

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

I. THE SYSTEM OF SIGNIFICANT SOUNDS

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1. *Introduction.* Foreign language teachers whose students have uniform native language backgrounds are apt not to realize that a given language cannot be successfully taught in an identical way to pupils of different language backgrounds. Nevertheless it is true that every different native language causes a different combination of problems in learning a given secondary language.

This is the first in a series of discussions of this general problem. The present article will be confined to problems arising from differences between the systems of significant sounds in the native language and the foreign language. Illustrations will be presented from the pronunciation problems encountered by speakers of Mandarin Chinese, Latin American Spanish, and Brazilian Portuguese in learning English. All problems involving non-significant differences in sounds, special combinations of sounds, accent, intonation, grammar, and vocabulary will be reserved for discussion in subsequent articles.

2. *Phonemic charts.** For purposes of comparison, four charts of the significant sound segments of English, Chinese, Spanish, and Portuguese will provide a starting point:

* These are charts of the phonemic norms in the four languages. It should be noted that the same symbol is used for sounds that are often phonetically different in the various languages (e.g., /d/). Moreover sounds that are approximately the same phonetically may be classified differently according to the phonemic structure of the various languages (e.g., /ç/ is a stop in English and Spanish, but an affricate in Chinese.)

ENGLISH (American)								
		bi-labial	labio-dental	inter-dental	al-veolar	palatal	velar	glottal
stops	voiceless	p			t	č	k	
	voiced	b			d	j ¹	g	
nasals (voiced)		m			n		ŋ	
fricatives	voiceless		f	θ	s	š ²		h
	voiced		v	ð	z	ž ³		
lateral (voiced)					l			
						front	central	back
semivowels						y	r	w
vowels	high					i		u
	higher-mid					ɪ		ʊ
	mid					e	ə	o
	lower-mid					ɛ		ɔ
	low					æ	a	

SPANISH (Latin American)							
		bi-labial	labio-dental	dental	palatal	velar	
stops (voiceless)		p		t	č	k	
stops or fricatives (voiced)		b		d	y	g	
fricatives (voiceless)			f	s		x	
nasals (voiced)		m		n	ɲ		
lateral (voiced)				l			
trill (voiced)				ʀ			
flap (voiced)				r			
					front	central	back
vowels	high				i		u
	mid				e		o
	low					a	

¹ Because of difficulties in obtaining type / dʒ / has been substituted for this symbol in the text of the article.

² / ʃ / has been substituted for this symbol in the text of the article.

³ / ʒ / has been substituted for this symbol in the text of the article.

CHINESE (Mandarin)							
		bi-labial	labio-dental	dental	retro-flex	palatal	velar
stops	aspirated	p		t			k
	unaspirated	b		d			g
nasals (voiced)		m		n			ŋ
affricates	aspirated			c	ç	ç	
	unaspirated			j	ʃ	ʃ ¹	
fricatives (voiceless)			f	s	ʃ	ʃ ²	h
continuants (voiced)				l	r	y	w
vowels	high					*	
	mid					e	
	low					a	

PORTUGUESE (Brazilian)							
		bi-labial	labio-dental	dental	palatal	velar	
stops	voiceless	p		t		k	
	voiced	b		d		g	
nasals (voiced)		m		n	ɲ		
fricatives	voiceless		f	s	ʃ ²		
	voiced		v	z	ʒ ³		
laterals (voiced)				l	ʎ		
trill (voiced)				ʀ			
flap (voiced)				r			
					front	central	back
vowels	high				i		u
	mid				e		o
	low				ɛ	a	ɔ

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3. *Difficulties common to the three language backgrounds.* Examination of these charts will reveal that seven of the English sounds are not present as phonemes in any of the other languages—/θ, ð, ɪ, ʊ, ə, ε, æ/.† For reasons that will be apparent in a moment the two sounds /ð, ə/ will be reserved for later discussion, while this section will consider the remaining sounds, which ordinarily cause the same difficulties for speakers of Chinese, Spanish, and Portuguese in learning English.

/θ/ is frequently pronounced as /s/; mispronunciations of *thick* may approximate English *sick*.

/ɪ/ is usually pronounced as /i/; therefore *bit* may sound like *beat*.

/ʊ/ is frequently pronounced as /u/; hence *full* resembles *fool*.

/ε/ and /æ/ are mutually confused; *pen* and *pan* may sound virtually alike.

4. *Difficulties common to two language backgrounds.* A number of errors are common to speakers of two of the languages chosen for illustration.

4.1. *Difficulties common to speakers of Chinese and Spanish.* Students whose native language is Chinese or Spanish frequently make the same substitutions for five of the English sounds—/ð, z, ɔ, æ, a/. Those substitutions are the following:

/ð/ is frequently pronounced as /d/; thus *there* may be pronounced so that it sounds more like *dare*.

/z/ is usually pronounced as /s/; mispronunciations of *peas* may approximate *peace*.

/ɔ/ is frequently pronounced as /o/; therefore *caught* may sound like *coat*.

/æ/ and /a/ are mutually confused; *add* and *odd* may sound virtually alike.

4.2. *Difficulties common to speakers of Spanish and Portuguese.* Students whose native language is Spanish or Portuguese frequently make the same substitutions for the three additional English sounds—/dʒ, h, ə/. These substitutions follow:

† English and Portuguese /ε/ are different enough phonetically to cause phonemic confusion.

/dʒ/ is frequently pronounced as /ʒ/; thus *pledger* may be pronounced so that it sounds more like *pleasure*.

/h/ is frequently not articulated (confused with "zero"); mispronunciations of *hair* may approximate *air*.

/ə/ is usually pronounced as /a/ or as /ɔ/; therefore *cut* may sound like *cot* or *caught*.

4.3. *Difficulties common to speakers of Chinese and Portuguese.* Students whose native language is Chinese or Portuguese often make the same sort of errors in pronouncing two additional English sounds—/ð, ʊ/.

/ð/ is frequently pronounced as /z/; hence *bathe* resembles *bays*.

/ʊ/ is frequently pronounced as /ə/; errors in pronouncing *could* may approach the sound of *cu'd*.

5. *Difficulties peculiar to a single language background.* The largest number of difficulties are peculiar to speakers of one of the three languages.

5.1. *Difficulties peculiar to speakers of Chinese.* Chinese students of English have special difficulties in pronouncing fourteen English phonemes—/θ, v, l, r, i, u, ʊ, e, æ, ə, o, ε, ɔ, a/.

/θ/ is often pronounced as /t/; *thin* may sound like *tin*.

/v/ is often pronounced as /f/ or as /w/; *veal* may sound like *feel* or *weal*.

/l/ and /r/ are mutually confused; *pull* and *poor* may sound virtually alike.

/u/ is often pronounced as /ʊ/ or as /o/; *pool* may sound like *pull* or *pole*.

/i/ is often pronounced as /ɪ/; *beat* may sound like *bit*.

/ʊ/ is often pronounced as /o/; *could* may sound like *code*.

/e/ and /æ/ are mutually confused; *ate* and *at* may sound virtually alike.

/ə/ is often pronounced as /ε/ or as /ʊ/; *putt* may sound like *pet* or *put*.

/o/ is often pronounced as /u/, as /ʊ/, or as /ɔ/; *pole* may sound like *pool*, *pull*, or *Paul*.

/ε/ is often pronounced as /ə/; *pet* may sound like *putt*.

/ɔ/ and /a/ are mutually confused; *caught* and *cot* may sound virtually alike.

5.2. *Difficulties peculiar to speakers of Spanish.* Spanish-speaking students have special difficulties in pronouncing seven English phonemes—/b, v, d, dʒ, ʒ, y, ʃ/.

/b/ and /v/ are mutually confused; *bale* and *veil* may sound virtually alike.

/d/ is frequently pronounced as /ð/; *den* may sound like *then*.

/dʒ/, /ʒ/, and /y/ are mutually confused; *pledger* and *pleasure* may sound virtually alike, as may *jeer* and *year*.

/ʃ/ is frequently pronounced as /č/; *shear* may sound like *cheer*.

5.3. *Difficulties peculiar to speakers of Portuguese.* Portuguese-speaking students have special difficulties in pronouncing eight English phonemes—/č, dʒ, θ, ð, h, r, y, w/.

/č/ is often pronounced as /dʒ/ or as /ʃ/; *chew* may sound like *Jew* or *shoe*.

/dʒ/ is often pronounced as /č/; *Jew* may sound like *chew*.

/θ/ and /ð/ are mutually confused; *ether* and *either* may sound virtually alike.

/h/ and /r/ are mutually confused; *hose* and *rose* may sound virtually alike.

/y/ and /w/ are mutually confused and frequently not pronounced at all (both confused with "zero"); *year*, *we're*, and *ear* may sound virtually alike.

6. *Conclusion.* The array of examples presented above may be synthesized by considering their meaning in terms of four situations in which English may be taught as a foreign language:

(1) Where all three language backgrounds are present in the students of one class, only five of the above difficulties are common to the whole group, and only ten of the difficulties are common to two of the language backgrounds; whereas twenty-nine of the difficulties are peculiar to one or another of the language backgrounds.

(2) Where students of Chinese and Portuguese language backgrounds are taught in the same class, only seven difficulties are common to the whole group, but twenty-two difficulties are peculiar to one or the other of the linguistic groups.

(3) Where students of Chinese and Spanish language backgrounds are taught in the same class, only ten difficulties are common

to the whole group, but twenty-one difficulties are peculiar to one or the other of the linguistic groups.

(4) Where students of Spanish and Portuguese language backgrounds are taught in the same class, only eight difficulties are common to the whole group, but fifteen difficulties are peculiar to one or the other of the linguistic groups. (This may be startling to those who think Spanish and Portuguese are almost identical.)

Since in all of these cases the problems peculiar to speakers of one or another language are almost twice as numerous as the problems common to speakers of two or three languages, it would seem best whenever possible to teach the system of significant English sounds to classes having unified linguistic backgrounds. The effect of linguistic backgrounds on the learning of the finer points of pronunciation and of accent and intonation are not included in this discussion but will be treated in a subsequent article. When the number of students of a particular linguistic background is not sufficient to form a separate class to study the English phonemic system, it is nevertheless economical and efficient to have special materials prepared to meet the specific problems of the group.

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