

Problems when teaching Pronunciation in an “English as a second language” classroom

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Abstract

When learning a new language, Spanish students of English as a second language have difficulties in the process of learning due to the influence of their native language. Transfers between their mother tongue and the target language are always present and they can be positive or negative, depending on the correct or incorrect production that results from them. Teachers have to help students in order to take advantage of positive transfers and also use negative ones to prevent all the learners’ errors and facilitate their learning process. In this article we are going to concentrate on the pronunciation problems.

Keywords: Pronunciation, English, Second Language, problems

Título: Problemas que aparecen al enseñar Pronunciación de "Inglés como lengua extranjera".

Resumen

Al aprender un nuevo idioma, los estudiantes españoles de inglés como segunda lengua tienen dificultades en el proceso de aprendizaje debido a la influencia de su lengua materna. Las transferencias entre primera y segunda lengua están siempre presentes y pueden ser positivas o negativas, dependiendo del resultado que se derive de ellas. Los profesores tienen que ayudar a los estudiantes a aprovechar las transferencias positivas y usar las negativas para prevenir sus errores y facilitar su proceso de aprendizaje. En este artículo nos vamos a concentrar en los problemas de pronunciación.

Palabras clave: Pronunciación, Inglés, Lengua Extranjera, problemas.

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1.-INTRODUCTION

Spanish students of English as a second language have always had some difficulties in the process of learning due to the influence of their native language.

In terms of second language teaching and learning, “transfer” is the influence of the learner’s native language in the second language.

When there is a linguistic interference and it results in correct language production, it is called *positive transfer*.

If the learner ends up producing mistakes we will be facing a *negative transfer*.

Transfer can be divided into *conscious* or *unconscious*.

Consciously, learners try to guess some words or expressions while speaking or writing in a second language, because they have not learned these words or because they have forgotten how to use the expression properly.

Unconsciously, learners might not realize that the structures of the two languages involved are different, and they use expressions in an incorrect way.

Some kind of “transfer” between the first language and the target language always appears in the process of second language acquisition. Teachers of second languages should be able to identify this phenomenon in order to *prevent all the learners’ errors* which may arise, trying to see in advance what might be difficult or easy for them, getting interesting clues of how to act and using these errors in a constructive way.

We may also encounter many *similarities* between the native and the target language that teachers should also consider, as they might take advantage of positive transfers in order to facilitate the learning process.

2.- PRONUNCIATION MISTAKES.

Concentrating on *pronunciation mistakes* of Spanish speakers while learning English, we might consider some literature related to the subject, and we would like to mention some interesting contributions:

As Mott (2005: 245) explains, in the learning of foreign languages speakers “tend to transfer their own sound system and produce sounds which they have been accustomed to making since they first learned to speak. Thus, our pronunciation of foreign language is inhibited by our own articulatory habits.”

Coe (2001: 91) suggests four different key points in Spaniards’ pronunciation of English:

1- *Difficulty in recognizing and using English vowels.* We should bear in mind that Spanish and English consonant systems show many similitudes but on the contrary, the Spanish vocalic system is significantly different from the English one, raising some difficulties in their pronunciation of English.

2 - *Strong devoicing of final voiced consonants.*

As Mott (2005: 262) estates, Spaniards “either weaken or elide the final plosives of foreign words like club, slip, autostop, light, chip and spot.”

More examples that he provided are lor(d), sprin(t), flir(t), stan(d) and relax /re’la(k)s/.

In most of them the final consonant is omitted when pronouncing them by a spaniard.

Coe (2001: 193-194) also contributed with more examples: espres (express) or instan (t)

3 - *Sentence rhythm* makes Spanish students of English not being understood by English listeners. Spanish is considered a syllable-timed language and so Spanish speakers often transfer the intonation patterns of their mother tongue into English, which is a stress-timed language. The resulting speech might not be comprehensible to native English speakers.

4 - *Range of pitch* is narrower than that of English speakers and produces a boring effect.

Some other pronunciation problems can be:

-*Sound substitution, which* is the replacement of a sound of the L2 by one of the mother tongue. Some examples are:

- The use of the Spanish dental /t/ for the English alveolar /t/.
- Do not aspirate initial voiceless plosives /p/, /t/ and /k/ as the English do, so they tend to sound to English native speakers as their voiced correspondence, /b/, /d/ and /g/.
- Voiced plosive in Spanish are unlikely to occur in final position, so they substitute /t/, /k/ and /p/ for /d/, /g/ and /b/.
- The English /j/ is pronounced like the Spanish /y/ in words such as yes or young.
- Before a vowel Spaniards use /g/ rather than /w/, for instance, /gud/ for would.

-*Underdifferentiation* is another phenomenon described by Bell (1981: 179) that appears when the learner does not “recognize in the second language L2 a phonemic distinction”. It is a negative transfer and it might influence consonants or vowels.

The *vowels underdifferentiation* especially appears when differentiating between long and short vowels.

Bell and Coe suggested several examples:

- The lack of an /i:/ - /i/ difference causes no distinction between pairs such as *beat – bit* or *sheep – ship*.
- The use of the Spanish /a/ for the three vowels /æ/, /ʌ /, and /a:/;
- Spanish /o/ is employed for /o:/ and /o/.
- The English phonemes /u:/ and /u/ are pronounced as /u/, producing confusion with words such as pull and pool.

Underdifferentiation in consonants concerns about the lack of differentiation while pronouncing two different consonant phonemes that the student makes sound similar.

This problem is frequently found in the /s/-/z/ and /b/- /v/ sounds:

As Coe (2001: 93) stated, the English voiced sound /z/ is not part of the Spanish consonant system, and so Spanish speakers associate both phonemes (/z/ and /s/) to the only Spanish phoneme /s/.

This sometimes results in the pronunciation of two different words as if they were the same word: “pence” and “pens” pronounced as “pence”; or “lacy” and “lazy” pronounced as “lacy”.

The same phenomenon affects /b/ and /v/, because Spanish only has one sound for both /b/ and /v/, provoking confusion between pairs, like “vowels” and “bowels” and giving rise to misunderstandings.

-*Overdifferentiation*, according to Bell (1981: 179), consists in producing a phonemic contrast which does not exist in the L2, as it does in the learner’s mother tongue.

The main example is the single /r/ and double /rr/. If Spaniards find a double r in English, they sometimes produce it as a double Spanish /rr/.

-*The pronunciation of the initial /s/* is another problem for Spanish speakers of English. According to Coe (2001: 193-194) the initial /s/ followed by another consonant as in “Spain”, “sceptic” or “stop”, “spoon”, in Spanish needs a supporting vowel, preceding or following the “s”, and so Spaniards pronounce these words as “espain”, “esceptic”, “estop”, “espoon”.

Mott (2005: 248) points out that this usually happens in the following combinations: [sp, sk, st, sf, sm, sn, sl].

We would like to add that some of the pronunciation mistakes do not interfere in the understanding of a Spaniard speaker of English, but others are really obstacles to efficient communication.

3.-HOW TO DEAL WITH LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN THE ENGLISH CLASS: SOME SOLUTIONS

Trying to solve *the problem of underdifferentiation* we consider the following possible solutions:

Some basic explanation on phonetics and phonology are essential, at least for students to be aware of their existence, arising consciousness in them previously to its practice.

Students would learn how to pronounce some specific sounds or phonemes, and so to pronounce some specific words correctly, in order to avoid misunderstanding or mixing of words

Exercising and practicing in this specific sound, producing it and insisting in its study.

Teachers should give examples to the students to differentiate between:

- /s/ and /z/ as fussy – fuzzy; lacy – lazy; cease – seize; race – raise;
- /b/ and /v/ as berry – very; ban – van; bat – vat; beer – veer; boat – vote; bowl – vole; serb – serve; best – vest; bet-vet ; bowels – vowels; gibbon – given; bale – veil ; bent – vent; bury – very; bane – vein; bid – vid ; bile – vile; biz – viz; bolt – volt; bowels – vowels; curb – curve; fibre – fiver ; lobes – loaves; rebel – revel; verb – verve.

And practice them through repetition, learning to use them in context, writing sentences, giving speeches to practice the expressions and so on, combining pronunciation both as a speaking activity and as a listening activity, as Adrian Underhill suggests.

If we also *expose the students to native speakers* and real English situations, they would also be able to infer and imitate them, and so getting the right pronunciation.

Real encounters with native speakers through telephone or Virtual Classes, listen to Speeches and Conferences, and students’ interchanges should be promoted.

Following native examples and using role playing are both good tools for the same objective.

Trying to solve the problem of *intonation and rhythm and stress* we should encourage students to learn English stress and tone rules, and also promoting reading and the discussion of what they have read, to make improvements in their word knowledge and in their knowledge in all language systems, including vocabulary, phonics, grammar or pronunciation.

Phonics, word recognition, and spelling are influenced by what students know about the sounds, word structure, and spelling in their primary language, and so students might transfer the *phonological* rules from their mother tongue into their English speech or even implement strategies similar to those used in their primary language.

Taking into account cognates (words with lexical similarities in both languages that normally have the same meaning) and false cognates or false friends (words with lexical similarities in both languages but not meaning the same in both languages), we can make our students be aware of the differences but also similitudes that both languages have in common, using positive transfer to motivate our students and create a feeling of self-confidence in the English class.

Following Roach (2009) ideas: “.....the only efficient way to learn to use intonation is the way a child acquires the intonation....learners of English who are not able to talk regularly to native speakers or to listen to colloquial English are not likely to learn English intonation, though they may learn good pronunciation of segments and use stress correctly.”

In order to be successful in the problems solving working through projects can be much more suitable than following tightly the implemented and sometimes imposed syllabuses. Teachers might be open-minded and willing to help and to keep eyes opened, in order to promote changes and working in a proactive way. Communication is again the key factor, and intelligibility remains the main objective.

4.-CONCLUSIONS

When learning a new language, students are always influenced by their first language. Transfers between their mother tongue and the target language are always present. Teachers have to help them in order to take advantage of positive transfers and motivate them, and also use negative transfers to prevent all the learners' errors and facilitate their learning process.



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