

Overcoming the American Accent in Spanish

An introduction also for native speakers of Spanish

COMPARED TO ENGLISH, Spanish has a much simpler phonological system: there are many fewer basic sounds (what linguists call *phonemes*) in Spanish than there are in English. So while the native Spanish speaker is faced with the challenge of learning many sounds that are not found in his language, the native English speaker has the opposite problem: how to unlearn—temporarily forget—three-quarters of the phonemes that he or she uses in everyday speech.

Consider: there are only five vowel phonemes in Spanish, but there are over 15 in English (Table 1). In Spanish there are 17 simple consonant phonemes, while in English there are 24. Doing the math, there 85 basic Spanish syllables compared to 360 in English. Actually, the math is more complex; that is, once one takes into account the many double-letter consonants that are found in both languages (e.g., br, bl, cr, cl).

The native English speaker who approaches Spanish is tripped up by two initial difficulties: with just a few exceptions, the two languages are spelled with the same Latin letters, creating a horrible confusion regarding pronunciation. A deeper problem yet is neurological in its roots: the mind of the native English speaker filters spoken Spanish by English phonological rules; and so only English-like sounds are actually “heard” by the ear. The first goal, therefore, is to learn what to listen for; the second, to learn what to forget in English; third, getting the tongue to repeat Spanish sounds without English coatings; and finally (and paradoxically) getting the ear to hear Spanish, as spoken.

This report will benefit the English speaker who has conversational ability in Spanish, advanced or otherwise. A close study will also benefit the Spanish-speaking student of English.

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