

THE RELEVANCE OF PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY IN THE CLASSES OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A Contrastive Approach

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Abstract

This final paper aims to emphasize the relevance of Phonetics and Phonology for pronunciation teaching and learning in the acquisition of English as a foreign language, an ability that in many cases, fails to receive due attention in English classes in Brazilian schools, both in regular ones and in language institutes. Through a contrastive approach between phonemes of English and Portuguese, this research aims to suggest that pronunciation must be taught since the initial classes, with the use of an English phonemic chart and explanations about the vocal tract, so learners can overcome obstacles that naturally exist when studying a foreign language and learn an intelligible pronunciation.

Key words: Phonetics. Phonology. Contrastive approach. Pronunciation Teaching. Intelligibility.

A RELEVÂNCIA DA FONÉTICA E DA FONOLOGIA NAS AULAS DE INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA: Uma Abordagem Contrastiva

Resumo

Este trabalho de conclusão de curso pretende enfatizar a relevância da fonética e da fonologia para o ensino e a aprendizagem da pronúncia na aquisição do inglês como língua estrangeira, uma habilidade que, em muitos casos, não recebe a devida atenção nas aulas de inglês no Brasil, tanto na escola regular como nas escolas de idiomas. Através de uma abordagem contrastiva entre fonemas do inglês e do português, esta pesquisa pretende sugerir que a pronúncia deve ser ensinada desde as aulas iniciais, com o uso de um quadro fonético da língua inglesa e explicações sobre o aparelho fonador, a fim de que os alunos possam superar obstáculos que

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naturalmente existem ao se estudar uma língua estrangeira e aprendam uma pronúncia inteligível.

Palavras-chave: Fonética. Fonologia. Abordagem contrastiva. Ensino de pronúncia. Inteligibilidade.

Introduction

English is today's *lingua franca*, which results in a growth in the number of specialized English schools throughout the national territory, besides being a subject that integrates the Common National Base of regular education. It is known that, through the ages, linguists had favored grammatical studies rather than pronunciation, which began to be better approached in the early twentieth century after the International Phonetic Association, which created the International Phonetic Alphabet, emerged in 1886. Recently, the teaching of English in Brazil has been changing from the traditional focus on grammar to textual and communicative approaches, both in regular schools and in language schools. However, in many cases, pronunciation teaching continues to be neglected, not infrequently restricting itself, when it happens, to listening to words and statements, and repeating them without attention to phonetic criteria. The crucial difference between the acquisition of Portuguese as the first language (L1) and the acquisition of English (L2) as a foreign language (EFL) is that Brazilian speakers are not exposed to English daily, as they are exposed to their mother tongue from the earliest age. For this reason, in the few weekly EFL classes, the little practice of listening to words and phrases previously recorded or spoken by the teacher, in order to repeat them without the correct knowledge of the phonemes is not enough to provide an effective learning for most students. Moreover, it may sediment incorrect pronunciations, which cannot be confused with linguistic variation, and which can lead to misunderstandings by native speakers of English.

This paper questions if this situation can change so Brazilian speakers of English can improve their pronunciation. The hypothesis is that this change is feasible, provided there is no search for a “perfect pronunciation”, but a search for an intelligible

pronunciation which allows Brazilian speakers of English to communicate effectively with native speakers of English and speakers of English as an international language. That is why this paper emphasizes the need for pronunciation teaching to receive the due attention from teachers.

Moreover, this paper intends to show the relevance of Phonetics and Phonology for the teaching and learning of pronunciation, which can be more effective if it is done through a contrastive approach between the Portuguese and English phonemes since the first lessons, so learners gradually identify the sounds that do not exist in Portuguese and progressively familiarize with them.

The Relevance of Teaching Pronunciation

The purpose of language is communication, and language has four skills that enable people to communicate: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Reading and listening are *receptive skills*, because they involve responding to language rather than producing it, whereas writing and speaking are *productive skills*, because they involve producing language rather than receiving it.

This paper focuses on speaking and on an essential feature to produce oral language accurately: pronunciation, because this feature has been neglected in most Brazilian regular schools and in language schools too. In our country, many teachers are not able to teach pronunciation correctly, because they did not learn it appropriately and because they do not know tools and methods that can help them teach their learners how to pronounce words and sentences in a fitting way. English classes frequently base on grammar, and learners have few opportunities for listening and speaking. When such rare opportunities happen, teachers restrain pronunciation to listening to words and sentences and repeating them carelessly, instead of doing it with techniques that can help students develop consciousness about English pronunciation.

Another obstacle for the teaching of pronunciation is that some students believe that learning English means overestimating the culture of English-speaking countries and underestimating the culture of the learners' country. Paula (2010, p.4) emphasizes that such an idea must be demystified. Lindsay and Knight (2011, p.10) say, "Nowadays this is less significant as English is used extensively as a world or

international language, not associated with any one country”. In fact, the more one knows about the culture of English-speaking countries the better one can understand English and, consequently, the better they can speak and learn pronunciation; however, it does not mean despising one’s own culture, because knowledge of the world widens perception.

According to Lindsay and Knight, “speaking [...] involves putting a message together, communicating the message, and interacting with other people. [...] As with listening, this is a complex task and learners need a lot of practice to develop this skill.” (LINDSAY; KNIGHT, 2011, p.57). From such statements, one can understand that speaking means interaction, and that there has to be an intensive practice for the learners to become able to communicating efficiently. Among other factors, interaction demands an intelligible pronunciation, since it can provide a clearer communication. “Clearer” does not mean perfect, because even native speakers of any language sometimes ask each other for clarification and/or explanation, i.e. mistakes are natural among native speakers of English as well. One must understand that people who do not speak clearly are often misunderstood, and sometimes mistakes may be harmful. That is why pronunciation cannot be neglected in English classes.

According to Bilefsky and Minder (2017), in 2015, teenage Dutch Vera Mol went to Spain with her friends, and the group decided to practice bungee jumping, a very dangerous sport. After attaching the harness to her body, the Spanish instructor told her “No jump!” because the rope had not been tied to the harness yet; however, she misunderstood the order and jumped towards death. This interaction between non-native speakers of English resulted in a tragedy because of two language mistakes. First, according to English grammar rules, the phrase should have been “Don’t jump!”, but the instructor was influenced by Spanish syntax (“No saltes!”) and said “No jump!”. Second, he mispronounced the adverb *no*, so Vera Mol understood “Now, jump!” instead of “No jump!” As a matter of safety, the instructor should have avoided to use the verb *jump*, he had better say “Wait!” besides making gestures that meant that the girl could not jump yet. This tragedy must warn people that although

English has become an international language, speaking it demands respecting grammar rules, and requires an intelligible (not “perfect”) pronunciation.

Teaching pronunciation requires parameters that help teachers do their job; that is why among all Englishes around the world, this paper focuses on American English since most of the movies and TV series shown in our country come from the USA. English, as any other language, varies. If in a small country like England there are many varieties of English, in a large one as the United States, there are even more varieties. Due to this fact, it is necessary to decide which variation of American English will be the parameter for the teachers to work with, although some linguists reject the label “Standard English”. Oliveira (2015, p.41) rejects this concept, stating that it is just ideological and abstract, because it is not possible to define what *standard* means and where the so-called *Standard English* is spoken. Moreover, according to him, accepting such a concept would be admitting that there is only one correct way to speak English. Other linguists disagree about the concept of Standard English as well, since, according to them, it means the imposing of a variety by the elite, which regards it as the best one whereas the others are labelled as inferior.

Richard Nordquist mentions a statement by Zoltán Kövecses, who explains how unfair the label “Standard English” can be:

Standard American English is not a variety of English that is inherently *standard*, or better, or more beautiful, or more logical than other forms of English. What makes it standard is that some speakers of American English have the social power to impose the variety of English they happen to use on speakers of other varieties. They are in a position to make their English the prestigious form of English. They can do so thanks to their social power. Since this social power is desired by other people, the English spoken by people with power is also desirable for others. In this sense, the possession of the prestigious variety is the possession of social power. (KÖVECSES, 2000 *apud* NORDQUIST, 2017)

Despite this controversy, some linguists claim that there is a prestigious variety of English called Standard American English (SAE) or General American (GAE). According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary,

Standard English is the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood. (THE MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, 2017)

The intent of this paper is not to discuss whether the concept of Standard English is correct or not; its target is to suggest some pedagogical strategies for teaching pronunciation. Therefore, using Standard American English and its grammar rules is only a way to reach the objective of helping Brazilian learners of English to speak accurately, especially because in formal situations that is the kind of speech which will be required. It means that, according to the interests of the learners, other varieties of English may be taught, that is, the suggestions presented in this paper are worthy for Creole, British English, Australian English, Jamaican English, and so on.

One must understand that learning informal English is essential as well because most of the time people speak such a way; therefore, English teachers must be very careful so they do not teach their learners to stick to bookish English. Nonnative speakers of English must try to sound as natural as native speakers do.

The Relevance of Knowing Phonetics and Phonology

According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2007, p.3), a revolutionary step for the teaching of pronunciation happened in 1886, when phoneticians Henry Sweet, Wilhelm Viëtor and Paul Gassy founded the International Phonetic Association and developed the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which consists of all the phonemes that humans can produce. A phoneme is the minimum distinctive sound in

any language, and every word is formed by the combination of phonemes. In the aforementioned alphabet, each phoneme is represented by a written symbol that enables readers to understand how it sounds. As each symbol represents a different phoneme, it is possible to transcribe all the words phonemically, which means that for those who know phonemic transcription, a dictionary is not only a source of meaning or translation, but also a means to learn how to pronounce words they have never read and/or heard before. For example, if someone looks up the word “foodstuffs” in a dictionary, they will not only find its meaning and/or translation but they will also find its phonemic transcription /'fu:dstʌfs/, which will help them learn how to pronounce it. To get such an achievement, students need to learn how each phoneme sounds and how the vocal tract articulates to produce it.

Some teachers and students are likely to claim that knowing phonemic transcriptions is useless since nowadays electronic and online dictionaries provide audio recordings of the words pronunciation. This point of view may not be wrong; however, the more resources one has the better one learns. Teachers must be aware that learners, especially beginners, may mishear some phones if they are not quite familiar to the sounds of English, i.e., many learners tend to hear a word the way they believe it sounds, especially if its spelling is similar to that of another word they already know, including words from their mother tongue.

It is essential to understand that English is not a phonetic language, so according to Szynalski (2018), “the spelling of an English word does not tell you how you should pronounce it.” That is the reason why the best dictionaries, including electronic and online ones, have phonemic transcriptions. Listening to words and trying to repeat them without criteria helps few students learn accurate pronunciation, whereas practicing pronunciation with the help of phonemic transcriptions and audio recordings together accelerates the learning process because learners can develop their consciousness and realize how the phonemes really sound. With such resources, students can focus on the sounds they consider as the most difficult. The following statement by Amanda Lillet shows how practicing pronunciation is important:

One of the comments I frequently hear from my students is how working on pronunciation greatly improves their listening comprehension. It's true. Practicing pronouncing specific sounds has the fantastic side benefit of training your ears to hear things that you may have never heard before. You see, it's very difficult to pronounce something that you can't hear, and our brains – after we're 13 or 14 years old – stop easily hearing sounds that we haven't been exposed to. The good news is that that doesn't mean you can't learn to hear sounds even if you're older than that [...]. (LILLET, 2016)

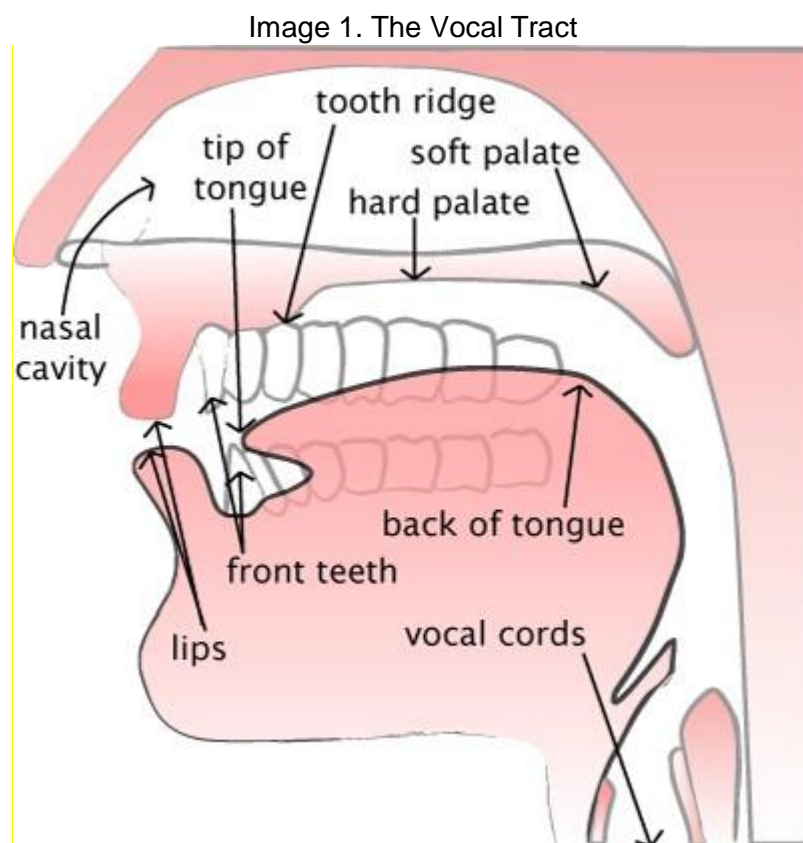
Phonemic transcriptions also help learners to know where stress falls in words, which is hard to realize based only on spelling, since English words do not have a graphic symbol to identify the stressed syllable, and stress placement in English is not as predictable as it is in languages as Portuguese. The most common sign used in phonemic and phonetic transcriptions to show the stressed syllable is a superscript accent mark (^ˈ) before such a syllable, whereas the secondary stress syllable is indicated by a subscript accent (_ˌ) placed before it; the unstressed syllables have no mark. For example, in the word *meningitis* the stressed syllable is *gi-*, while the secondary stress syllable is *men-*, so it is transcribed /_ˌmɛnɪn^ˈdʒaɪtɪs/. Another reason to be able to read phonemic transcriptions is that sometimes it is not possible to have access to audio recordings.

In short, everything stated so far means that English teachers must know Phonetics and Phonology, since this knowledge allows them to identify and classify phonemes, read phonemic and phonetic transcriptions, and understand the operation of the vocal tract because all of these abilities are essential to provide good English pronunciation classes. However, as stated before, Brazilian EFL learners have few opportunities to speak during classes, and most of the time it is done without criteria, which impedes them from acquiring an accurate and intelligible pronunciation. It happens because many teachers do not know Phonetics and Phonology and consequently, they do not know the vocal tract and the IPA phonemic chart. Indeed, they do not even know what a phoneme is, and thus they fail in teaching pronunciation appropriately. This situation needs to change immediately.

One needs to know that although humans are able to produce many different phonemes, each language uses only a few of them. This way, during the acquisition of our mother tongue, we learn only the phonemes that feature in it. That is why pronouncing phonemes from other languages may be hard to some learners, since

their vocal tracts are not familiarized with such articulations. That is another reason why during English classes teachers must show students exactly how to articulate their vocal tracts in order to get the intended sounds.

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2017) defines Phonetics as “[...] the study and systematic classification of the sounds made in spoken utterance [...]”. The sounds mentioned in this definition (phones) are produced by the articulation of the elements of the vocal tract. The image below shows the vocal tract.



Source: <https://pronuncian.com/the-vocal-tract>

According to Spratt, Pulverness and Williams (2008, p.13), “Phonology is the study of the sound features used in a language to communicate meaning. In English these features include phonemes, word stress, sentence stress and intonation.”

One of the first things students need to learn is that phonemes and letters cannot be confused with each other. Firstly, because one single letter can represent different phonemes; for example, letter *a* can sound as /æ/ /ɪ/ /ə/ /ɑ/ /ɔ/ /ɛ/ and /eɪ/, as it does in *cat*, *leverage*, *about*, *hot*, *chalk*, *dictionary* and *mate*, respectively. Secondly, because more than one letter can combine to make a phoneme, as *sh* do in *sheep* /ʃi:p/. Finally, because each phoneme represents only one sound. Phonemes are vowels (monophthongs and diphthongs) and consonants, and humans produce each one of them due to a different articulation of the vocal tract.

Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2007, p.93) define vowels as “sounds in which there is continual vibration of the vocal cords and the airstream is allowed to escape from the mouth in an unobstructed manner, without any interruption”. Dubois *et al.* (2014, p. 388) state that “a monophthong is a vowel that does not change perceptibly in the course of its emission [...], as opposed to diphthongs [...], triphthongs, etc”. Dubois *et al.* (2014, p. 190) advocate that “a diphthong is a vowel that changes its timbre once in the course of its emission, so that one can hear some vocal quality at the beginning and another at the end”. Finally, Dubois *et al.* (2014, p. 135) define a consonant as “a sound whose articulation involves obstruction, totally or partially, in one or several points of the vocal tract. The presence of this obstacle in the passage of the air causes a noise that constitutes the consonant or an element of the consonant.”³

According to Williamson (2015) the vowels are classified according to five criteria: openness of the mouth (close, close-mid, open-mid, open), tongue elevation (high, mid, low), position of tongue elevation (front, central, back), length (long, short), and lip shape (rounded, unrounded). In fact, according to their roundness, lips can be spread, half-spread, nearly rounded or rounded. According to Cristófar-Silva (2015, p. 38), instead of considering the length of the vowels, some scholars of NAE classify the long vowels as tense and the short vowels as lax. This criterion comes from the fact that the articulation of the tense vowels demands more muscle tension than that of the lax vowels, with the result that the tense ones feature in the more extreme

³ All the concepts by Dubois *et al* were translated from Portuguese by the author.

positions in the mouth, while the lax vowels feature in the more centered positions. Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2007, p. 42-46) state that each consonant is classified according to three criteria: place of articulation (bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar, glottal), manner of articulation (stop, fricative, affricate, nasal, liquid, glide) and voicing (voiceless, voiced).

English teachers must be aware of all these criteria and classifications so they can effectively teach their learners how to pronounce unknown phonemes accurately. However, they must remember that regular speakers of any language do not know such technical terms; they just speak naturally. Therefore, in order to avoid the classes from being disgusting and causing learners to give up studying English, explanations about the phonemes and the vocal tract must be simple, i.e. learners do not need to memorize all those names, they just need to understand how to articulate their vocal tracts consciously until they are finally ready to do it naturally. In other words, English classes must be pleasant and stimulating.

As not all the phonemes feature in each language, every language has its own phonetic alphabet, as part of the general IPA. Adrian Underhill (2018) considers that SAE has 40 phonemes: 16 vowels (11 monophthongs and 5 diphthongs) and 24 consonants as shown on the phonemic chart below:

Image 2. Standard American English Phonemic Chart

ɪ	I	ʊ	u	eɪ	ɔɪ	ɔʊ	ɔʊ
e	ə	ɜr	ɔ	ɔɪ	oʊ		
æ	ʌ	ɑ		aɪ	aʊ		
p	b	t	d	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ
m	n	ŋ	h	l	r	w	j

Source: <http://www.adrianunderhill.com/the-pronunciation-charts/> (2018)

Although on the board above the so-called “short e” (LILLET, 2016) is represented as /e/, in this paper the original IPA symbol /ɛ/ will be used such as Cristófaros-Silva (2015, p.86) and Lillet (2016) do because, as a matter of fact, in SAE the phoneme /e/ occurs only in the diphthong /eɪ/. Using /e/ instead of /ɛ/ would not allow the author of this article to do a contrastive approach between the Portuguese and English vowels, as it will be seen further. Furthermore, the long vowels will be followed by a colon (:).

Contrastive Approach

Brazilian learners of English usually find it hard to identify and pronounce the sounds of English that do not exist in Portuguese, both vowels and consonants, so before listening and speaking, it is essential to learn and understand such phonemes. A suggestion to do it is through a contrastive approach so learners can be aware of what sounds are common and which ones are different between L1 (Portuguese) and L2 (English). Such an approach consists of comparing English phonemes to each other as well.

From the 24 consonants of SAE, three do not exist in Portuguese: /θ/, /ð/ and /ŋ/. The “th” phonemes, /θ/ and /ð/, are the strangest English consonants for Brazilian speakers of English because they are interdental, an articulation that does not happen in Portuguese and causes shy students to feel embarrassed when pronouncing them. However, teachers can give a simple explanation about such phonemes, by telling their learners to try to pronounce /t/ and /d/ or /s/ and /z/ with the tongue between the teeth. Teaching these consonants in a fun way can help learners overcome shyness. Learners must realize they cannot pronounce /θ/ like /f/ or /s/ because it may change the meaning of the words. For example, *three* cannot be pronounced as /fri:/ because it becomes the word *free*; the right pronunciation is /θri:/. Likewise, *think* cannot be pronounced as /sɪŋk/ because it becomes the verb *sink*; the right pronunciation is /θɪŋk/. Equally, pronouncing /ð/ as /d/ may change the meaning of the words. For example, *they* cannot be pronounced as /deɪ/ because it becomes *day*; the correct pronunciation is /ðeɪ/. When speaking *ng*-ending words Brazilian speakers of English

tend to pronounce the final *g*. However, such syllables end with the velar consonant /ŋ/. For instance, *typing* is pronounced /'taɪpɪŋ/, not /'taɪpɪŋg/; *lung* is pronounced /lʌŋ/, not /lʌŋg/. Phoneme /ŋ/ sounds a little like the Portuguese uvular consonant /ŋ/, and Brazilian learners of English can realize that especially when an *-ng* ending word precedes a word that starts with a vowel, e.g. *making it* /'meɪkɪŋɪt/. Besides these three consonants, the voiceless glottal consonant /h/ does not exist in Portuguese either, however pronouncing the voiced uvular consonant /R/ instead of /h/, as most Brazilian speakers of English do, causes no misunderstanding, e.g. *house* /Raus/ instead of /haus/.

Another sound we need to deal with in a contrastive approach is the phoneme /r/ (retroflex r) because in some cities of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul this phoneme exists only at the end of syllables as in *dor* /dor/, and not at the beginning and in the middle of syllables as it does in English, e.g., *relegate* /'rɛlɪgeɪt/ and *break* /breɪk/.

Moreover, in most the Brazilian territory such a phoneme is not spoken. Consequently, producing utterances like *American Horror Story* may not be easy for many Brazilian learners of English. As the Portuguese phoneme /R/ and the English phoneme /r/ are both represented by the letter *r* or the *rr* digraph, it is essential to contrast them with each other, in order to prevent learners from pronouncing /R/ or /h/ instead of /r/ because it may change the meaning of words. For instance, if a learner pronounces *rabbit*, *Rome* and *rate* as ['hæbɪt], [houm] and [heɪt], respectively, in fact, they will be saying *habit*, *home* and *hate*. These words must be pronounced as /'ræbɪt/, /roum/ and /reɪt/, respectively.

The phonemes /t/ and /d/ deserve a special attention from teachers and students of American English because when they come at the beginning of unstressed syllables and occur between vowels or between an *r* and a vowel sound, they are pronounced as an alveolar *r* /ɾ/ sounds in Portuguese, such as in *areia* /aɾeia/. When the unstressed syllable spells with *t*, some American books and dictionaries transcribe the flap allophone /ɾ/ as a flap *t* /t̬/; for example: *better* /'bɛt̬ər/, *party* /'pɑːt̬i/. When the unstressed syllable spells with *d*, the flap allophone /ɾ/ is transcribed as /d̬/; for

example: *daddy* /'dædi/, *doodle* /'du:dl/. In both words while the first /d/ is a stop, the second is a flap and sounds as /ɾ/. This happens because for native speakers of SAE the flap allophone is a quick *d* sound. Therefore, words as *matter* /'mæɾer/ and *madder* /'mæder/ sound the same: /'mæɾer/.

As L1 (Portuguese) sometimes influences in the learning of L2 (English), when reading words spelled with a *t* or a *d* preceding a vowel that represents long *e* /i:/ and short *i* /ɪ/, learners need to remember that the phonemes /t/ and /d/ are alveolar in English, in order to avoid pronouncing the palato-alveolar phonemes /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. For example, *Dean* /di:n/, not /dʒi:n/, which is the pronunciation of *Jean*; *tip* /tɪp/, not /tʃɪp/, which is the pronunciation of *chip*. In English, the digraph *ch* often represents the phoneme /tʃ/, so Brazilian learners of English must be careful with the influence of Portuguese, in order to avoid pronouncing /ʃ/. For example, *chip* /tʃɪp/, not /ʃɪp/, which is the pronunciation of *ship*.

In English letters *l*, *m* and *n* represent phonemes /l/, /m/ and /n/ respectively, so at the end of syllables and words they sound that way, whereas at the end of Portuguese syllables, letter *l* sounds as /u/ and letters *m* and *n* nasalize and diphthongize the previous vowel sound. Brazilian students of English can more easily realize that when words ending with such consonants precede words that start with vowel sounds. Therefore, besides comparing the English pronunciation of these consonants in final position to their Brazilian counterparts, it is important to expose learners to utterances in which such a linking occurs. For example, *Pam is alone in the house* /pæmɪzæ'loʊnɪnðəhaʊs/; *Fill in the form* /fɪlɪnðəfɔ:rm/.

Lindsay and Knight (2011, p.28) warn: "Italians tend to add an extra vowel to some final consonants such as *big*, or *lead*". Such a warning is worthy to Brazilians too. For example, Brazilians tend to pronounce *haze* as ['heɪzi], instead of [heɪz], and this extra final vowel turns the noun *haze* into the adjective *hazy*.

The hardest difficulties in pronunciation come from the vowels, since realizing the articulations of the vocal tract to produce them is harder than realizing those which are needed to produce the consonants. Furthermore, SAE has seven vowels that do not exist in Portuguese, /æ/ /ɪ/ /ə/ /ʊ/ /ɜ/ /ʌ/ and /ɑ/, and vowels may be reduced in unstressed syllables, which does not happen in Portuguese. These facts cause great

confusion for Brazilian learners of English. Therefore, teachers must tell learners the differences and similarities of English and Portuguese vowels carefully, showing them vertical and horizontal positions of the tongue, lip posture and openness of the mouth. If learners fail in pronouncing vowels accurately, their interlocutors may misunderstand them, because their pronunciation may not be intelligible. Contrasting the English vowels to the Portuguese vowels is essential since it helps students perceive the similar ones and the different ones. Then, contrasting English vowels with one another will show learners that replacing one by the other often causes misunderstanding.

According to Cristófaros-Silva (2017, p.171), some speakers of Brazilian Portuguese know the English vowel /ʌ/, which sounds similarly to the Portuguese vowel /ẽ/; however, they find it hard to pronounce when it precedes an oral consonant such as in the word *above* /ə'baʊ/ because in Portuguese this phoneme is a nasal vowel as in *cama* /'kɐma/ and *amanhã* /amɐ̃ ɲɐ̃/. Brazilian learners of English tend to confuse /ʌ/ with /ɔ:/ or /o/, especially when the syllable spells with *o*, due to Portuguese influence, then they pronounce /ə'bo:v/ or /ə'boʊ/ instead of /ə'baʊ/ (*above*); /'ɔ:ðər/ instead of /'lðər/ (*other*). Phoneme /ʌ/ is a low near-back half-spread vowel, while /ɔ:/ is a low-mid back nearly rounded vowel; and /o/ does not exist in SAE, except in the diphthong /ou/.

Vowel /ɑ:/ is usually confused with /ɔ:/ by Brazilians since both are often represented by letter *o*, phoneme /ɑ:/ does not exist in Portuguese, and they sound similarly. However, /ɑ:/ is a low near-back nearly rounded vowel and /ɔ:/ is a low-mid back rounded vowel. For example, *Ford* /fɔ:rd/, *rock* /rɒk/.

Brazilian students of English tend to consider two sounds of the *oo* spelled syllables as the same, however, they are different: /ʊ/ and /u:/. For example, *hood* /hʊd/, *hoof* /hu:f/. Vowel /ʊ/ also spells *u* (*full*), *o* (*wolf*) and *oul* (*should*), while /u:/ also spells *u* (*illusion*), *o* (*prove*), *ou* (*coupon*), *wo* (*two*), *ui* (*fruit*), *oe* (*shoe*), *ue* (*true*), *ew* (*few*), *eu* (*accurate*), *ieu* (*lieu*), *ioux* (*Sioux*). Replacing /ʊ/ with /u:/ or /ɑ:/ by /ɔ:/ is not too harmful to communication since there are no competing words. However, pronouncing the right vowels provides learners a more native-like accent and avoids clarification requests.

The next pairs of vowels deserve a very special attention from teachers and students because realizing the ones that do not exist in Portuguese is not easy and pronouncing them is not easy either. Besides, replacing one with the other will often change the meaning of the words. Brazilian learners of American English usually find it hard to tell the short *a* /æ/ from the short *e* /ɛ/ because they sound quite similar to each other. The difference between them is that /æ/ is a low front spread vowel, while /ɛ/ is a low-mid front spread vowel. Therefore, contrasting these phonemes is very important so learners become able to distinguish them when listening and speaking.

For example, *Pat* /pæt/, *pet* /pɛt/.

Distinguishing the vowels /i:/ (long *e*) and /ɪ/ (short *i*) is a hard task for Brazilian speakers of English, including teachers. Influenced by Portuguese, they tend to pronounce the letter *i* as /i:/ when it does not sound as /aɪ/ because in Portuguese the oral letter *i* always sounds as /i/. Consequently, Brazilians may be misunderstood by interlocutors because changing such phonemes often changes meaning, as these pairs of words show: *peel* /pi:l/ and *pill* /pɪl/; *bean* /bi:n/ and *bin* /bɪn/. It means that vowels length is a very important feature to understand English words meaning. When teachers show such a contrast, learners realize these vowels are different. However, as /ɪ/ does not exist in Portuguese, learners are inclined to believe it sounds as the Portuguese vowel /e/; that is why explaining and comparing these vowel articulations is essential. While /i:/ is a high front spread vowel, /ɪ/ is a high near-front half-spread vowel and /e/, which does not exist in SAE, except in the diphthong /eɪ/, is a high-mid front spread vowel.

The long vowel /ɜ:/ is not familiar to native speakers of Portuguese; so, it may be confused with /o/ due to the spelling of some words as *work* /wɜ:rk/ and *word* /wɜ:rd/. Phoneme /ɜ:/ is a near-high central half-spread vowel, which teachers can contrast with /ʌ/, a low near-back half-spread vowel. Linguists classify /ɜ:/ as an r-controlled vowel since it is always followed by an *r* /r/, such as in *dirt* /dɜ:rt/ and *concern* /kən'sɜ:rn/. This vowel always features in stressed syllables.

Considered as the most common vowel sound in spoken English, phoneme /ə/, called *schwa*, is a high-mid central half-spread vowel, whose length is very short. It

occurs in unstressed syllables of multi-syllable words and as a reduced vowel sound in function words. Any of the five vowel letters can represent schwa, which is a lax vowel, i.e. the vocal tract is completely relaxed when pronouncing it. According to Lillet (2018), “the purpose of schwa is to allow unstressed syllables to be said more quickly so the main beats of spoken words are easier to place on the stressed syllables”. Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2007, p.132) state, “the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is greater in English than in most other languages [...]”. So, unstressed syllables are reduced in some multi-syllable words, such as *perfection* /pə'fɛkʃn/, although not all multi-syllable words have reduced vowels, which is the case with *educated* /'ɛdʒu:keɪtɪd/.

Although considered as not pertaining to the inventory of Portuguese, in fact, according to Cristófar-Silva (2015, p.198), the schwa articulates and sounds similar to the unstressed final *a* of Brazilian Portuguese; for example, *boca* /'bokə/ and *caixa* /'kaɪfə/. As native speakers of Portuguese consider this final vowel as an *a*, they do not recognize the vowel /ə/ in English, because it occurs not only at the end of words as it does in Portuguese, but also at the beginning and in the middle of multi-syllable words, such as *obey* /ə'beɪ/, *apartment* /ə'pɑ:rtmənt/ and *disproportionate* /dɪsprə'pɔ:rfjənət/. The pronunciation of the schwa is very close to a short *u* /ʌ/, which is a low central half-spread vowel, but this one features on stressed syllables.

In order to better understand the relevance of the schwa to spoken English, it is necessary to move from segmental features towards suprasegmental features. According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2007, p.152), in spoken English “the length of an utterance depends not on the number of syllables [...] but rather on the number of stresses”. It means that content words – nouns, main verbs, adjectives, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, interrogatives, negative contractions, adverbs and adverbial particles – are often stressed. On the other hand, function words: articles, auxiliary verbs, personal pronouns, possessive adjectives, demonstrative adjectives, prepositions and conjunctions, are usually unstressed, except when emphasized or in final position. Function words can have two different pronunciations: a citation form, which features in a dictionary transcription, and a reduced form, which features in spoken utterances; the citation form also happens

when such words are spoken isolated or are emphasized in sentences. For example, the citation form of the preposition *for* is /fɔ:r/, and its reduced form is [fər]. Reduced form: *We're searching for it* [wi:r' sɜ:rtʃɪŋfəɪt]. Citation form: *It's what we're searching for* [ɪtswətwi:r' sɜ:rtʃɪŋfɔ:r]. Citing Avery and Ehrlich, Nordquist shows us how natural pronouncing the schwa is.

It is extremely important to recognize that pronouncing unstressed vowels as schwa is not lazy or sloppy. All native speakers of Standard English (including the Queen of England, the Prime Minister of Canada, and the President of the United States!) use schwa." (AVERY; EHRLICH, 2013 apud NORDQUIST, 2018)

Therefore, EFL teachers and their learners must realize that learning to use the schwa appropriately is also an essential key to get an accurate pronunciation and a more native-like accent.

After discussing some aspects of English pronunciation through a contrastive approach, one can see that learning an intelligible pronunciation of English is possible and essential to provide a good communication. Contrasting the known phonemes with the unknown ones and telling the students how to articulate their vocal tracts correctly in order to produce the sounds they are learning accelerates the learning process and increases the chances of success. That is why teachers of English need to graduate from College knowing Phonetics and Phonology and need to find out strategies which enable them to help each learner overcome individual difficulties as well.

Final Considerations

Teaching English pronunciation in a country where English is not spoken outside the classroom is not an easy task. However, teachers who are well trained in Phonetics and Phonology have a greater possibility of success. Ranging from segmental features to suprasegmental features, they can teach EFL learners how to pronounce phonemes

accurately so they become able to pronounce words and sentences intelligibly, i.e. students can become fluent speakers of English.

The average native speaker of any language ignores the study of phonemes in their mother tongue because they speak naturally, so there can be an initial resistance to Phonetics and Phonology in the foreign language classroom. Consequently, teachers must be able to handle the situation by teaching phonemes in a fun way, without demanding that learners memorize all those technical names, but showing them that learning the articulations is not that hard and that it is essential for them to speak confidently and fluently. Being aware that pronunciation is only one feature of spoken English, teachers also need to teach word and sentence stress, connected speech, rhythm and intonation, otherwise learners will learn an artificial English and it may become frustrating for native speakers and Brazilian speakers of English to try to communicate. However, teachers must never offer their learners the illusion that they will speak exactly like native speakers of English because eliminating the first language accent is almost impossible and needless. An intelligible pronunciation is a realistic aim that can lead to an effective communication if learners make an effort to increase their vocabulary and to improve their ability to speak English every single day.

The conclusion of this study is that it is possible to improve the teaching of pronunciation in the classes of English as a foreign language in Brazil, since it is done with the use of Phonetics and Phonology and with a contrastive approach between the Portuguese and English phonemes in order to provide an effective learning.

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