

## A TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING POSTVOCALIC AMERICAN ENGLISH [l] TO SPANISH AMERICANS

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**I**N TEACHING the pronunciation of a foreign language one of the most difficult errors to correct is that of phonetic substitution which does not result in semantic confusion. This mispronunciation results in much of the so-called "foreign accent," *i.e.*, a strangeness which is easy for a native speaker to note as being different, but which does not confuse his understanding of what the foreigner is saying. Such a sound is the variety of postvocalic *l* used by Spanish speakers in words like *meal, bill, sale, tell, shall, doll, cool, full, bowl, call, mile, towel, soil, mule, milk, film, cold, colt.*

The Spanish speaker will substitute his so-called "clear" *l* in all of these words with a resulting sound peculiar to American ears but not strange enough to be confused with any other sound in the language. There is no confusion between *tell* as the Spanish speaker pronounces it and as a native speaker of English pronounces it—none of the sort of confusion that occurs when a foreigner substitutes his /i/ vowel for the English /ɪ/ making such words as *bit* sound somewhat like *beat*.

Naturally in teaching pronunciation it is essential to concentrate first on the phonemic distinctions such as /i/ and /ɪ/, /s/ and /z/, and so forth. For advanced students, however, who desire to speak English with as little foreign flavor as possible, it is important to overcome the non-phonemic peculiarities of speech.

In the formulation of pronunciation exercises, the phonetic differences between Spanish and English postvocalic *l* must be considered first. Spanish *l* is produced with the tip and blade of the tongue spread out against the upper gum with a good deal of muscular pressure. The English postvocalic *l* is made with the tip of the tongue against the upper gum, the middle of the tongue rather low, and with very little pressure. Moreover, the transition from the preceding vowel to the *l* tends to be slower than in Spanish.

In classroom drill, therefore, articulatory position, tongue pressure, and transition speed need to be emphasized. A typical set of exercises could proceed as follows:

(1) The teacher pronounces the word *eel* very slowly diphthongizing the vowel even to the point of making two separate syllables:

[i:ə]. The students pronounce the word in imitation of the teacher. This same thing can be done with a list of words such as *ale*, *Al*, *all*, *oil*, *owl*, *I'll*, so that the students gain flexibility in pronouncing vowel plus *l*. At the same time the teacher observes the tongue position of each student, trying to make sure that the student raises only the tongue tip and applies only slight pressure.

(2) The above exercise is repeated with words in which the vowel sound is preceded by a consonant sound: *meal* [mi:ə], *sale*, *coal*, *fall*, *fool*, and so on.

(3) A third set of words is introduced, this time with the *l* followed by another consonant: *field*, *cold*, *colt*, *feels*, *called*, and so on, using all the combinations of *l* plus consonant which occur post-vocally in English.<sup>1</sup>

(4) After the student has firm control of the articulatory position for English *l* he can practice words like *tell*, *fill*, *full*, *dull*, and so forth, in which the transition from the vowel to the *l* is a little more rapid. Students should be cautioned to keep the middle of the tongue in a rather low position even though it may be somewhat higher than after other vowels.

(5) Consonant combinations with the preceding type of word can be practiced next: *milk*, *film*, *felt*, and so forth.

(6) The final step is to use the words in sentences and connected discourse. Patterns such as the following have been found useful:

- Student A. Was it a good *meal*?  
 B. Yes, it was a good *meal*.<sup>2</sup>  
 C. No, it wasn't a good *meal*.
- Student D. Did he *tell* you a story?  
 E. Yes, he *told* us a story.  
 F. No, he didn't *tell* us a story.
- Student G. The *bowl* is *old*.  
 H. Is the *bowl* *old*?  
 I. Yes, the *bowl's* *old*.
- Student J. How do you *feel*?  
 K. I *feel* fine.  
 L. I don't *feel* very *well*.

<sup>1</sup> For such combinations see C. C. Fries, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1945. p. 18 (footnote 6).

<sup>2</sup> Care must be taken to ensure a falling intonation glide on this single syllable at the end of the utterance. This also helps lengthen the transition between the vowel and the *l*. Thus the word is drawled out: [mi:ə].