reprinted from

kansas working papers in linguistics

volume l 1976 KANSAS
WORKING
PAPERS
IN
LINGUISTICS

VOLUME 1 1976

This volume is a revised and reprinted edition of the Kansas Working Papers in Anthropology and Linguistics 1976, Walter M. Hull and Paul Brockington, eds.

Published by the Linguistics Graduate Student Association, University of Kansas, and printed at the University of Kansas Printing Office, April 1978.

Partially funded by the Student Activity Fee.

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TEACHING ENGLISH SUPRASEGMENTALS TO SPANISH SPEAKERS

Bertha Chela de Rodriguez

EAR TRAINING

- 1.1. Audiocomprehension and a native-like fluency are perhaps one of the most difficult aspects to master in a second language. It is very common and most frustrating for the foreign language learner to find himself unable to divide the native speaker's speech into meaningful utterances even after having covered exhaustively the grammatical structures of the target language. The typical classroom activities, grammatical drills, reading aloud, dictations, etc. help to increase productive control but do not usually develop aural comprehension, nor are any of those activities sufficient to guarantee a pronunciation accurate enough to make the student's speech intelligible and fluent. On the other hand, many foreign language teachers, especially abroad, use a formal, deliberate and repetitive pronunciation in the classroom with the result that the uninhibited pronunciation of the native speaker in the street is quite unintelligible for the student.
- 1.2. Although some work is done on pronunciation in the language programs, most of it is usually left to be picked up by imitation or passive listening, especially the suprasegmentals. Unfortunately however, most students learning a language for the first time are inexperienced listeners; they find it difficult to acquire an accurate pronunciation merely by listening "unconsciously" even if it is to very "fine speech":

Only children posses to a great extent the ability to imitate; adults are much less receptive, for their habits are too strongly imprinted in their minds. From this point of view, a human mind is already adult at early adolescence.1

In only few cases can students achieve a native-like fluency by mere imitation and "unconscious" listening. F.L.Billows² recommends passive listening as one of the best ways to get an insight into the language He gives as an example an Austrian musician who had lived in Ankara for five years and spoke Turkish like a native. For the first two years, this musician had been amongst Turks a great deal but had only spoken to those who understood German. After a time, when he needed

to use Turkish, he did so with ease and eventually without an accent. Billows specifies, however, the advantage this Austrian musician had over the average language student, i.e. the fact that he had already developed a musician's capacity for attentive listening: most of our language students are novice listeners and will hear new sounds in terms of their own phonetic habits. So one of the important tasks of the foreign language teacher is to teach the student to hear and to do it correctly in the new language.

1.3. Intensive, deliberate work on pronunciation is also often left aside on the grounds that a native-like fluency is neither possible nor desirable as a goal in most cases; but even if we are aiming at the minimum requirements for intelligibility in a foreign language, intensive, deliberate work both on segments and suprasegmentals has to be carried out. J. Donald Bowen3 gives as a reasonable goal for most adult students:

efficiency, but without expecting to achieve competence in pronunciation that would enable them to conceal their own different language background. At the same time it should be possible to achieve a consistent production of the basic contrasts of the sound system, to speak fluently and understandably in a form that requires minimum adjustment on the part of one's listener. And of course the student must be capable of understanding native pronunciation under normal circumstances of production and not require of his interlocutors a special style for his personal use. He should, for example be capable of understanding two native speakers addressing each other in informal speech.

Even after deciding that the student only needs a comfortable, intelligible pronunciation and an ability to understand the native speaker's "informal speech", one must realize that both these skills require among other things a mastery of the suprasegmentals:

In a situation where we do not hear clearly in the native language it is these features that assist us in piecing together the import of what we have heard. 4

Audiocomprehension has to be taught by first training students to understand complete sentences or at least groups of words which involve phonetic variation at word or morpheme boundaries, word and sentence stress, rhythm and intonation. The speaker who has not mastered the suprasegmentals of a language cannot be said to be fluent in that language.

1.4. Very few language programs deal with suprasegmental accuracy as an objective. English suprasegmentals are frequently neglected because they are more difficult to describe and analyse than segments and this is also one of the aspects in which the English teacher who is not a native speaker has the most difficulty himself. Pronunciation programs could be improved to guarantee more accurate aural comprehension and native-like fluency if more time is dedicated to training the student to "hear" correctly and also by deliberate study of the features of stress, rhythm and intonation as a separate unit; one should not rely on their being picked up through other aspects of language instruction.

THE LEARNING PROCESS.

- 2.1. There are several aspects to be considered when planning pronunciation lessons. First of all there should be a presentation of the segment or suprasegmental to be drilled. If necessary a minimum of technical explanation should be included; the adult student usually welcomes these explanations since he likes to understand what he is doing. For this presentation the teacher should also predict the difficulties in advance by a point-by-point comparison of the structure of the native language and the target language. This contrastive analysis is important since merely by pedagogical experience and intuition it is not possible to develop a full awareness of the ways in which two phonetic systems differ. Such an analysis will help the teacher pinpoint the sounds which do not occur in the native language and those which are different according to their distribution in the system.
- 2.2. From the technical explanations one should not move on straight into the articulatory drills without having the student identify the new feature first:

Phonetic habits cannot be mastered solely through articulatory drills...The control of sound production is probably much more auditory than articulatory... As long as the sound has not been heard correctly, it cannot be reproduced correctly except by chance.

It is also important to remember that many times articulatory drills are not effective because the student has no experience in controlling his organs of speech, i.e. the fact that he is told, for example, that the sound $/\mathbf{r}/$ as in bit is more open and relaxed than $/\mathbf{i}/$ as in beat does not guarantee that he is going to produce them correctly.

2.3. Oral cues are important for listening practice; for example in the case where the only distinctive difference between a negative and an affirmative sentence is the different vowel sound one should point this out to the student: e.g.

You can talk to him now. You can't talk to him now. The student should be told to watch out for the use of the /ð/ in the affirmative and /æ/ in the negative rather than expect him to identify the negative through the voiceless alveolar plosive, which in this case is not released. Discrimination of these two sentences and other similar ones should take place before production is carried out. Such means of identification through minimal contrasts should be extended to the suprasegmentals. More detail on this aspect will be given later in the article.

2.4. Pronunciation exercises must be drilled intensively, and the language laboratory becomes an indispensable tool in the teaching of foreign languages. But unless the student's ear is trained beforehand, he will only hear his inaccurate pronunciation played back to him repeatedly and not be in a position to evaluate it, maybe even thinking that he is giving an accurate imitation. Enough listening practice will enable the student to discriminate between accurate and inaccurate speech and consequently to hear and correct his own mistakes.

The process of fixation in the language laboratory preceded by an intensive listening practice in the classroom is essential if the student is to retain features of stress, rhythm and intonation outside the pronunciation lesson. A common complaint among language teachers is how quickly a student forgets what he has learnt in class. Donald Bowen refers to this in his article "Contextualizing Pronunciation Practice" 6:

When mature students try seriously to imitate a foreign pronunciation model and when the expertise is available to offer technical assistance, they will demonstrate the physical capacity for a quite satisfactory production. But the moment the student's attention is diverted to the content of the message, the pronunciation control loosens and the native language influence reappears to produce a heavy speech accent.

However one should notice that this problem is not limited to pronunciation alone; it occurs in any of the language skills that has not been dealt with fully. Even the student's syntax, which is generally given the most attention in the language program, slackens when he is concentrating on the content or message, probably because the process of fixation has not been reached in his mind. As far as pronunciation is concerned, the listening practice he receives in his training should keep the student conscious of the different features of pronunciation in his everyday activities. It will teach him to hear himself more critically and make reliable and valid corrections.

SOME OF THE PROBLEMS.

3.1. When choosing a suitable model for student imitation, Pierre Leon suggests two possibilities - either the uninhibited pronunciation of the man in the street or the overcareful diction of the teacher,

"The final objective would probably be the former for audiocomprehension and the latter for sound production." 7 A. C. Gimson also recommends the foreign learner to aim at "a careful colloquial style of English in his own speech" 8 but at the same time to be aware of the features which characterize the rapid colloquial or familiar style that he is likely to hear from native speakers. For an accurate "colloquial" style on the part of the student, such features as word and sentence stress, proper rhythm and intonation should be mastered before he can be said to have reasonably fluent speech. Features of assimilation, elision, etc. which occur in rapid speech are important for audiocomprehension but not essential for the student to produce.

- 3.2. The difficulty that the Spanish speaker finds in recognizing and producing certain words is due both to the reduction of vowel sounds to /a/ or to syllable consonants and to the different position of the stress. Many Spanish speakers only recognize the word cotton /katn/ for example, if the two syllables are made roughly equal in length and the second receives its full vowel value and is made to rhyme with the first: /xxtn/.9 On the other hand word-stress usually falls in different syllables in Spanish. English words ending in tion for example, like tradition, have the stress in the syllable before and the Spanish cognates ending in ción are stressed on that last syllable. When learning English, the Spanish speaker might either stress that last syllable (i.e. -tion) or pull the stress towards the beginning since many English words tend to have the stress in the first syllable. Robert Ladolo has pointed out that this tendency is found even in cases where the stress falls in the same place in both languages, for example museum /mjulion/and museo /museo/.
- 3.3. Accurate teaching of stress and rhythm is also significant because they usually exert considerable influence on other matters of pronunciation. Many of the most important signals of grammatical meaning are given by words that occur in unstressed syllables and are therefore particularly likely to be missed, so that:
 - (a) I would have mentioned this before.

may well be heard as

(b) I have mentioned this before.

or even

- (c) I mentioned this before. because the I would have in statement (a) is reduced in rapid colloquial speech to $I^{\dagger}d^{\dagger}ve.^{11}$
- 3.4. The shifting of stress that is used in English for emphasis or grammatical contrast and which frequently places a heavy stress on forms usually unstressed is another source of difficulties. Compare the following:
 - (a) That's his car
 - (b) That's not his car.

(c) That's not his car.

Ese es su coche. Ese no es su coche. No es el coche de él. The emphasis given to the possessive adjective in the example (c) does not have a point-by-point translation in Spanish as in the previous two cases. Spanish relies instead on grammatical or lexical devices. This is especially difficult for Spanish speakers when auxiliaries are used to emphasize a statement, for example:

I'm going to New York tomorrow. Voy a Nueva York mañana. I am going to New York tomorrow. Sí voy a Nueva York mañana.

3.5. Although Spanish syllables receiving primary stress or sentence stress are longer than other syllables, they are not as long as similar syllables in English. Spanish rhythm tends to give each syllable approximately the same duration. The phrases will thus be proportionately longer or shorter depending on the number of syllables they contain. Spanish therefore, may be said to have syllable-timed rhythm. English rhythm, on the other hand, depends more on stress. There is a tendency to try to equalise the time between stressed syllables: the greater the number of unstressed syllables between two stressed syllables, the greater seems to be their speed of delivery. So in English it is normal for many syllables to cluster around one primary stress. Compare, for example the time it takes to pronounce the following sentences:

If I had <u>talked</u> to him, he would have <u>done</u> it. She <u>only</u> eats <u>twice</u> a day.

It is important to point out these differences to the Spanish speaker learning English and to lead him through numerous exercises both for comprehension and production since this is one of the main causes for his being misunderstood and for his difficulty in audiocomprehension. W. S. Allen gives useful exercises in <u>Living English Speech</u>, ¹² in order to practice the rhythm of English. He first shows graphically how the English pattern he is going to practice looks, for example:



and then gives sentences for production:

Thank you for calling. Open the window. Why are you worried, etc.

3.6. Features of assimilation, elision etc. which occur especially at word boundaries should also be included when planning pronunciation lessons since the student is going to encounter them in rapid colloquial speech and will be confused unless he knows what is happening with the words that have been familiar to him in other situations where deliberate formal speech has been used. The extent of variation that we are going to find at word boundaries depends, of course, upon the speed of the utterance, "the slower and more careful the delivery the greater the tendency to preserve a form nearer to that of the isolate word." So a group of words such as:

I can try and borrow some money from her.

would be pronounced in the following way for the student's production

/ai kan trai an boro sam mani fram har/

but for listening practice it should also be presented as:

Gimson tells us that the foreign learner does not necessarily have to attempt to produce in his speech such phonetic variations unless he wants his speech to be a perfect reproduction of that of the native speaker but "he must know of their existence for otherwise he will find it difficult to understand much of ordinary colloquial English." Some of the most important phonetic variations at word boundaries listed by Gimson are" 15

- i) Assimilatory tendencies which involve a variation in the place of articulation, changes which are normal in colloquial speech and of which the native speaker is usually unaware. Word final /t,d,n,s,z/readily assimilate to the place of the following word initial obstruents: that pen /arpen/, good boy /gubbox/, ten players /templerz/, this shop /argap/, those young men / Jozjan men/, has she? /hargar/. Although the sense of an utterance may be determined by the context, the assimilations of the final alveolars to the place of the following word initial obstruent may confuse the comprehension of the foreign learner.
 - i) Coalescence of /t,d,s,z/ with /j/ at word boundaries:

This coalescence is especially noticeable in question tags, i.e. didn't you? could you?, etc. To make sure the student is hearing these variations one could test them through phonetic transcriptions. The phonetic transcription can also help him visualize the processes more clearly. One should remember however that the ability to transcribe these features proves that the student can perceive the phonetic variations but not that he can produce them:

The IPA which is very useful has unfortunately been employed too often as the main tool in the teaching of pronunciation. In fact the ability to use it properly never proved mastery of good speech habits. 16

Another of the phonetic variations present in rapid colloquial speech that Gimson 17 ennumerates and which might confuse the student, is that of elision:

Initial /ə/ is often elided, particularly when followed by a continuant and preceded by a word final consonant...e.g. not alone /notflown/.
get another /getnandə/, run along /ranllon/.

3.7. When dealing with the different intonation patterns in English, the language teacher dealing with Spanish speakers should consider the different levels of pitch between the native and target language. Basically there are four levels of pitch in English which can be contrasted to only three in Spanish "spaced closer together than the four in English in a fashion analogous to the musical notation below:"18

0	Emphatic		
0	High		
0	Normal	0 0	Emphatic
0	Low	0	Low
1 2 3 4		1 2 3	

Some of the differences in pitch between the two languages are shown in the following examples of intonation patterns: 19

Matter-of-fact statements:

I'm from Colombia

Soy de Colombia

Where're you going?

Para donde va?

What's your name?

Como se llama?

Emphatic statements:

2 3 1 2 3 1 2 4 1 No soy de Chile soy de Colombia.

3 1 2 3 1 2 4 1
Yes, I know. But when?

2 1 2 1 1 3 1
Si, ya se. Pero cuando?

Vocatives and other utterance modifiers:

3 2 2 1

Hi Mary!

1 Hola Maria!

2 3 2 2 2

I'm fine, thank you.

Estoy bien, muchas gracias.

Greetings:

2 3 2 3 2 2 1 2 1 Adios.

71

2 3 2 Hasta mañana.
2 3 1 3 2 2 3 1
Good morning or Good morning. Buenos días.

The difference in pitch between the two languages is obvious from the examples above and one should point out to the student the negative reaction of the English speaker that will result from his transferring the same level of pitch in Spanish into English, for example the pattern /1211/ used for normal questions in Spanish has the meaning of annoyance, disinterest or disgust in English.

What's for dinner?
What are you doing now?

Stockwell and Bowen suggest to English students who find it difficult to master this pattern in Spanish to say it as if they were a little angry. 20 It is necessary to let the student know that what is normal to him in Spanish is used in uncolored, indifferent utterances in English. It also helps to show the student the impression the English speaker gives when he transfers his English patterns into Spanish, for example when answering the question "De donde es usted?", the speaker will sound strangely insistent if he answered:

Soy de Colombia.

since the pattern /231/ marks a statement as emphatic or contrastive in Spanish. The interrogator may well think he is irritated by the question.

TESTING PERCEPTION OF ENGLISH SUPRASEGMENTALS.

4.1. One of the ways of measuring the accuracy of the student's auditory perception of suprasegmentals is by means of phonetic transcriptions of phrases, sentences dialogues etc. which will include the necessary features of stress and intonation. However, teaching the student to transcribe accurately is not an easy procedure and sometimes we might misjudge the student's discriminatory abilities by his lack of control in handling the phonetic symbols. Furthermore, we might take more time teaching the student to transcribe properly than to discriminate and produce the sounds correctly.

I would like to suggest some exercises, besides phonetic transcriptions, for both drilling and testing suprasegmentals. The exercises are based mainly on minimal contrasts usually found when dealing with segments but which I believe can also be of great use in the perception, discrimination and production of some of the difficult and more subtle features of the English suprasegmentals.

4.2. I tested the exercises on ten Spanish-speaking students who ranged from beginners to advanced; the exercises which turned out to be more difficult were so for both levels and in some cases there was better discrimination and perception from students who had had less exposure to the language. By means of this test I wanted to corroborate the point made earlier in the article, namely, that most of the language courses are no preparation for developing a perceptive ear; such an achievement requires first an understanding that ear training is a skill to be handled on its own and not as the result of reading, writing and speaking instruction. Like these latter skills it requires deliberate and systematic work as part of the language program.

Of the ten students tested, five were beginners (three males and two females) and five advanced (two males and three females). Their average age is 24 and the level of their English proficiency was estimated on the basis of their level in Intensive English courses which they are either presently attending or have attended. They were all volunteers.

4.3. In the first part of the test (given in full in the Appendix) I dealt with word-stress. Sixteen words (ten cognates) were presented and the student had to identify the primary stress and mark the corresponding blank box, e.g.

	1st syllable	2nd syllable	3rd syllable
fortunate	х		
tradition		х	

In exercise B, the students were to discriminate pair of sentences which differed only in one unstressed syllable and therefore particularly likely to be missed. One of the two sentences was read and the students had to identify the correct one by writing $\underline{\mathbf{a}}$ or $\underline{\mathbf{b}}$ next to the numbers 1 to 4.

The two sentences on the left in exercise C were read four and three times respectively, changing the position of the primary stress each time. The student had to identify the primary stress in the sentences by marking the correct responses on the right, e.g.:

1.	(I	don't	want	to	buy	a	brown	coat.)	But Mary does.	4
2.	(I	don't	want	to	buy	a	brown	coat.)	Buy a jacket then.	3
3.	(I	don't	want	to	buy	a	brown	coat.)	Yes, I know you hate brown.	1
									Why don't you rent one then.	2

Exercise D, which consisted in underlining the most important words in the sentence, did not turn out to be a good exercise since it also confused the native speakers whom I tested in order to measure the efficiency and clarity of the test, therefore I left it out in most

of the cases. A similar exercise, however, should be devised for it is important that Spanish speakers hear the differences between the English rhythm and that of Spanish, before he is asked for oral production.

In exercise E, I wanted to see whether the student could hear and interpret the different levels of pitch in the B utterances, i.e. the dialogue was read twice changing the level of pitch of response B and the student was asked to underline one of the three possible interpretations given below.

The eight sentences in exercise F had either a fall or rise at the end and the student was asked to interpret the attitude of the speaker for the first three imperatives and to distinguish a question from a confirmation for the last five. They responded by underlining one of the two possibilities.

The instructions were always given in Spanish and except for C, were kept to a minimum without any other clarifying examples or previous practice. For C, however, the explanation was quite detailed, even differences between the shifting of stress in English and the changes needed in the structure in Spanish to obtain the same result were explicitly pointed out. This was obviously a completely new concept for nine of the students and I had to give a different example with the responses in order to show the procedure.

Test items were read directly to the students, who were to mark or number the correct unit on hearing the stimulus. The stimulus was repeated up to three times if requested by the student.

4.4. The results of the test are given below in 3 tables, one for each group tested. The horizontal division gives the letters of the different exercises tested (exercise D was left out for the reasons explained previously). Vertically, the division indicates the number of correct and incorrect responses obtained, for example, for test A there was a possibility of 80 correct responses for each group:

Beginners

correct incorrect total

Α	В	C	E	F	Total
51	71	8	19	21	170
29	9	27	21	19	100
80	80	35	40	40	275

Advanced

correct incorrect total

A	В	C	E	F	Total
68	70	7	27	25	197
12	10	28	13	15	78
80	80	35	40	40	275

Native speakers

correct incorrect total

A	В	C	E	F	Total
80	80	35	35	39	269
0	0	0	5	1	6
80	80	35	40	40	275

Although the sample for this preliminary study was inadequate for satisfactory statistical evaluation of the results, several things are suggestive:

- 1. The virtually perfect responses of the native control group show that the tests do in fact reflect ability to discriminate suprasegmentals. They did not, however, distinguish between the two groups of Spanish speakers. The most likely explanation, it would seem, is that the two groups are not really very different with respect to the ability in question, and that our present course of instruction does not teach this ability as well as we might wish.
- 2. The tests varied greatly in difficulty. On test B, both beginners and advanced scored nearly as well as native speakers, whereas on Test C, which also gave native speakers no problems, both Spanish-speaking groups did very poorly. It is interesting to note that Test B involves the effect of stress on segments, rather than stress itself.
- 4.5. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH. The exercises presented here could be used to train a group of students and then compare the results with those of an untrained group. Other language groups, besides Spanish, could also be tested. Various exercises should be compared for efficacy and made more complex according to the level of the students and the listening practice they have had. Furthermore, once the student is familiar with this kind of ear-training exercises, the stimulus could be given without allowing the student to visualize what is being read aloud to him. In this way, he would not either corroborate or cancel the first impressions of the ear.

APPENDIX

STRESS, RHYTHM AND INTONATION: A test to measure the Spanish speaker's auditory perception of English suprasegmentals.

A. WORD-STRESS

		First syllable	Second syllable	Third syllable
1.	fortunate			
2.	tradition			
3.	determine			
4.	attitude			
5.	intervene			
6.	capital			
7.	assistance			
8.	quantity			
9.	difficult			
10.	immediate			
11.	talkative			
12.	unusual			
13.	yesterday			
14.	newspaper			
15.	overlook			
16.	regardless			

SENTENCE-	STRESS	AND	RHYTHM

T)	7	1	- 1.2	
В.	con	tra	Ctl	ons

- a) We'll talk to him (tomorrow.) (every day.) b) We talk to him
 - 1. 2.
 - 3.
- 2. a) I'll cut it for you. b) I've cut it for you.
- 1. 3.
- 3. a) They come to see you (every day.) b) They've come to see you (twice already.)
 - 1. 2. 3.
- (there several times.)
 (if she had been there.) 4. a) You've stayed b) You'd've stayed
 - 1. 2.
- C. SHIFTING OF STRESS
- But Mary does Buy a jacket then_ 1. I don't want to buy a brown coat. Yes, I know you hate brown Why don't you rent one then?
- Because the other one is dirty_ Because she doesn't like veils_ 2. Why is Mary wearing that hat? Because Jane decided not to wear it

- D. UNDERLINE THE MOST PROMINENT WORDS.
- 1. He talked to you about it, didn't he?
- 2. She only eats twice a day.
- 3. He can understand them.
- 4. I would have spoken to him if I had seen him.
- 5. We aren't English but they are.
- 6. They're not very clever with it, are they?

INTONATION

- E. Different Pitch-levels. (Comments refer only to B.)
- 1. A: What are you doing?
 - B: I'm writing a letter.
 - 1. Unfriendly
 - 2. Normal
 - 3. Emphatic
- 1. Unfriendly
 - 2. Normal
- 3. Emphatic

- 2. A: Here's your book.
 - B: Thank you.
- 1. Indifferent
- 2. Normal
- 3. Emphatic
- 1. Indifferent
- 2. Normal
- 3. Emphatic

- 3. A: What did you think of him?
 - B: Charming.
- 1. Sarcastic
- 2. Normal
- 3. Emphatic
- 1. Sarcastic
- 2. Normal
- 3. Emphatic

- 4. A: How is your job?
 - B: It's just great.
- 1. Sarcastic
- 2. Normal
- 3. Emphatic
- 1. Sarcastic
- 2. Normal
- 3. Emphatic

- F. FALL vs RISE
- 1. Pass me the salt!
- 1. Abrupt, ordering
- 2. Friendly, requesting
- 2. Open the window!
- 1. Abrupt, ordering
- 2. Friendly, requesting
- 3. Take the blue one:
- 1. Abrupt, ordering
- 2. Friendly, requesting

- 4. That's not the way to do it.
 - 1. asking
 - 2. affirming
- 5. That's it.
- 1. asking
- 2. affirming
- 6. He's coming later.
- 1. asking
- 2. affirming
- 7. It's cold, isn't it?
 - 1. asking
 - 2. affirming
- 8. You're Venezuelan, aren't you?
 - 1. asking
 - 2. affirming

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