)

Simple declarative sentences in Spanish and English have a falling contour overall. In Spanish they have a fairly low pitch until the first stressed syllable where it rises rapidly, in English this rise is less abrupt.

As mentioned above, intonation may convey affection and other contextual meanings, therefore, the same sentence may be pronounced with a huge variation in intonation

contours depending on the circumstances of the conversation. For example, intonation will vary when expressing incredulity versus certainty. Here we focus only on the main sentence types.

4.2 Interrogative sentences

The intonation contour of questions in Spanish, in general, moves in a wider pitch range than that of declarative sentences. Two main types of questions are distinguished: (i) yes-or-no questions and (ii) question-word questions.

Neutral question-word questions in Spanish have a falling contour similar to that of declarative sentences, with the highest point on the question word. If the question is not completely neutral e.g. there is an added pragmatic meaning such as politeness or insistence, the intonation contour might be different. In English, typically, there is a rising intonation on the question word and a falling intonation at the end of the question.

As for yes-or-no questions in Spanish, unlike in English, intonation may be the only linguistic feature that differentiates them from statements. These questions in most Spanish varieties have a final rise from a low point on the last stressed syllable.

Not only is there considerable variation in intonation across different contexts, but also across different regions of the Spanish-speaking world.

Activity 2

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Visit the webpage *Atlas interactivo de la entonación del español* (link below). What is the example sentence for the exclamative sentence produced by a speaker from Bogotá?

This tool is very useful if you want to illustrate a teaching point or just check the intonation of different sentence types in different places. You can search by region, sentence type (e.g. declarative sentence, wh-question, etc.) and choose a neutral or marked sentence. <http://prosodia.upf.edu/atlasentonacion/>

Answer

Entonación declarativa > De tipo no neutro > Exclamativa

¡Ay! ¡Qué delicioso olor a pan, don José!

5 Contrasting Spanish and English: placement of nuclear stress

Spanish has a very strong tendency to put the nuclear accent on the last content word of the intonational phrase (remember that nuclear accent is not the highest point in the intonation contour), while in English it can appear on nonfinal words in many cases. Also, it is this final position in the sentence where new information is typically placed in Spanish. (What follows is based on Hualde 2005, pp. 257-260.)

It is important to make students aware of this syntactic characteristic of Spanish. Look at the following short dialogues and try to translate them into English.

- ¿Quién viene mañana?
- Mañana viene mi herMAno.
- ¿Cuándo viene tu hermano?
- Mi hermano viene maÑAna.

In cases where the whole proposition conveys new information (so it could be the answer to the question *what happened?*), other morphosyntactic rules will determine word-order (these fall outside the scope of this course).

- ¿Qué ha pasado?
- Ha llegado el tren. (verb-subject)
- ¿Qué ha pasado?
- La enfermera salvó al paciente. (subject-verb-object)
- ¿Qué pasa?
- Me encanta el chocolate. (indirect object-verb-subject)

In the following sections, you will see several contexts where English and Spanish differ in the placement of nuclear accent.

5.1 Repeated information

In English, repeated information at the end of a sentence is generally deaccented, thus nuclear accent falls on an earlier word in the sentence. In Spanish, nuclear accent is normally kept at the end of the intonational phrase, even if it falls on noninformative words that constitute repeated information.

ENG *You want your coffee with **S**ugar or with**OUT** sugar?*

SP *¿El café lo quieres con a**ZÚ**car o sin a**ZÚ**car?*

Similarly, where the prefix is the object of correction and everything else is repeated, the nuclear accent is placed on that syllable in English.

*It is not an **I**mport business, it is an **E**Xport business.*

Whereas in Spanish, it is common to keep the accent on the lexically stressed syllable.

*No es un negocio de importa**CIÓN**, es un negocio de exporta**CIÓN**.*

5.2 Indefinite objects

In English, indefinite object pronouns are usually deaccented and pitch accent is placed on the verb.

I KNOW someone.

I SAW something.

Whereas in Spanish, pitch accent is kept on the final content word, in this case the indefinite pronoun.

Conozco a ALguien.

He visto ALgo.

5.3 Intransitive sentences

In simple neutral intransitive sentences, where the whole sentence is new information (remember, it can answer the question: *what happened?*), there is a preference in English to place the nuclear accent on the subject, rather than on the verb.

The SUN came out.

The maCHINE broke.

In Spanish, on the other hand, the unmarked word-order in many cases is to put the subject in postverbal position, which by virtue of its place in the sentence, will bear the nuclear accent.

Ha salido el SOL.

Se ha roto la MÁquina.

5.4 Contrastive focus

Contrastive focus (also called *narrow focus*) refers to the information that is contrary to the presuppositions of the interlocutor. For example, in the questions, *Your dad helped you with the work, didn't he?* or *Did your dad help you with the work?*, the presupposition is that it was our interlocutor's father who helped. If the answer contradicts this presupposition, the new information is a contrastive focus and nuclear accent will be placed on it (indicated by capitals).

No, my BROther helped me.

In Spanish, the word order is changed in such a way that the expression with contrastive focus is in final position, since this is a special case of new information.

No, me ha ayudado mi herMANO.

Quien me ha ayudado ha sido mi herMANO.

Activity 3

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Listen to this student talking and reflect on her rhythm and intonation. Give her some constructive feedback.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Feedback: Student 1

Answer

This is a possible answer, but you might notice other features that you would like to point out.

The student's intonation is good, in general. She has quite big jumps in pitch on some stressed vowels (the first mention of *mejsAje*; *gEnte*; *famllia*). Perhaps these modulations are affected by exposure to a specific variety of Spanish, not just interference from the intonation of her mother tongue.

Ideas for exercises

1. "Read" the following sentences just by humming them, that is, without pronouncing the words, and ask your students first to describe the intonation pattern (e.g. rising slowly/abruptly, falling, etc.).
Then read the sentences and ask them to identify the meaning added by intonation.
 1. Hay un ratón en la despensa. (neutral declarative sentence)
 2. ¿Hay un ratón en la despensa? (neutral yes-or-no question)
 3. ¿Hay un ratón en la despensa? (rhetorical question when blaming the interlocutor)
 4. Hay: un ratón en la despensa, ... (truncated enumeration)
2. At higher levels: what's the difference in meaning between ¿Quieres café (↗) o té (↘)? or ¿Quieres café o té (↘↗)? (Choose one of the two vs. a general offer of something to drink).

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Gil, Juana (ed.) *Aproximación a la enseñanza de la pronunciación en el aula de español*, 2012, Edinumen.

Hualde, José Ignacio. *The Sounds of Spanish*, 2005, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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6 Week 3 summary

Well done on completing Week 3. You should now have:

- developed an understanding of the importance of prosody in L2/FL acquisition
- considered the differences between stress, rhythm and intonation in Spanish and English
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

Now get started with [Week 4](#).

Week 4 Spanish and English vowels contrasted

Introduction

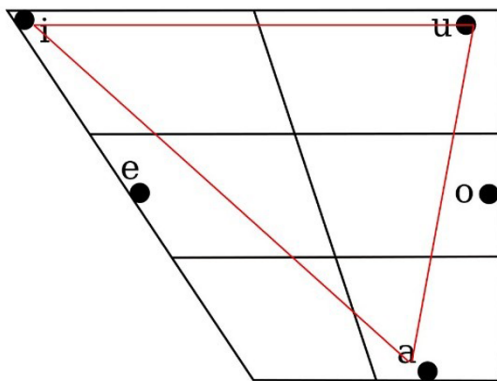
This week we will discuss the difficulties of learning Spanish vowels. The question of connected speech phenomena will also be addressed.

By the end of this week you will have:

- deepened your understanding of the opposition between orthography and pronunciation
- reflected on the main differences between vocalic sounds in Spanish and English
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

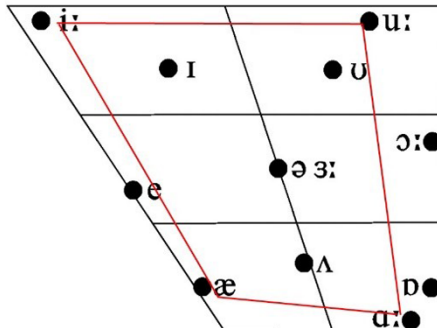
1 Spanish and English vowel spaces

Spanish has a simple and symmetrical vowel system consisting of five vowels. The most common vowel systems in all languages have five vowels and, among these, symmetrical systems, like Spanish, constitute the majority. If we arrange Spanish vowels according to their place of articulation, we get a triangle shape.



Spanish vowels Adapted from Ladefoged and Johnson (2010: 227)

The English vowel system is more complex and has more of a quadrilateral shape, as there is a front-back contrast between low vowels as well.



British English vowels (Received Pronunciation) Adapted from Roach (2004: 242)

It is evident at first sight that unlike Spanish, vowel length (coupled with a varying degree of difference in vowel quality) is a distinctive phonological feature in English. In Spanish, on the other hand, sequences of identical vowels are allowed e.g. *lee* (s/he reads) and *azahar* (orange flower).

It is also noteworthy that although English has more than twice as many vowels as Spanish, no English vowel exactly corresponds to any Spanish vowel. Actually, even in cases when we use the same phonetic symbol for vowels in different languages, it's unlikely that they sound exactly the same. A further difference is that while Spanish vowels are fairly consistent across the Spanish-speaking world, there are considerable differences in the pronunciation of vowels among English varieties, even within the United Kingdom.

Ideas for exercises

Analyse the difference between the following quadruplet: *pase* – *pasé* – *pasee* – *paseé*.

Depending on the level, you can ask your students to find word pairs that differ only in the identical vowel sequence or lack of it, such as *pasé* – *paseé*.

2 Spanish vowels one-by-one

- The high front vowel /i/ is higher, more closed, than English /ɪ/ (*bit*), but shorter than English /i:/ (*beat*) and non-diphthongal. While English /i:/ starts a bit lower and then glides up, Spanish /i/ is invariant.
- The high back vowel /u/ is also short and non-diphthongal just like /i/ and is more back, i.e. articulated with a more retracted tongue than its English counterparts, the lower short /ʊ/ (*foot*) and the long, slightly diphthongal /u:/ (*food*).
- The mid front vowel /e/ is a bit higher and longer than the English vowel /e/ as in *bet*. Spanish /e/ can occur in open syllables (syllables with no coda consonant) *in-te-re-san-teas* as well as in closed syllables *ver* (see) and *cen-tro* (centre), while the phonotactic rules of English only allow the diphthong /eɪ/ in open syllables as in *May*. /e/ is banned in this position, it can occur in closed syllables only (/eɪ/ can occur in closed syllables as well, e.g. *made*).

This is a common source of pronunciation mistakes for English learners of Spanish. The well-known English phrase *No way, José* will definitely not rhyme if the word *José* is pronounced correctly in Spanish. In fact, if a learner pronounces a glide in open syllables, it becomes the Spanish diphthong /ej/, so *pena* (pain) might sound like *peina* (s/he combs), while *le* (to him/her) might sound like *ley* (law), although the Spanish diphthong has a slightly longer glide element.

For higher levels: /e/ in contact with the trill *r* and /x/ as in *perro* (dog) and *lejos* (far) is more open than in other contexts.

- The contrast between English and Spanish mid back vowels is similar. Spanish /o/ is higher than the vowel in *dog* and it can occur in both closed and open syllables, while in English only the diphthong /əʊ/ as in *go*, is allowed in open syllables.
- The Spanish vowel /a/ is at about the same distance from three RP vowels; the front low /æ/ as in *cat*, the mid-low /ʌ/ as in *cut* and the low back /ɑ:/ as in *cart*. It's not surprising that Spanish learners of English find it difficult to distinguish these vowels and that English learners of Spanish find it hard to achieve the correct pronunciation.

A characteristic feature of all five Spanish vowels is that they are more or less stable all the way through their production and across their position within the word. We have seen in [Week 3](#) that Spanish vowels are not reduced in unstressed position either.

Some problems might relate to the visual interference in case of cognate words (see [Week 2](#)). In these cases the pronunciation of the English vowels can be carried over into Spanish. For example, *mission* ['mɪʃ(ə)n] vs. *misión* [mi 'sion]. Note that all the vowels are pronounced differently.

For higher levels: In some varieties of south-eastern Spain (mostly spoken in and close to the province of Granada), most vowels have a more open allophone as well. The difference between the two allophones is significant in the case of the mid vowels /e/ and /o/. The phenomenon is called *desdoblamiento vocálico* and was first described by Navarro Tomás (1939). In these varieties, word-final /s/ is generally deleted, however, before these silent s's the open allophones appear and thus the morphological meaning of /s/ (e.g. plural, or verb ending) is not lost; *coche* ['kotʃe] (car) vs. *coches* ['kotʃɛ] (cars).

Ideas for exercises

You might find the recordings on *The mimic method* webpage useful for practising the pronunciation of vowels.

<https://www.mimicmethod.com/spanish-pronunciation-ultimate-guide/>

References

Hualde, José Ignacio. *The Sounds of Spanish*, 2005, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ladefoged, Peter and Johnson, Keith. *A Course in Phonetics*. (6th ed.), 2010, Boston, Massachusetts: Wadsworth Publishing.

Maddieson, Ian. *Patterns of Sounds*, 1984, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Paperback reprint 2009.

Navarro Tomás, Tomás. "Desdoblamiento de fonemas vocálicos", 1939, *Revista de Filología Hispánica* Vol. 1: 165-7.

Roach, Peter, "British English: Received Pronunciation", 2004, *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* Vol. 34(2): 239-245.

3 Diphthongs and triphthongs

As in English, two vocalic segments in Spanish can form a single syllable. It sounds as if the vowels were pronounced rapidly, cuatro, ['kwa.tro] (four) with one of the elements actually losing its full vowel status. In Spanish, even three vowels can form a single syllable; these are called triphthongs, e.g. cambiáis [kam.'bja:is] (you-pl. change). Most words in Spanish containing a triphthong are verbs in second person plural vosotros (this form only exists in the Peninsular Spanish variety).

Rules of syllabification

A diphthong (or triphthong) is formed when an unstressed high vowel is adjacent to another vowel (generally a mid or low vowel). In these cases, the high vowel loses its syllabic status and a so-called 'glide' is formed. Sequences which rise in aperture (glide + vowel) are called **rising diphthongs**, while vowel + glide sequences are called **falling diphthongs**.

The rising diphthongs of Spanish are /ɷa, ɷe, ɷo, iə, ie, io/, as in pascua (Easter), muela (tooth), cuota (share), historia (history), piel (skin), limpio (clean).

The falling diphthongs of Spanish are /ai, ei, oi, aɷ, eɷ, (ou)/, paisaje (landscape), rey (king), boina (beret), flauta (flute), Europa (Europe). Note that when the glide is word-final, it is generally spelt 'y'. Some transcriptions use /j/ rather than /i/.

A homogenous diphthong is created when two different high vowels come together as in viudo (widower) and cuidado (care). They are generally pronounced as rising diphthongs.

4 Connected speech phenomena

It was mentioned in [Week 3](#) that connected speech phenomena contribute to the perception that Spaniards speak very fast. Resyllabification and syllable contraction are the most important of these.

Resyllabification

Resyllabification is a phonological process in which consonants are attached to syllables other than those they originally come from. It involves adjustments of syllable structure across morpheme or word boundaries, and is common in Romance languages. So in Spanish, unlike in English, a word-final consonant is normally resyllabified together with the following word-initial vowel, so *mis amigos* (my friends) is syllabified as mi.sa.mi.gos. This makes it difficult for students to parse the individual words and gives the impression that Spaniards speak so fast that they merge words. Thus, the two phrases *tienes alas* (you have wings) and *tiene salas* (s/he has rooms) sound the same in connected speech. Although there are not many ambiguous phrases like these, when they encounter them, students might have the impression that spoken Spanish cannot be segmented into words. Being aware of resyllabification will improve students' spoken language comprehension. To raise awareness, a parallel can be drawn between linking-r (or even intrusive-r) in British English. The word *car* is pronounced as [kɑ:] in isolation, but in a phrase where it is followed by a vowel-initial word like *car is*, an *r* is also pronounced and syllabified with the next word [kɑ:. ɪz]. The phenomenon is attested even in phrases where no orthographic *r* is present, so when a word ends in /ə/, /ɪə/, /ɑ:/, or /ɔ:/ and the next starts with a vowel, an *r* appears; *India (r) and*.

Syllable contractions

In connected speech, it is very common that sequences of unstressed vowels (especially if one of them is an *i* or a *u*) are grouped into a single syllable across word boundaries (in Spanish, this is known as *sinalefa*) and a diphthong is formed; *mi amigo* [mja.'mi.ɣo], *tu abuelo* (your grandfather) [tʷa.'βue.lo].

Frequently, sequences of identical vowels are reduced to a single vowel; *de Elena* (from Elena) [de.'le.na], *estaba allí* (I/he was there) [es.ta.βa.'ji], and also within a word; alcohol [al.'kol]. These contractions can even affect three vowels *va a ayudar* (s/he will help) [ba.ju.'ðar].

Ideas for exercises

1. Ask your students to listen to a recording (or a recording with text) appropriate for their level and find any resyllabifications or syllable contractions.
2. At higher levels: Find a poem that contains syllable contractions (*sinalefa*) and ask students to count the number of syllables, show where contraction occurs, and then read the poem aloud. For example:

José de Espronceda: *La canción del pirata*

Con diez cañones por banda (8 syllables)
viento en popa a toda vela (8)
no corta el mar, sino vuela (8)
un velero bergantín; (7, but as it ends in a stressed vowel, in verse it counts as 8)
baja el pirata que llaman (8)
por su bravura el Temido (8)
en todo el mar conocido (8)
del uno al otro confín (7, but as it ends in a stressed vowel, in verse it counts as 8)

Activity 1

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Listen to this recording and give the student feedback on the pronunciation of her vowels in Spanish. Disregard any other language errors.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Feedback: [Student 2](#)

Answer

This is a possible answer. You might want to point out other pronunciation features.

We can claim that the student has assimilated the main rules regarding the pronunciation of vocalic sounds in Spanish. She doesn't pronounce English diphthongs in final position.

[a], [e], [i] and [o] are pronounced following the Spanish patterns and this is especially noticeable when the student clearly differentiates between the [a] and [i] in /amiga/ [a 'miɣa] and the [ɑ:] and [ɪ] in /Cardiff/ ['kɑ:dɪf].

[u] is pronounced somewhat front (*estudia*), which shows clear interference from English.

There seems to be an influence from another foreign language as well – probably French – as *enis* pronounced with a lower nasal vowel as in French. This should definitely be pointed out early so that it does not become a fossilised error.

5 Week 4 summary

Now that you have completed Week 4, you should have

- deepened your understanding of the opposition between orthography and pronunciation
- reflected on the main differences between vocalic sounds in Spanish and English
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

Get started with [Week 5](#).

Week 5 Spanish and English consonants contrasted

Introduction

By the end of this week you will have:

- deepened your understanding of the opposition between the orthography and pronunciation of consonants
- developed an understanding of the differences between consonantal sounds in Spanish and English
- reflected on the main difficulties in pronunciation for English speakers
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

As any English speaker in the process of learning Spanish might have noticed, there are many differences between the consonantal sounds of the two languages. It is obvious at first sight that there are many sounds in English that do not exist in Spanish. The opposite is also true. Certain segments of the Spanish phoneme inventory might not have an exact counterpart in English. In the following sections, we discuss each group of consonants and highlight the differences and potential difficulties.

1 Stops (oclusivas)

Both Spanish and English have two series of stops (also known as plosives); voiceless stops /p t k/ and voiced stops /b d g/. However, the actual phonetic realisation of these consonants is very different in the two languages.

- Spanish voiceless stops are realised without aspiration. The difference is very noticeable in utterance-initial position.
- Spanish voiced stops are often realised as approximants.

1.1 What is aspiration?

When a voiceless stop and a following vowel (or liquid consonant) are pronounced in Spanish, during the closure of the stop there is no vocal fold vibration. The vowel on the other hand, is fully voiced. This means that the release of the oral occlusion must be coordinated with the activity of the vocal folds, so the onset of voicing starts at the moment of the release, or very shortly after it. In English, however, there is a considerable “gap” between the release of the occlusion and the start of vocal fold vibration. The result is a voiceless aspirated stop, so we hear a small [h] sound between the release of the stop and the vowel. This allophone is typical in utterance-initial position unless the voiceless stop is preceded by an /s/ as in *spill*, *still*. In these cases, there is no aspiration in English either. So the closest production of the Spanish voiceless stop will occur in English words such as *spill*, *spot*, *still*, but without the [s].

Note that Spanish /t d/ are more front than their English counterparts.

1.2 Voicing in /b d g/

English voiced stops might be realised without much actual voicing during the occlusion phase of the consonant, while the Spanish voiced stops show vocal fold vibration during the whole of the occlusion. Linguists call languages like Spanish, French, Hungarian and Russian “true voice languages”. Languages like English, German, Dutch, etc. are called “aspirating languages”.

A notable characteristic of Spanish voiced stops is that very frequently – mostly in intervocalic position – they are realised as approximants rather than stops; [β ð ɣ]. This means that the articulators approximate each other, but there is no actual closure e. g. *la barra* (the bar), *a dedo* (by finger) *agua* (water). These types of allophonic differences are very difficult for foreign students to master. Very often, native speakers are not aware of the varying pronunciations of a phoneme either. Note that in utterance-initial position as well as after a nasal – and in the case of /d/ after /l/ too – a voiced stop is pronounced; *ambos* (both), *aldea* (village), *un guante* (a glove)

1.3 Word-final stops

Word-finally, the only stop that occurs in Spanish words is /d/ e.g. *Madrid*. It is normally pronounced as an interdental fricative [ð], or simply deleted if the word is more than one syllable long “*Madri*”.

For higher levels: in Northern Peninsular Spanish it is pronounced voiceless [θ]!Warning!
Tahoma not supported

“*Madriz*”; in Catalonia and some areas of Spanish America, it is pronounced [t] “*Madrit*”.

All the other stops occur in borrowings only and their pronunciation is word-specific. The English word *pub*, for instance, is normally pronounced [paf], *clubis* [kluβ] or [klu].

For higher levels: word-internal syllable-final codas in Spanish are not too common and their pronunciation varies. The word *doctor*, for instance, can be pronounced [dok'tor] or [dox'tor], [doy'tor]. In some dialects it might appear as a long *t*. In most dialects in colloquial speech, stops in this context are simply deleted. In other dialects they might be reduced to a velar realisation.

1.4 Spanish stops

Table 1 Spanish stops

Phoneme	Allophone	Orthography	Articulation	Context
/p/	[p]	p	voiceless bilabial stop	all
/t/	[t]	t	voiceless dental stop	all
/k/	[k]	ca/o/u, qu, k	voiceless velar stop	all
/b/	[b]	b, v, (w)	voiced bilabial stop	initial position (after pause), after nasal
	[β]	b, v, w	voiced bilabial approximant	elsewhere
/d/	[d]	d	voiced dental stop	initial position, after nasal and liquid
	[ð]	d	voiced interdental approximant	elsewhere
/g/	[g]	ga/o/u, gue, gui	voiced velar stop	initial position, after nasal
	[ɣ]	ga/o/u, gue, gui	voiced velar approximant	elsewhere

Ideas for exercises

Depending on the level of your students, take a few sentences (or phrases) and ask your students to underline those occurrences of /b d g/ that are realised as approximants. For example, find all the [ɣ]'s in

Gabriela le ha comprado unos guantes ingleses a Miguel.

Or, which allophones of /d/ occur in this sentence?

Dora y Tadeo han tenido un día tremendo.

2 Fricatives (fricativas)

Both the number of fricative phonemes as well as their actual realisation vary across the dialects of Spanish. Unlike English, Spanish has only one voiced fricative /j/ as in *yo* (I), *mayo* (May). According to some phonologists, it is an approximant rather than a fricative. Peninsular Spanish (except for some Southern dialects) has four voiceless fricative phonemes; /f θ s x/ as in *fuego* (fire), *zapato* (shoe), *sopa* (soup) and *jabón* (soap). In the rest of the varieties of Spanish /θ/ and /s/ are merged into a single phoneme /s/. While the realisation of Spanish /f/ does not pose a problem for English-speaking students, the other voiceless fricatives can be challenging.

2.1 Sibilants

/θ/ and /s/ are called sibilant fricatives because of the hissing noise that characterises them. Although they are contrastive in some varieties of Spanish, distinguishing words like *casa* (house) – *caza* (hunt) and *sien* (temple) – *cien* (hundred), it is not worth insisting that learners of Spanish also make the distinction as most of the Spanish-speaking world doesn't either. Where the distinction is made, the actual pronunciation of /s/ is something like the English 'sh' sound (*she*), while in most other areas it is very similar to an English 's' (*see*).

In much of the Hispanic world, /s/ in syllable coda weakens and is pronounced as an [h] sound or simply deleted; *esto*[ehto] (this). In many places this is more characteristic of colloquial speech than formal speech. Areas where /s/-weakening is absent are the north of Spain, the highlands of Central America and the Andean region.

In those varieties where /s/ in syllable coda is preserved, it often assimilates in voice to the following voiced consonant. This happens within the word: *mismo* ['mizmo] (same), *esbelto* [ez'βelto] (thin) and across a word-boundary: *los niños* [loz'ninos] (the children). Note that [z] in these cases might be less "strong" and less voiced than zed in English. Vowels, although they are fully voiced, do not trigger voicing assimilation except in Spanish in Catalonia and some varieties of Ecuadorian Spanish.

Ideas for exercises

Make a list of words or phrases (e.g. *eslogan*, *pasta*, *las hermanas*, etc.) and ask your students to indicate the s's that might be voiced. Depending on the level of your students, you might include words that are spelt with x and are voiced in English like *exacto*.

2.2 The voiced fricative

The voiced palatal fricative /j/ such as in *mayo* has quite a variable pronunciation across dialects and contexts. It can be a very soft glide [j], or in utterance-initial position or after a nasal or lateral it can become a strong affricate-like sound, something similar to English [dʒ] as in *joke*, but more palatal.

Note that orthographic *ll* as in *calle* (street) is pronounced in the same way in most of the Spanish-speaking world. In some areas e.g. Paraguay and Catalonia, a lateral palatal sound is preserved [ʎ].

In the area of Rio de la Plata (Argentina and Uruguay), it is pronounced [ʒ] as in the middle of *pleasure*, or [ʃ] *she*.

2.3 The affricate

Spanish has only one affricate phoneme; [tʃ] *chocolate*, *hacha* (axe). It is more front, (more alveolar) than in English. In some varieties (parts of Chile, parts of Andalusia) it is replaced by [ʃ] (*shoe*).

2.4 Spanish fricatives

Table 2 Spanish fricatives

Phoneme	Allophone	Orthography	Articulation	Context
/f/	[f]	f	voiceless labiodental fricative	all
/θ/	[θ]	z, ce, ci	voiceless dental fricative	all – in Central and Northern Peninsular Spanish only
/s/	[s]	s, in most dialects also z, ce, ci	partially voiced	before voiced consonants (<i>hazme</i>)
			voiceless alveolar fricative (might be apical, dorsal, dental, etc.)	all except voiced consonant
/x/	[z]	s, in most dialects also z, ce, ci	Voiced alveolar fricative	before voiced consonants
	[x]	j, ge, gi (x in archaically spelt words like <i>México</i> , <i>Texas</i>)	voiceless velar fricative	all
	[χ]		voiceless uvular fricative	in Northern Peninsular Spanish, especially before back vowel (<i>joven</i>)
	[h]		voiceless glottal fricative	in vast areas of America and Southern Spain
/j/	[j] or [i]	y (ll)	voiced palatal fricative	all
	[ɟ] or [dʒ]		voiced palatal affricate	utterance-initially and after a nasal or a lateral

3 Nasal (nasales)

Spanish has three nasal phonemes:

- The bilabial nasal /m/ [m] *mama* (mum), *cama* (bed)
- The alveolar nasal /n/ [n] *no* (no), *cana* (grey hair)
- The palatal nasal /ɲ/ [ɲ] *ñandú* (rhea), *caña* (cane)

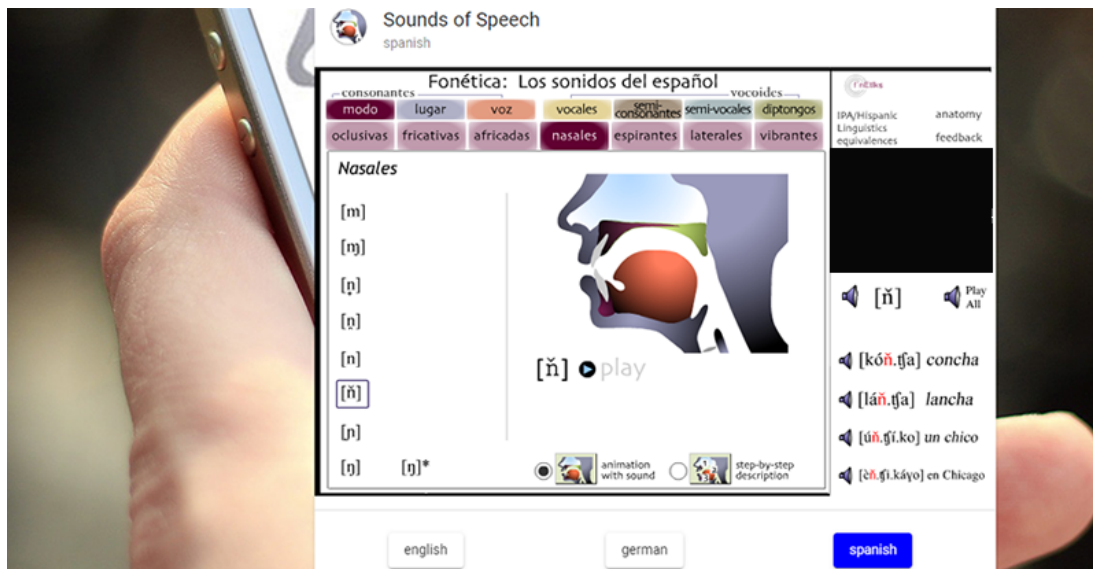
English does not have a palatal nasal. It is commonly compared to the intervocalic sound in words like *onion* and *canyon*. Native speakers of English generally need a fair amount of practice before they master “la eñe”.

The distribution of nasals, however, is somewhat deficient in Spanish. In word-final position only the alveolar nasal is present. So borrowings that end in /ɲ/ or /m/ are generally adopted into Spanish with a final *n*, e.g. Adam -> *Adán*, champagne -> *champán*. In some varieties in Western Spain and in the Caribbean, word-final *nis* pronounced velar [ŋ], the sound at the end of *singing*.

3.1 Nasal assimilation

Nasals in pre-consonantal position, that is in syllable-coda (both within the word and across word-boundary), assimilate to the place of articulation of the following consonant.

- A nasal before a bilabial sound /p/ or /b/ is pronounced bilabial [m]; *ambos* (both), *u* [m] *beso* (a kiss). It's worth pointing out that the orthographic sequence -nv- also represents phonetic [mb] as in *convertir* [komber'tir], *invitar* [imbi'tar].
- Before labiodental *f*, the nasal becomes labiodental [ɱ] *énfasis* (emphasis).
- Before dentals, the nasal is pronounced dental [ɳ], *cantar* (to sing). It sounds very similar to alveolar *n*, but the tip of the tongue touches the back of the front teeth, just like when pronouncing [t] or [d].
- Before palato-alveolars and palatals, the nasal is palatalised [ɲ]; *ancho* (wide), *cónyuge* (spouse). Note that it is not identical to the palatal nasal ñ. (On the *Sounds of Speech* site, this nasal is represented as [ɲ̃]).
- Before velars, we pronounce a velar nasal; [ŋ] – *manga* (sleeve), *ángel* (angel).



Preconsonantal nasal allophones. Source: Sounds of Speech
<https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/main/spanish>

4 Liquids (líquidas)

As mentioned in [Week 2](#), linguists classify two groups of consonants as liquids: laterals and rhotics. Most Spanish dialects have a single lateral sound /l/, spelt 'l'. Spanish /l/ is always the so-called “clear l”, that is, articulated with the tip of the tongue touching the alveolar region, similar to English /l/ in words like *lid*, *lap*. The Spanish lateral might be difficult for some English learners, especially when it occurs in syllable coda, e.

g. *alto* (tall), *mal* (bad), since in English in this context a “dark l”, phonetically speaking a velarised l, is pronounced. /l/ in Spanish assimilates to the consonant that follows it.

For higher levels: A few varieties of Spanish have a second lateral phoneme; a voiced palatal lateral /ʎ/ spelt 'll' as in *calle*. It is similar to the sound in Italian that is spelt *gli*, as in *fogli*a (leaf).

Activity 1

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Go to the *Sounds of Speech* website: <https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/main/spanish>
Select Spanish, and study the allophones of /l/. Which places does it assimilate to?

5 Rhotics (vibrantes)

Spanish has two rhotics; a simple voiced alveolar tap /r/ (vibrante simple) and a voiced alveolar trill /r/ (*vibrante múltiple*), as in *pero* (but) and *perro* (dog). The tap is produced with a single swift contact of the tip of the tongue, while the trill is produced with several such quick contacts. The tap is similar to the Scottish pronunciation of *r* in words like *three* or *curd*. Although pronouncing an alveolar approximant (English *r*) is a noticeable sign of a foreign accent, it is still worth explaining to your students that they should not worry about rolling their *r*'s as long as they don't "swallow" them.

In most British dialects, *r* in syllable-final position is not pronounced: *morning*, *car*. This is an automatic process, so often English speakers are not aware of carrying this phonological rule over to Spanish and might pronounce *amó* (he loved) and *amor* (love) in the same way. It requires a good deal of practice not to drop coda *r*'s.

5.1 Tap or trill?

The distribution of the two rhotics in Spanish is quite special. While they are contrastive in intervocalic

position; *pero* – *perro*, *caro* – *carro*, *quería* – *querría*, *a Roma* – *aroma* etc., in other contexts there is no contrast.

Only the trill occurs:

- word-initially; *rosa* (rose)
- after *l* and *n*; *alrededor* (around), *Enrique*

Only the tap occurs:

- after a consonant in the same syllable; *fraude* (fraud), *brazo* (arm)
- word-medially before a consonant; *carta* (letter)
- word-finally; *mar* (see)

If the *r* is preceded by an /s/, the sibilant is usually deleted and a trill is pronounced *las rosas* [la'rosas].

At higher levels: You might mention that in utterance-final position, /r/ is often devoiced and has a number of pronunciation variations.

Ideas for exercises

1. Make a list of words and phrases with *r*'s in syllable coda and make your students regularly practice them.
2. Collect phrases like *dar ocas* vs. *da rocas*; *salí rápido* vs. *salir rápido* and ask your students whether they are pronounced the same way or not and why.

Activity 2

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Listen to the speech of this student and try to identify the most important inaccuracies in his pronunciation. Focus on the consonants only.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Feedback: [Student 3](#)

Answer

In this sample there are several pronunciation features that deserve attention.

The audible presence of the so called “reading” phenomenon is obvious. Firstly, the rhythm and intonation are inadequate and completely monotonous. There are many mistakes that are affected by spelling (*hubo* with hache, *batalla* with l), and cognates pronounced as though they were English words (*fascista*).

We will focus on consonants. The student pronounces the velar fricative [x] as in *naranja* correctly. This means that the phoneme that has no similar counterpart in English, has been acquired correctly. However, there are a number of features which show that the phonology of the mother tongue has a major influence on the student’s pronunciation.

The production of voiceless stops is quite aspirated, just as in English (*puerto*, *padeció*).

He produces the alveolar tap or flap [ɾ] (*durante*) and the alveolar trill [r] (*guerra*) the same way and pronounced as *r* is in English. This could be improved, although we would like to emphasise that there is no point in insisting on a rolled pronunciation if it is difficult for the learner. It is more important to point out that he does not pronounce the *r*’s in syllable coda at all; *fundadoR*, *impoRtante*, *baRco*.

If the above-mentioned errors – which can hinder comprehension – have been tackled, we can focus on /v/ in all its positions, as it is pronounced [v] instead of [b] or [β] (*noVecientos*), and on voiced stops (*instiGó*, and *De*), as they are always pronounced as occlusives rather than approximants.

6 Practising the verbo-tonal method

In [Week 2](#), we mentioned the verbo-tonal method according to which, in order to achieve pronunciation that is closer to that of the target language, nuanced pronunciation is used. The teacher asks the student to repeat a particular sequence of words several times copying the teacher's pronunciation each time. The teacher will not produce a standard pronunciation of the selected sequence i.e. ['unaβo'tejaðe'kaβa] but an approximate pronunciation in which the sounds [ð] and [β] will be “nuanced”, i.e. the difference between the Spanish and the English pronunciation will be exaggerated.

You can find some example recordings here:

Audio content is not available in this format.

La gata de Gala García ganó el concurso de gatos en Guatemala.

Audio content is not available in this format.

En la Vuelta a Valencia venció Benito Vila con su bicicleta de Vivavox.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Ese gol de Vélez le dio el pase a la segunda vuelta al equipo de Barcelona.

7 End-of-course summary

dmcd

Congratulations, you have completed Week 5 and come to the end of the course.

For Week 5, you should now have

- deepened your understanding of the opposition between the orthography and pronunciation of consonants
- developed an understanding of the differences between consonantal sounds in Spanish and English
- reflected on the main difficulties in pronunciation for English speakers
- reflected on your own practice and the most challenging points for your students.

Congratulations on completing the course! Hopefully you have now met the course learning outcomes:

- understand the importance of learning and teaching pronunciation
- identify the most relevant challenges your students might face
- formulate realistic goal settings with regard to pronunciation
- design activities that enhance the acquisition of Spanish pronunciation.

If you are interested in learning more Spanish on OpenLearn take a look at our [spanish resources](#).

Acknowledgements

Week 1

Images

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Cambridge University Press

Section 1.2: Screenshot (adapted) from Dialectoteca del Español
<http://dialects.its.uiowa.edu/main.html> <https://uiowa.edu>

Week 3

Images

Section 4.1: image from Hualde, Jose Ignacio (2005) The Sounds of Spanish (p257)
Cambridge University Press

Week 5

Images

Section 3.1: Screenshot adapted from <https://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/main/spanish>

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