

Fricatives and affricates: a teaching experiment using IPA to Spanish and Catalan bilinguals

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I. INTRODUCTION

The role of English has become vital in our societies. Globalization has transformed the English language into a tool for communication. Nevertheless, Spanish and Catalan bilinguals still tend to have problems when uttering words with intelligibility in English. One of the reasons for these difficulties is that little has been focused on ways to integrate pronunciation in an EFL class. Another reason might be the fact that both Catalan and Spanish have a narrow grapheme-morpheme correlation. However, English has a shallow grapheme-morpheme correlation. Consequently, the grouping of lack of teaching and the divergence between these languages has led to a permanent difficulty in speaking English with accuracy.

II. EXPERIMENT

A. Objectives and hypotheses

The main objective was to aid tertiary students of English whose first languages are Spanish and Catalan through explicit training with the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The hypothesis was that production and perception of sounds of English can be improved by introducing formal phonetic training with the introduction of IPA in an EFL class.

B. Experiment

The participants of this research were sixty nine first-year University students who studied English as a compulsory subject in their Spanish/Catalan degrees. They were all Spanish and Catalan bilinguals who mostly come from Tarragona region. Their level of English varied between A2 and C1.

All participants were recorded in a pre-test which was done before the training and a post-test that took place after the sessions. In both tests students had to read seventeen words, six sentences, a text and free speech which contained the target sounds.

After the pre-test students were divided into two groups (an experimental and a control group) and engaged in a ten-session 40 minute sessions that were integrated in the language class. Both groups had a similar number of students and the levels of English were balanced.

The experimental group were taught the IPA and some basic phonetic rules regarding some fricatives and affricate consonant sounds. However, the control group were not given any formal tuition and did not learn IPA. Instead, they practiced pronunciation through imitation, repetition and speaking exercises that included the target sounds. IPA was taught in the experimental group because, according to Celce-Murcia (1996) it represents a “consistent one-to-one relationship between the written word and the sound it represented”. Therefore, as Lintunen (2005) states: “is likely to be very beneficial for learners who are accustomed to a close phoneme-grapheme correspondence (or shallow orthography) in their native language when they want to learn a language

with more complicated grapheme-to phoneme rules (or deep orthography)", which is the case of Spanish/Catalan learners of English.

B. Analysis and early results

Out of the sixty nine participants, only the information about those who had attended eight sessions or more were taken into consideration. Therefore, finally only the data from 12 control group students and 22 students from the experimental group was analyzed. Though very preliminary, results of acoustic analyses point at the fact that, indeed, the experimental group was able to improve their pronunciation of fricative and affricate sounds more efficiently and effectively than the control group.

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