

Common Articulation Variations Between English and Spanish

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When working with a bilingual student, it is important to be aware of typical articulation rules and patterns of speech found in that student's language and dialect. Knowing these differences helps the Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) completing an evaluation to be aware of what might be a disorder versus a difference resulting from the particular rules and patterns of the student's primary language.

Often times, it is easy to mistake typical differences in articulation as a disorder if the student is transferring rules of speech from his/her primary language into the second language. Learning these typical differences will help avoid misdiagnosing a bilingual student as having an articulation disorder. This handout explains a few of these differences.



General Articulation Variances Between English and Spanish:

A. Consonants: There are many differences between the consonants in English and Spanish. There are 15 phonemes that occur in both languages, 5 that occur in Spanish only, and 9 that occur in English only. Here are a few examples.

- "ch" and "sh" are two different phonemes in English. However, in Spanish, students may pronounce these interchangeably without changing word meaning. For example, students may pronounce *chimenea* as "chimenea" or "shimenea."
- "v" and "b" are two different phonemes in English. However, in Spanish, both letters appear in written words but the typical pronunciation is "b" (depending on dialect). For example, *vaca* sounds like "baca" just as *baja* sounds like "baja."
- "s" and "z" in English are two different phonemes. However, in Spanish, both letters appear in written words but the typical pronunciation is "s" (depending on dialect). For example, *zapato* sounds like "sapato" just as *sopa* sounds like "sopa."
- There are other allophonic variations of the "b," "d," and "g" sounds that exist in Spanish that we do not produce in English. Also the trilled "rr" is a phoneme in Spanish and will carry a different meaning than a word produced with an "r." For example, *perro* means "dog" and *pero* is the conjunction "but."

B. Vowels: There are only five vowels found in the Spanish language. There is no unstressed schwa / ə / as found in the English word "above." This is very different from the 30+ vowels found in English. Spanish speaking children may substitute a tenser vowel for the unstressed vowels in an English word. Also, in addition to diphthongs, triphthongs are also common in Spanish (though not typically found in English).

• The following are the five Spanish vowels:

- / i / = keep
- / e / = made, vet
- / a / = cot
- / u / = you
- / o / = sew



C. Syllables: Spanish is a syllabic language. This language has syllables that fall within and between words. Each syllable has the same duration, no matter where the stress in the word may fall. This is often why many English speakers may perceive Spanish speakers as "rapid" talkers. In contrast, English has an accentual rhythm of speech in which the accented syllables have a longer duration than the unaccented syllables. For example, "I stayed a while" has two accented areas of stress that have a slightly longer duration than the other sounds in the sentence.

D. Pitch: In Spanish, pitch does not vary as it does in English. Therefore, a student whose primary language is Spanish may sound monotone when speaking English.

E. Accent: In Spanish, placement of an accent on a word may change the meaning. For example:

Camino = (1st person present tense) "I walk."

Caminó = (3rd person past tense) "You (formal)" or "He/She walked."

F. Dialectal Variations: It is important to note where the Spanish student is from because, depending upon the student's region/country, there will be different types of variations and substitutions common to his/her dialect. Articulation and language differences occur in different countries. For example, some Caribbean (i.e., Puerto Rico and Cuba) communities will simply delete the final / s / in words. An example would be *los amigos* produced as "lo amigo." This will have an effect on articulation, as well as language. Students may carryover this final / s / deletion into English.

Spanish speakers with a Castilian dialect may produce the "th" sound in place of the / s /. For example, *cena* would sound like "thena" in certain dialects. This occurs only in parts of Spain and is not typical to Spanish speakers from any other country.

Knowing these and other dialectal variations will help the SLP determine if the student is exhibiting disordered articulation or simply differences in pronunciation based upon his/her primary language.

Resources

Goldstein, Brian A. (2004) *Bilingual Language Development and Disorders In Spanish-English Speakers*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Teschner, Richard V. (2000) *Camino Oral: Fonética, fonología, y práctica de los sonidos del español*. 2nd Edition. Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Barrutia, Richard and Schwegler, Armin (1982) *Fonética Y Fonología Españolas*. 2nd Edition. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.