

TEACHING GENERAL AMERICAN *r* TO SPANISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS

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SPANISH SPEAKERS habitually use a flapped or trilled *r* in learning English, because Spanish has a flapped and a trilled *r* and does not have an untrilled *r* such as that of General American. The use of Spanish *r* in English has been considered only a matter of "accent," which did not affect meaning. The teaching of untrilled *r*, as a result, has often been postponed until other sounds which could change the meaning of words have been taught. In other words, pronunciation of a Spanish *r* in English has been considered a phonetic substitution which does not affect meaning and which can therefore be overlooked until phonemic substitutions, which do affect meaning, have been overcome.

Flapped Spanish *r*, however, is confused by Spanish speakers with unaspirated *t* between vowels in rapid speech. *What is he?* is understood as *Where is he?* Since the vowels in *what* and *where* are very similar in rapid speech, the only remaining clue for the identification of these two words is the unaspirated *t* of *what* as contrasted with the untrilled *r* of *where*. Spanish speakers confuse these clues. This confusion can be verified easily and repeatedly with any group of beginning Spanish-speaking students by asking them to give one of two responses, *He is a doctor* or *He is here*, to the questions, *What is he?* and *Where is he?* A number of students will answer *He is here* when asked *What is he?* thus showing that they heard *Where is he?*

This confusion will obviously occur wherever unaspirated *t* occurs, and although the meaning may be clarified by other sounds and clues it is nevertheless a problem involving change of meaning (a phonemic problem) and should therefore be coped with early in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The main purpose of this paper, however, is to present a useful technique in the teaching of untrilled *r* to Spanish-speaking students learning English. The technique will prove helpful whether *r* is taught early or late in the course.

Imitation of the teacher-informant's pronunciation of a number of words containing *r* in various positions serves to launch the lesson quickly. This procedure allows the students to gain as much as possible from this simple and direct approach and will just as simply and directly reveal to the teacher what his students can and cannot do with untrilled *r*. Imitation alone, however, will seldom achieve satisfactory production of *r* in the various positions where it appears in English.

The technique which was found most successful at this point is as follows: (1) The teacher tells the student to pronounce a prolonged Spanish trilled *r*, which he can pronounce of course without difficulty. (2) He is asked to pronounce it again with the tip of the tongue farther back on the palate. (3) The teacher pronounces the sustained trilled *r* to encourage and guide the student. (4) To help demonstrate the position of the tongue the teacher holds out a hand with palm upward and fingers bent slightly back. (5) The student is asked to pronounce the same trilled *r* bending the tongue farther back at every try until—presto—out comes an untrilled *r* often to the pleasant surprise of the student himself, who has been struggling with the problem without success. It is sometimes helpful to point out to the student that there is no contact or vibration between the tip of the tongue and the palate.

When the student has produced this sound, he will in turn hear it more clearly and will be able to imitate it better. Simple imitation of words such as *read, rat, red*, which begin with *r* will provide needed practice. Oral pattern practice exercises of the substitution type and of other types will be needed to gradually fix the production of the new sound as an automatic habit.

Production of words and phrases containing *r* between vowels, e.g., *around, very, Mary*, will now be possible through simple imitation, with reminders to bend the tongue back and avoid contact and vibration. Words and phrases with *r*, e.g., *there, near, far, where, car*, can be produced next in the same manner.

The teacher then introduces *r* following a consonant, leaving the *tr, dr*, clusters for the end of the lesson. Extremely slow and prolonged pronunciation of words such as *group, president, great* is imitated by the students. Those having much difficulty may attempt to imitate p-r-r-r . . . , g-r-r-r . . . and gradually glide into a vowel, *a*,

thus saying p-r-r-r-a, g-r-r-r-a. When they succeed, they should step up the speed until it is normal. On speeding to normal pronunciation, however, they will often revert to the flapped *r*. Ever so patiently and cheerfully the teacher must start them again until they succeed. They usually do in one class period, although the establishment of the new *r* as an automatic habit will require repeated follow-up practice. Words with *tr*, *dr*, e.g., *tree*, *try*, *dry*, *drive*, are practiced the same as the above with the expectation that they will be more difficult to pronounce satisfactorily.

The students will by now be able to produce General American *r* when their attention is directed primarily to the pronunciation of the sound itself. It is to be expected, however, that as they engage in free conversation and concentrate on the expression of their thoughts and feelings they will revert to the flapped and trilled *r*'s which they can produce automatically. Practices which begin with full attention on the *r* and will gradually draw attention away from it will now be needed to establish a habit that will operate in free conversation. One such practice follows:

- Teacher: Where are your brothers?
 Teacher: My brothers are here.
 Teacher to Student A: Where are your brothers?
 Student A: My brothers are here.
 Teacher: Where are your problems?
 Student B: My problems are here.
 Teacher: Where are the trees?
 Student C: The trees are here.
 Teacher: Where are your friends?
 Student D: My friends are here.
 Teacher: Where are the doctors?
 Student E: The doctors are here.
 Teacher: Where are the players?
 Student F: The players are here.
 Teacher: Where are the representatives?
 Student G: The representatives are here.
 Teacher: Where are the refrigerators?
 Student H: The refrigerators are here.
 Teacher: Where are the razor blades?
 Student I: The razor blades are here.

Memorization of a tongue twister based on *r* will lighten the drill toward the end of the lesson. Following are samples, but the teacher may prepare one that will mean more to the particular class involved.

Around the rough and rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran.
Her brother tried to remember how to pronounce General
American *r*.

I remember the trees on the shore of the river.

The teacher may at any time during the lesson use General American *r* in Spanish *r* tongue twisters; e.g., *El perro de San Roque está sin rabo porque San Roque se lo ha cortado*, or *Erre con erre, cigarro*, etc. This rendition will bring home to the students the violent distortion of their language wrought by the simple substitution of one—only one—strange phoneme. They will then better imagine what they do to English when they use Spanish *r* in it. They will then see the point in working on that one sound until it is mastered, since its mastery will improve their English on every one of the innumerable occasions in which that sound occurs.