

ESOL – Accent Errors of Spanish Speakers

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One of the first steps in reducing accent is becoming aware of problem areas. People use speaking patterns and styles of communication from their native language when speaking another language. This is called first language transfer.

Below are typical accent errors that Spanish speakers make due to first language transfer.

Vowels:

Spanish has 5 vowels with 5 corresponding vowel sounds that are very consistent in how they are pronounced. English has 5 vowels and 20 possible pronunciations. English lax vowels, for example the *schwa*, are difficult for Spanish speakers to reproduce. Spanish speakers need to expand their range of vowel sounds.

S-consonant cluster at the start of a word

Words that start with s- in English are difficult to pronounce for Spanish speakers, who will start those words with es- instead. For example, a Spanish speaker would mispronounce story as “estory”, which sounds almost like “history” and could be confusing to the listener. To stop this habit, have the student start the word with their teeth touching and with lips only slightly open. It is when they start with the mouth open that the extra vowel sound sneaks its way in before the s sound.

Consonant cluster at the end of a word

Spanish speakers may drop consonants at the end of words, since words in Spanish do not end in consonant clusters (brefas’, trouble with plural nouns, etc). One way to overcome this habit is by linking words in a sentence and moving the consonant sound over to the next word.

Stress

Word stress is very important in English, and putting the stress on the wrong syllable can confuse the listener, especially in the case of

heteronyms. In English, the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is prominent, while in Spanish the difference is minimal. In English, stress changes the quality of vowel and consonant sounds.

Rhythm

Spanish is syllable-timed (all syllables get equal time), while English is stress-timed (we don’t give the same emphasis to all the sounds). In English, we shorten unstressed syllables to fit the rhythm. We often stress important words that carry information (nouns, adjectives, and main verbs), and we speed up on words with less importance (articles and auxiliary verbs). Use a rubber band to visually show the student how words get crammed between peak stretch (stress-timed).

Sh/Ch

Spanish speakers confuse these sounds, and often replace ch with sh when speaking (a coworker named Rishard), and vice-versa (went chopping for a chirt).

- **Sh** is a smooth, unbroken stream of air: shh!
The tip of the tongue is not allowed to touch!
- **Ch** stops and blocks the airflow, which is then forcefully released like a mini-sneeze: a-choo! The tip of the tongue will touch like for a T.

/i/ and /i/

These are two distinct sounds in English and can change the meaning of words, such as ship/sheep; been/bean; fit/feet. Short /i/ does not exist in Spanish, and Spanish speakers use the long sound /i/ instead.

- /i/ - is short and lax. Tongue and mouth are relaxed and in a slightly lower position than for long /i/. *Sit with Tim*
- /i/ – is long and tense, and held longer than /i/. Lips are spread and tongue position is slightly higher. *Seat with team*