

ACCURATE PRONUNCIATION FOR EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION

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RESUME: An efficient executive secretary needs to devote special attention to communication skills, and intelligible pronunciation is essential for communicating effectively. While in the office or on the phone, this professional is constantly exposed to situations in which a word incorrectly used or pronounced may result in embarrassing situations or even damage an important business transaction. In this article, we will discuss about some frequently mispronounced English sounds by Brazilian English as a foreign language speakers that could be avoided if some attention be given to these pronunciation aspects. The sounds to be dealt with in this article are (1) the consonants in word-final position, (2) the /s/ clusters, (3) the final /l/, (4) the nasals, and (5) the unstressed *h* words.

KEY WORDS: pronunciation, communication, attention.

1 INTRODUCTION

An English as a foreign language (EFL) learner is frequently faced with a dilemma: what is the correct pronunciation of this English word? English sounds are rather confusing, since there seems to be no specific logic to decode the sequence of sounds orthographically represented in words. As exemplified by Fromkin and Rodman (1998:181), in the sentences “Did he believe that Caesar could see the people seize the seas?” and “The silly amoeba stole the key to the machine”, the sound /i/ is represented by **e**, **y**, and **i** and other eight combinations: **ie**, **ae**, **ee**, **eo**, **ei**, **ea**, **oe**, and **ey**. With the

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aim of minimizing the difference between spelling and sounds, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was developed in 1888 to provide a universal code that could represent the exact pronunciation of the sounds that exist in all languages. However, most EFL students are not very familiar with the IPA, and even though the phonetic transcription is present in bilingual dictionaries, many students are unable to decode the symbols and end up feeling puzzled by the unsystematic way words are represented by orthography.

The objective of this article is not to show how the IPA can be decoded, but how we can start paying more attention to the sounds we hear in order to improve the accuracy of the sounds we produce. Since one is able to learn an item only when he/she notices it (SCHMIDT, 1990), the aim of this article is to present five pronunciation aspects that are frequently ignored by EFL learners, and to encourage these learners to pay some attention to the way they pronounce given sounds, so that, by means of noticing and reflection, pronunciation errors be reduced.

This article is divided into 6 sections. Five sections deal with a particular pronunciation aspect: (1) English words that end in a consonant; (2) the /s/ clusters, (3) the final /l/, (4) the nasals, and (5) unstressed *h* words. The sixth section presents the conclusion of the article.

2 PRONOUNCING CONSONANTS IN WORD-FINAL POSITION

Brazilian Portuguese is a syllable-timed language. This means that the syllables are pronounced in isochronous intervals, which might be identified as a *stacatto* rhythm by an English native speaker. On the other hand, English is a stress-timed language, since the *stressed* syllables are pronounced in isochronous intervals, and the vowels in unstressed syllables tend to be reduced. The difference between the English and Brazilian Portuguese syllable structures may cause a faulty pronunciation by Brazilian EFL speakers. As a strategy to overcome syllable structure differences, these speakers tend to add vowels to syllables where there is no vowel in English, as the case of words that end in a consonant. (BAPTISTA AND SILVA FILHO, 1997 and KOERICH, 2002)

Thus, as found by BAPTISTA AND SILVA FILHO (1997) and KOERICH (2002), words like dog and lab are generally pronounced *dogi* and *labi*. The insertion of an extra vowel is very likely to result in communication problems, since it is difficult for a native speaker to understand the new word that is formed with extra sounds. Imagine how confused an English native speaker would feel if he heard the sentence “Whati didi you do withi thati siti?” (What did you do with that sit?). The English speaker might eventually understand the sentence, but it would certainly take him some time to process so many inserted vowels. Once, a student of one of the authors of this article asked what a *siticom* was. It took her some time to think about a “city com” and it was only after the word was contextualized that she was able to understand that the student meant “sitcom”. Therefore, Brazilian EFL learners need to be aware that communication problems can be caused if no special attention be given to the pronunciation of sounds. In the case of English words that end in a consonant, learners should become conscious of the fact that no vowel-like sound should be added to this final consonant. If there is heavy native language interference, some pronunciation training becomes crucial to improve second language production.

3 PRONOUNCING /S/ CLUSTERS

Due to the different syllable structures of Brazilian Portuguese and English, besides inserting an extra vowel after a consonant in word-final position, Brazilian EFL speakers also tend to insert an extra sound before /s/ clusters (CORNELIAN JR., 2003; RAUBER, 2002; REBELLO, 1997). These clusters are formed by the fricative /s/ plus a stop and they do not occur in Portuguese. Examples of words containing /s/ clusters are: *sports*, *study*, *scratch*, *sprite*, *strike*, *splash*, *slow*, *small*, *snow*. In order to simplify this syllable structure difficulty, Brazilian EFL speakers frequently insert an /e/ or /i/ sound before /s/ clusters, thus pronouncing sports as *isports/esports*, and strike as *istrike/estrike*. In the specific case of the clusters /sl, sm, sn/, besides inserting an /e/ or /i/ sound, the /s/ becomes a /z/. As a consequence, slow becomes *izlow/ezlow*, small becomes *izmall/ezmall*, and snow becomes *iznow/eznow*. A good way to start improving

the pronunciation of the /s/ clusters is by exaggerating the production of the /s/, thus producing a long s-sound before the following consonant (e.g., *sssnow*, *ssstop*).

4 PRONOUNCING THE [L]: BRAZIU OR BRAZIL?

Except when in word-initial position, as in *love*, *letter*, *loop*, Brazilians tend to pronounce the English /l/ as /u/ (BAPTISTA, 2001:226; MOORE, 2004:01). In words such as *milk*, *help* and *small*, the /l/ must be pronounced with “the center of the tongue pushed down... and the tip of the tongue firmly touching the top of the mouth” (LANE, 1993:89). Differently from pronouncing /u/, the lips must not be rounded. Although not exactly the same, the pronunciation of the English /l/ at the end of a word or syllable resembles that of some gauchos, in words such as *galdério*, *galpão*, *fatal*. A very common example of how the /l/ can be mispronounced is when producing the word *call* as *cow*. How embarrassing it would be if an executive told his/her boss: “Mr. Watkins, you need to give Mr. Smith a cow. It’s an emergency!”.

Another typical mispronunciation problem occurs in words in which the /l/ must be silent. Some examples are:

talk	could	calm
chalk	should	palm
walk	would	half

In these words, the /l/ must not be pronounced. Again, a way to improve the pronunciation of the final /l/ is by listening to an English native speaker’s production and paying attention to the way this sound is pronounced. Although constant attention requires some effort in the beginning, a more native-like production may eventually become automatized.

5 PRONOUNCING THE NASALS

Nasal sounds must be clearly pronounced at the end of words and before other consonants. The nasal /m/ must be produced by closing the lips, while the nasal /n/ must

be pronounced by touching the tip of the tongue to the alveolar ridge (right behind the upper teeth). However, due to the interference of Portuguese, Brazilian EFL learners tend to nasalize the vowel that precedes the nasals instead of producing /m/ and /n/. Thus, words like *company* are pronounced as *cõpany*, *sun* becomes *sã*, and *cotton* becomes *cottõ*. It is only by being aware of the correct articulation and pronunciation of the nasals that their production can be improved.

6 PRONOUNCING UNSTRESSED *h* WORDS

The pronunciation aspect to be dealt with in this section is not necessarily a mistake Brazilian EFL speakers make when pronouncing unstressed *h* words. This section was written only to raise the reader's awareness concerning fluency and native-like speech. We would like to make it clear that the /h/ in unstressed *h* words *can* or *cannot* be produced, it is only a matter of sounding more or less natural in English.

Personal pronouns and auxiliary verbs that begin with /h/ are considered unstressed *h* words, since they are function words. Differently from content words (verbs, adjectives, nouns, adverbs, question words), which are usually stressed in a sentence, function words (personal pronouns, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs) are frequently unstressed. These words simply lose the /h/ sound when they are inside a sentence. It is important to highlight that the /h/ deletion in these cases is not considered slang or colloquial, but standard English.

Examples of sentences containing personal pronouns:

- a) **Tell him** I'm here. => Tell ~~h~~im (tellim)
- b) I won't **ask her**. => ask ~~h~~er (asker)
- c) Keep it **if he** likes it. => if ~~h~~e (ifi)
- d) Give her the money. => Give ~~h~~er (giver)

Examples of sentences containing auxiliary verbs:

- a) We should have stayed there. => should ~~h~~ave (shouldave)
- b) She had already gone. => she ~~h~~ad (shead)
- c) What have they done? => What ~~h~~ave (whatave)
- d) Where have you slept? => Where ~~h~~ave (whereave)

After a pause, for emphasis, or when unstressed words begin a sentence, the /h/ sound must be kept. For example:

- a) I met (after a pause) *her* at the university.
- b) Tell *him*, not me. (emphasis in “him”)
- c) *He* came here.

Many EFL learners do not notice that the *h* is not produced in unstressed words. This deletion is one of the reasons learners tend to tell teachers “I can’t understand a native speaker’s recording on a CD, but I understand my teacher very well”. Teachers tend to use a simpler language in the classroom, articulating the sounds very well for the students to understand the message being conveyed. However, calling the students’ attention to natural speech and deleted sounds are useful ways to improve both the learners’ listening and speaking skills.

CONCLUSION

Due to time constraints, pronunciation practice during an Executive Secretary undergraduate course is very unlikely to occur. Many students who enroll in this course are not fluent in English, and consequently the professors must balance the time they use to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Thus, it is important that the students themselves look for material that can help them overcome pronunciation difficulties. Pronunciation is improved by repetition and awareness of how sounds are produced, and this can be done without the help of a professor. There are several pronunciation manuals on the market that come with CDs and can be used as self-study guides.

Five pronunciation aspects were briefly discussed in the present article with the purpose of calling Executive Secretary students’ attention to the importance of an accurate production of sounds. Besides avoiding miscommunication problems and embarrassing situations, pronunciation practice brings confidence to the EFL speaker. Discovering how sounds are articulated and pronounced is very pleasant and stimulating. We gave you some hints on how to embark this journey. Now it is your turn to improve your pronunciation skills and impress your boss. Good luck!

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