

# Spanish Voices in the English classroom

## Abstract

*English Vowels for Spanish Speakers* is a repertoire of English vowel sounds that has been carefully selected according to what sounds best and most natural coming from the mouth of a Spanish speaker using English. This article examines how it was compiled and goes on to suggest some practical uses.

## Terminology

- The term *vowel sounds* is taken to mean both vowels and diphthongs.
- *RP* is taken to mean modern Received Pronunciation.

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## I Introduction – a drilling dilemma

I am a big fan of drilling-based activities. Any teacher who wants his or her students to sound comprehensible and “correct” should be. For learners, trying out the sounds of an English structure or piece of vocabulary is as fundamental as trying on clothes before buying. Recently, however, I have been faced with a drilling dilemma.

At its most fundamental, drilling involves the teacher saying a word or structure and having the students repeat it. Students have to use their ears and sometimes they do this too well. I first realised this when it became apparent that one of my Spanish learners had picked up on the fact that I, as a Scottish speaker, use different diphthongs in the words nine and five.

	Nine	Five
My accent:	/nəɪn/	/faɪv/
RP speaker:	/naɪn/	/faɪv/

The /əi/ diphthong (which I pronounce in the word nine) is not represented in the phonemic chart. That is because it is not a sound present in the phonemic repertoire of an RP speaker. Here are some more examples of the same diphthongs in my speech.

Dry white wine  
/aɪ/ /əi/ /əi/

Light my fire  
/əi/ /aɪ/ /aɪ/

I, Simon Pie, deny that I lie to my wife  
/aɪ/ /aɪ/ /aɪ/ /aɪ/ /aɪ/ /əi/

Quite understandably, my learner was confused. It had never been my intention to train my students to differentiate between and consequently produce the same two sounds in their speech. Wouldn't that be pointless? I quickly changed my way of drilling, taking care to avoid the /əi/ diphthong and using the /aɪ/ diphthong in its place.

Nine /naɪn/ Five /faɪv/ etc

In fact, this is not the only adjustment that I have made to my drilling accent. Here are the other three. (Note that in each case, the main vowel sounds in my accent which are under scrutiny are not represented in the phonemic chart. Again this is because these vowel sounds are not present in the phonemic repertoire of an RP speaker.)

	My natural accent	My drilling accent	Vowel change
How now brown cow	hʌʊnɒʊbrɒʊnkɒʊ	haʊnaʊbraʊnkaʊ	/ʌʊ/ → /aʊ/
The rain in Spain	θəre:nənspe:n	θəreɪnənspeɪn	/e:/ → /eɪ/
Scary hairy bears	ske:rihe:ribe:rz	skeriherberz	/e:/ → /e/

It is important to point out that I am merely considering my drilling accent here. I do not change my natural accent when speaking normally in class. But why do I change my drilling accent? Am I trying to encourage my students to speak English like an RP speaker? No, that can't be the case. For a start, I have never made any attempt to drill the standard dictionary pronunciation of words such as horse (/hɔ:s/), daughter (/dɔ:tə/) and brought (/brɔ:t/). I stick with my natural accent in these cases (/hɔrs/ /dɔtə/ /brɔt/) thus avoiding the long /ɔ:/ vowel. Similarly, in words such as laugh, dance and can't, I drill the short /æ/ vowel rather than the long vowel /ɑ:/ which is used in these words by RP speakers.

So why have I been changing my accent when drilling?

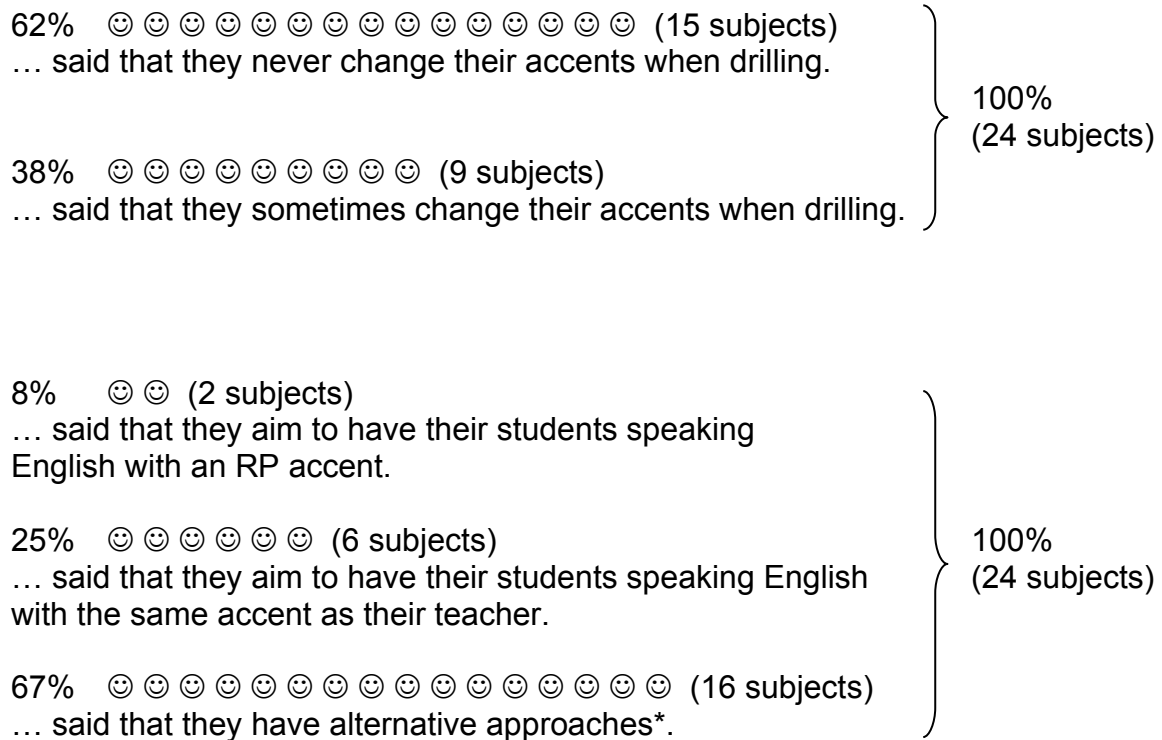
## II Survey results

In this mini survey, I spoke with 32 subjects - all native English teachers residing in Barcelona.

25% (8 subjects) said that they do not drill in class.

75% (24 subjects) said that they do drill in class

Of the 24 subjects that drill in class: -



(\*) When questioned further about their “alternative approaches”, 8 of the 16 subjects mentioned that their methods involve giving paramount importance to the comprehensibility of spoken L2 English.

Has comprehensibility also been the driving force behind my drilling approach?

### III Catering towards Spanish accents

For the past four years I have been teaching English to Spanish learners. During this time and to some degree without really realising it, I have also been refining the vowel sounds in my drilling voice to those that I feel are most suited for *their* voices (not their ears). In a sense, I have been catering towards the sound of my students' natural L2 accents rather than the sound of any native L1 English accent. I feel that this approach is uncontrived, natural and realistic. In its defence I would also mention the following factors.

#### 1) Prestige

There seems to be little in the way of negative attitudes towards Spanish accents in general.

#### 2) Identity

That such accents are L2 accents does not mean that they are not "correct" in any way. As long as comprehensibility is not an issue, Spanish accents should be considered as valid as those from East London, Liverpool or Texas. In the majority of cases, there may be no more reason for a Spanish speaker to learn RP or than there is for a native Yorkshire man to do it.

#### 3) Expectation

When English comes out of the mouth of a native Spanish speaker, we expect it to sound Spanish. This is, of course, the reality of the situation and it seems realistic to work with it. We are surprised (albeit sometimes pleasantly) when we hear a native Spanish speaker speaking with, for example, an Australian accent. But this rare phenomenon is often a result of a learner having lived in some English-speaking environment with a dominant accent rather than a specific teaching approach.

In the following section, we will examine the specific repertoire of English vowel sounds that I am advocating for Spanish speakers.

## IV English Vowels for Spanish Speakers

With the above in mind, I set out to create a [chart](#) which represents the vowels and diphthongs that a Spanish speaker needs to be able to produce when speaking English. But can such a standardisation be possible? We are well aware of the huge number of L1 English accents that exists in the world. Does such a diversity of L1 Spanish accents not also exist? Accentual variation does, of course, exist in the Spanish language. However, we are specifically dealing with the level of vowel production and at this level, such a standardisation is possible.

### Why vowels?

The character and sound of a native English accent is determined primarily at the level of vowel and diphthong production. In RP, there are 12 vowels and 8 diphthongs. Consonant production, on the other hand is subject to less variation among native English speakers.

Conversely, in Spanish there are only 5 pure vowels which are practically invariable throughout the Spanish-speaking world. These vowels are combined in various ways to produce diphthongs. The character and sound of native Spanish accents is largely determined at the level of consonant production and intonation.

This means that one of the characteristics of native Spanish accents is a smaller repertoire of vowel sounds. *English Vowels for Spanish Speakers* takes this into account by minimizing the number of new vowel sounds that a Spanish-speaker must learn to produce.

	Number of short vowels	Number of long vowels	Number of diphthongs
RP (phonemic chart)	7	5	8
<i>English Vowels for Spanish Speakers</i>	6	5	4

As a teacher of Spanish speaking students, I have found myself having to focus on vowel sound production more than the other levels of pronunciation (consonant production, word and sentence stress, intonation, etc). Perhaps the comparatively small repertoire of vowel sounds in the Spanish language accounts for this.

### The 10 basic vowel sounds

After the schwa, the 10 most common vowel sounds in English can be illustrated by the magic e phenomenon.

Mad /æ/	Made /eɪ/ (= the alphabet name of the letter A)
Pet /e/	Pete /iː/ (= the alphabet name of the letter E)
Win /ɪ/	Wine /aɪ/ (= the alphabet name of the letter I)
Not /ɒ/	Note /əʊ/ (= the alphabet name of the letter O)
Cut /ʌ/	Cute /juː/ (= the alphabet name of the letter U)

The general observation is that the addition of the letter e in words such as those above alters the sound of the pronounced vowel or diphthong. Because of the high frequency of use of these 10 vowel sounds in spoken English, it seems plausible that equivalents should be provided for all of them in the chart. The 10 basic vowel sounds form the core of the chart.

As well as giving the phonemic symbols for these 10 vowel sounds, *English Vowels for Spanish Speakers* also suggests a user friendly way of referring to them - long A (/eɪ/), short A (/æ/), long E (/iː/), short E (/e/), etc.

One of the phonemes, the /əʊ/ diphthong (long O), is an unnatural sound for Spanish speakers. Spanish speakers naturally avoid this sound in words such as phone, roll and crow, substituting it with a long vowel similar in sound to that of the Scottish one in the same words. On *English Vowels for Spanish Speakers* this sound is represented by /oː/. This sound is not found on the phonemic chart.

Rolling Stones	
Spanish speaker	RP speaker
/roːlɪŋstoːnz/	/rəʊlɪŋstəʊnz/

### The 4 minor vowel sounds

The 4 diphthongs on the *English Vowels for Spanish Speakers* chart have Spanish equivalents: -

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>
/aʊ/	Crowded House	auto
/eɪ/	Play Station	buey
/aɪ/	Nine to five	baile
/ɔɪ/	Noisy boys	hoy

Two of these (/eɪ/ and /aɪ/) have already been considered as being 2 of the 10 basic vowel sounds. The other two (/aʊ/ down and /ɔɪ/ boy) which are less common, are included at the top right hand side of the chart.

The long vowel sounds /ɜ:/ and /ɑ:/, which are also less common than the 10 basic vowel sounds are also included. It is suggested that Spanish speakers use these sounds only in conjunction with /r/.

Third world	/θɜ:rdwɜ:rlɪd/	
Car park	/kɑ:rpɑ:rk/	
Can't dance	/kæn(t)dæns/	(sound avoided in absence of r)

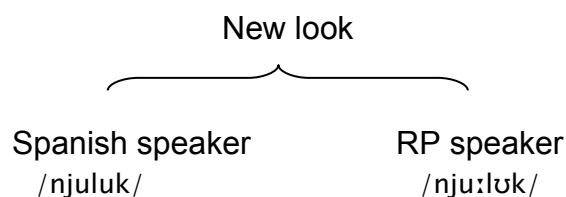
On the chart, the /ɑ:/ box (shown as /ɑ:r/) is located on the same level as the short and long A boxes (/æ/ and /eɪ/). This is because in spelling, these three vowel sounds have strong relationships with the letter a.

The /ɜ:/ sound can be represented by a number of orthographies (germ, bird, word, turn, journal, earn, etc) but none of which involves the letter a. The /ɜ:/ box (or rather /ɜ:r/ since this vowel is also associated with /r/). has been positioned on the chart to reflect this.

### Omissions from the phonemic chart

Three diphthongs - /ɪə/ (ear), /ʊə/ (tour) and /eə/ (hair) have been omitted from *English sounds for Spanish speakers*. These sounds are present on the phonemic chart primarily because RP speakers, unlike Spanish speakers, are not rhotic (they do not pronounce all their r's).

An RP accent will differentiate between the sound of the vowels in the words foot /fʊt/ and boot /bu:t/. I have always felt that any attempt to drill this difference in a Spanish learner is analogous to a Scotsman drilling the difference between his vowel sounds in the words nine and five (see pages 1 and 2). For this reason the short /ʊ/ vowel has been omitted from the chart. The actual Spanish vowel that is produced naturally in words such as foot and boot lies somewhere between /ʊ/ and /u:/. On *English Vowels for Spanish Voices*, it could have been represented by /u/ but this has been avoided for simplicity.



In addition, the long U box in the chart has been split into 2 boxes: /u:/ and /ju:/. This is because the /ju:/ sound is the natural magic e sound (see page 5): -

Cut /kʌt/	+	e	→	Cute /kju:t/
Cub /kʌb/	+	e	→	Cube /kju:b/
Hug /hʌg/	+	e	→	Huge /hju:dʒ/

However, this does not mean that /u:/ is always accompanied by /j/: -

Fruit juice /fru:(t)dʒu:s/

On the chart, the split box serves to increase students' awareness of this situation.

Finally, the long /ɔ:/ has been omitted. Whereas RP speakers use this sound Spanish speakers naturally tend to use /ɒ/ (or sometimes /o:/).

Walkie-talkie	
Spanish speaker	RP speaker
/wɒkɪtɒki/	/wɔ:kɪtɔ:ki/

## V Bad pronunciation versus bad accents

	"Incorrect" Spanish pronunciation	"Correct" Spanish pronunciation	Standard English dictionary
Will Smith	/wi:lsmi:θ/	/wɪlsmiθ/	-
Message	/mi:sədʒ/	/mesedʒ/	/mesədʒ/
Daughter	/daʊtər/	/dɒtər/	/dɔ:tə/
Thirsty	/θi:rsti/	/θɜ:rsti/	/θɜ:sti/
False	/fæls/	/fɒls/	/fɔ:ls/
Live (verb)	/laɪv/	/lɪv/	/lɪv/
Suit	/swi:t/	/su:t/	/su:t/
Blood	/blu:d/	/blʌd/	/blʌd/
Heart	/hert/	/hɑ:rt/	/hɑ:t/
Public	/pu:blɪk/	/pʌblɪk/	/pʌblɪk/
Private	/pri:vait/	/praɪvət/	/praɪvət/
Famous	/fæmaʊs/	/feɪməs/	/feɪməs/

At the level of vowel sound production, we can see some examples of bad pronunciation in the second column above. In each example, the hypothetical Spanish speaker has failed to produce the word with the appropriate vowel sound or sounds. I will now cite three reasons for this overly familiar phenomenon:-

- 1) Spelling and sound associations  
Learners often fail to grasp the relationships between certain orthographical features and sound production in English. For example, a student may not realise that ai in words such as wait, mail and explain corresponds to the /eɪ/ rather than the /aɪ/ diphthong.
- 2) Maverick spellings  
Learners may be taken in by words such as blood, heart and live where the normal orthographic and sound associations are not observed.
- 3) Learners' accents  
Note that the phonemic transcriptions of the "correct" Spanish pronunciation are not necessarily the same as those provided in standard English dictionaries. This does not undermine their validity in any way. It is merely a consequence of a learner speaking English with the sounds represented on *English Vowels for Spanish Speakers* rather than those represented on the phonemic chart.

On the other hand, if a learner fails to distinguish between sounds such as /ɪ/ and /i:/ or /æ/ and /ʌ/ when speaking, the result may be an accent that requires some tuning.

At the phonemic level, then, I make a distinction between bad pronunciation and a bad accent: -

	Bad pronunciation	Bad accent
Definition	Student is unaware of what phonemes should comprise a word or item (or is aware but has failed to employ them well).	Student is unaware of some aspect of the phonemic repertoire which he/she should be producing in speech.
Cure	Activities that aim to build up awareness of the relationships that exist between orthography and sound.	Voice training activities and drills which aim to have the student aware of and differentiating between the individual phonemic sounds in spoken language production.

## VI Accentual awareness

### The Oral Level

This is the level we have been dealing with exclusively up until now. We have been focusing on the sounds (specifically a suggested repertoire of vowel sounds) that a learner requires for spoken language production.

### The Aural Level

Of course, there is a big case for raising our students' awareness of accentual variation in the English speaking world. In the classroom, it may be beneficial to examine the sounds and characteristics of for example: -

- The teacher's native accent
- Standard accents (RP, General American, etc)
- Any L1 or L2 English accents that individuals may come into contact with. (A learner may be having to communicate in English with German speakers for business purposes, for example).

## VII Practical use

This section will describe some activities and practical approaches in the English classroom which centre around English Vowels for Spanish Speakers. All of the following will be considered: -

- 1) A vowel sound recognition activity (the aural level)
- 2) A vowel sound production activity (the oral level)
- 3) An activity which builds up student-understanding of certain relationships between spelling and vowel sounds.
- 4) A way in which the chart can be used for vocabulary acquisition
- 5) A vocabulary reactivation activity
- 6) A way for the teacher to elicit vowel sounds in class.

### Vowel recognition activity - Head and shoulders, knees and toes

- 1) Sing the song with your class just like native English children do so at school. Don't forget the actions.

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Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes  
 Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes and ...  
 Eyes and ears and chin and mouth and nose  
 Head and shoulders knees and toes, knees and toes

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If you don't know the tune, ask a native English speaker.

- 2) Repeat the song but with vowel sounds only (keep doing the actions)
- 3) We now have 6 different vowel sounds: -

Head		/e/
Nose	(Toe Shoulder)	/o: / (RP - /əʊ/)
Knee	(Ear*)	/i: /
Eye		/aɪ /
Chin		/ɪ /
Mouth		/aʊ /

(\* I would drill /i:r/ rather than /ɪə/)

- 4) Each of the items in the box below contains one of the previous 6 sounds. Pronounce them loudly and clearly while students point to either their head, nose, knee, eye, chin or mouth accordingly. For example, the teacher shouts, "five" and the students should point to their eyes. In the case of items with more than one syllable, we are examining the vowel sound which falls on the strong syllable.

Item List (include your own items)

Numbers: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12\*

Letters: B, C, D, E, F, G, I, L, M, N, O, P, S, T, V, X, Y, Z\*

Days: Wednesday Friday

Months: February July September October  
 November December

(\*Hold up letter and number flash cards while pronouncing them)

- 5) Get the students to do this with their eyes closed so that they cannot be influenced by others.

## Vowel reproduction / correlating vowel sounds with orthography

(See *Fishing Cards*)

Here is an activity that can tackle both of these aims at once. It can be very useful to consider the 10 basic vowel sounds one pair at a time. This activity deals with the long and short E sounds (/i: / and /e /) and one possible way of spelling them (ea).

I call this game "Fishing". It works best for pairs and small groups.

- 1) Cut up and drill all the items on [the cards](#). Use the *English Voices for Spanish Speakers* chart to identify any problematic sounds. For example, the word Earth belongs in the /ɜ:r / (Third world) rather than the /e / box (Heavy metal).
- 2) Lay all the cards (or fishes) face up on the table.
- 3) Students take it in turn to pick up a card and pronounce what is on it. If they say it correctly, they keep it. If not, they have to put it back.
- 4) When there are no cards left on the table, the player with the most in his/her hand wins.

This game serves to reinforce the connection between the written letters ea and the vowel sounds /e / and /i: /. It is useful for students to realise that /i: / is the dominant pronunciation of ea. It is also important that they realise that the following are exceptions: -

Earth, heard, pearl, learn, earn	/ɜ:r /
Sean	/ə /
Heart	/hɜ: /
Steak, great	/eɪ /

(NB according to *English Vowel Sounds for Spanish Speakers*, words like ear are pronounced with the /i: / rather than the /ɪə / sound and are therefore not exceptions).

## Learning New Vocabulary or Items

(See [Students' Chart](#))

This is a good way for sorting out the pronunciation of a word when it is first met or when it is apparent that it is being mispronounced. Simply photocopy a chart per student per lesson who can then place words in the correct box according to the stressed vowel.

For example if we were doing a lesson on work, the following words might arise: -

Salary, bank manager,	students write in short A box
Job, boss, office	students write in short O box
Fired, pilot, private	students write in long I box
Etc	

It is also a good idea to have some method of remembering the word stress which can also be entered in the box (The stress of Bank manager, for example, can be represented by Oooo).

## Reactivating pre-existing vocabulary

This is what I call a gridless word search. If done correctly, you can have your students revising any topic that you have already studied. For example, put students into pairs or small groups and get them to find the Heart Sound /a:r/ in: -

- 1) A planet / chocolate bar
- 2) A month
- 3) A musical instrument
- 4) A part of the body (not heart)
- 5) The first name of a famous cartoon character
- 6) A country
- 7) A herb
- 8) A letter of the alphabet

Possible answers: -

- 1) Mars (bar)
- 2) March
- 3) Guitar
- 4) Arm
- 5) Bart or Marge Simpson
- 6) Denmark
- 7) Parsley
- 8) R

## Eliciting vowel sounds

Back to *head and shoulders, knees and toes*. With the addition of some other parts of the body/gestures, the teacher has a very effective vowel elicitation system that helps to correct vowel misplacements.

The 10 Basic vowel sounds: -

- /æ/ point to **back**
- /eɪ/ draw an imaginary circle around your **face**
- /e/ point to **head**
- /i:/ point to **cheek**
- /ɪ/ point to **chin**
- /aɪ/ point to **eye**
- /ɒ/ hold **jaw**
- /o:/ point to **nose**
- /ʌ/ point **up** (note that the phonetic symbol for this sound also points up)
- /u:/ point to **foot**

The 4 minor vowel sounds: -

- /ɜ:r/ tug your **shirt** or T-**shirt**
- /ɑ:r/ beat your hand on your **heart**
- /aʊ/ point **down**
- /ɔɪ/ I've never been able to think of one for this sound.

For example, when Felipe says breekfast instead of breakfast, all you have to do is draw attention to the word in question and point to your head. In my experience, if you take the time to make your Spanish students aware of this gesture system, it becomes a very effective tool. You will look a bit odd to a newcomer to the class but in this situation the existing students always seem eager to explain (and therefore revise) the system.

## VIII Summary

Native English accents are characterised principally at the level of vowel production. Regardless of dialect, Spanish has 5 pure vowels. An attempt to train our Spanish-speaking learners to emulate an L1 standard or regional English accent may be analogous to attempting to make wrong bits of the jigsaw puzzle fit.

At the phonemic level, we can improve the L2 English accents and word pronunciation of our Spanish-speaking learners by: -

- 1) Working to develop their phonemic recognition and production abilities. *English vowels for Spanish speakers* is a suggested vowel sound repertoire for Spanish learners of English.
- 2) Raising their awareness of relationships that exist between certain orthographical features and phonemes (oo with /u:/ for example). We should also raise awareness of situations in which those relationships are not observed (in the words flood, blood and poor for example).

Students can be made aware of the characteristics and sounds of other native and non-native English accents.

## IX References

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