

A STUDY ON THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH CONSONANT CLUSTERS BY SPANISH STUDENTS

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RESUMEN. Dentro de los estudios sobre la evolución de la interlengua y siguiendo la tradición de las hipótesis del Análisis Contrastivo, los Universales del Lenguaje y la Teoría de lo Marcado, el presente trabajo analiza la producción de las secuencias de consonantes en hablantes de español que aprenden inglés. El estudio tiene dos objetivos principales: comprobar si dichas hipótesis son válidas en este aspecto concreto de la fonología de la interlengua, así como indagar en el papel que desempeña la instrucción formal en el aprendizaje de las secuencias de consonantes del inglés.

PALABRAS CLAVE. Secuencia de consonantes, fonología de la interlengua, Análisis Contrastivo, Universales del Lenguaje, Teoría de lo Marcado, instrucción formal.

ABSTRACT. This paper can be classified within the body of studies that focus on the evolution of interlanguage and follow the tradition of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Language Universals Hypothesis and Markedness Differential Hypothesis. Its aim is to analyse the production of consonant clusters by Spanish learners of English. The study has two main goals: to test whether the hypotheses mentioned above are valid for this specific aspect of the phonology of interlanguage, as well as to examine the role of formal instruction in the learning of English consonant clusters.

KEY WORDS. Consonant clusters, interlanguage phonology, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Language Universals Hypothesis, Markedness Differential Hypothesis, formal instruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades there has been a great deal of discussion on the nature of interlanguage (L. SELINKER 1972), its development and its relationship with both the native and the target language. This discussion is especially relevant in the case of phonology, since it seems obvious that learning the phonological system of a language is usually a harder task than learning other linguistic components. In fact, it is often easy to find students who have an extremely good command of second language syntax and semantics, but who are not so proficient in phonological terms. Different explanations have been offered bearing in mind different factors, such as the physiological, psychological or social. Nonetheless, it is a matter that seems to remain unsolved so far.

Among the several theories that have been posed in order to explain this conundrum, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis¹, Language Universals Hypothesis (R. CARLISLE 2001) and Markedness Differential Hypothesis (F. ECKMAN 1977, E. BATTISTELLA 1990) are worth mentioning. Each of them aims at explaining the origin of these difficulties in different ways. Contrastive Analysis is based on the idea that by comparing the native language and the target language of the students, it will be easier to guess the mistakes they will make and, consequently, to prevent them. As for Language Universals Hypothesis, its claim is that difficulty can be predicted on the grounds of universality. That means that there are some features in every language which are somehow universal, that is, they are present in the rest of the languages as well, and, consequently, they are easier to acquire for speakers of any linguistic context. Regarding the Markedness Differential Hypothesis, it takes into account both native language transfer and language universals. In order to understand the concept of markedness it should be necessary to quote Eckman's words (F. ECKMAN 1977): «A phenomenon A in some language is considered to be more marked than a phenomenon B if the presence of A in a language implies the presence of B, but the presence of B does not imply the presence of A».

More recently, and somehow related to Markedness Hypothesis, a new theory known as Optimality Theory (A. PRINCE AND P. SMOLENSKY 1993, J. MCCARTHY AND A. PRINCE 1993) has emerged. Optimality Theory is based on the notion of constraints. All languages are structured by means of a series of constraints which give rise to rules. Constraints are universal but the ordering is unique to each language. It is in this aspect that distinction among languages can be found. In Optimality Theory grounds, language typology prefers some types of syllables. Ideally, the perfect syllable would be that which begins with a consonant and ends with a vowel (CV). The rest of combinations are dispreferred. Nonetheless, the fact that some languages employ very complicated (complex) consonant clusters is due to the ranking of constraints in that language.

The concern about these potentially particularly difficult parts of a language has led to other questions, such as which could be the way in which these difficulties were neutralized. The most obvious solution seems to be that of formal instruction. Thus, one could wonder if by providing the students with the explicit rule about a particular phenomenon they will be able to produce it correctly.

Bearing all these ideas in mind, the aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, to test the efficiency of the previously mentioned theories so as to see if they are actually capable of predicting, or even explaining, the mistakes that students of a particular linguistic background (Spanish students) will make when trying to learn a second language (English in this case). Secondly, the role of formal instruction in second language learning, and particularly, in a specific aspect of the language such as consonant clusters, will be investigated. The goal is to check whether it leads to an improvement in students' production. In other words, the second purpose of this study is to compare the performance of two groups of students: one whose members have received no instruction on Phonetics and Phonology at all and who, consequently, are supposed to learn consonant clusters by means of what some authors call "natural acquisition"; and a second group of those other students who have received formal instruction on pronunciation and Phonetics and Phonology and, particularly, on the area of consonant clusters.

¹ See F. JOHANSSON (1973) for a complete summary.

2. INITIAL AND FINAL CLUSTERS IN ENGLISH

A phenomenon such as consonant clusters was chosen for the study due to its complexity. The fact that the inventory of consonant clusters varies from one language to another is related to phonotactic constraints. Some languages allow two, three, four or even more consonant sequences (such is the case of languages like English, German or Russian) whereas there are other languages in which only two or even no consonants may be found in combination (such as Mandarin, Cantonese or Vietnamese).

The idea of cluster is connected to that of syllable structure. The type of consonant sequences that a language allows will depend on the kind of syllables that can be found in the language. J.D. O'CONNOR ([1973] 1980) has stated that the structure of the syllable in English is the following: (CCV)V(CCCC)². On the contrary, the syllable structure in Spanish is much more simple: (C)CV(C).

There is a wider range of final clusters than initial ones in English because of grammar rules (plural formation, past tenses) and word formation rules. In addition to this, when two words come into contact it may happen that the first of them finishes in a sequence of consonants and the second one begins with another one (*best man, watch cricket, small square*). In this way, clusters of up to seven consonants together may occur.

On the other hand, consonant sequences in Spanish are much shorter, usually just two consonants together, and they tend to appear at the beginning or in the middle of words (*brote, ladrillo, atroz, tragar*). Consonant clusters at the end of words are very rare, in fact almost non-existent, being reduced to some neologisms and borrowings.

By comparing these data, Contrastive Analysis would argue that Spanish students will have no problem in producing those clusters which are possible in both languages, whereas they will find much more trouble in pronouncing those others which are target language-specific, that is, those that are absent in Spanish.

Taking this into account, in this study I will focus on final clusters, which are supposed to cause the greatest problems for Spanish students. Moreover, the selection of final clusters is also based on a teaching methodological perspective. If final sequences in English are so important because they reflect such essential grammatical issues as plurals, third persons and past of verbs or word formation, Spanish students will have to concentrate on them if they want to improve their command of the language and be more intelligible. It is in this sense that the role of formal instruction is integrated within the present investigation.

3. INVESTIGATION

3.1. HYPOTHESIS

Following the reasoning that Contrastive Analysis would offer, it can be inferred that speakers of a language such as Spanish, in which consonant sequences are simple, may have some problems when trying to produce English clusters (which can be complex). They are supposed to have no problem with those sequences which are the same in both languages,

² It should be stated that, despite the fact that O'Connor's work might seem nowadays rather simple and probably old-fashioned, it offers a very systematic, clear and organised description of consonant clusters, which was considered extremely useful for the present study.

but they are likely to find much more trouble in those others which are more unusual or do not exist at all, that is, final clusters.

This idea is related to Markedness Differential Hypothesis as well as Optimality Theory and the concept of typological markedness. Complex clusters are supposed to be more marked than simple ones. This is due to the fact that the existence of a long cluster in a language implies the existence of a shorter one. Therefore, the shorter one will be unmarked, which means that it will be more universal and therefore easier to learn by speakers of all languages. In relation to this, some authors agree on the fact that when students are faced with marked structures which are unknown to them, they will try to transform them into less marked structures, especially those which are present in their native language. This is what happens with syllable structure. As Language Universals Hypothesis would predict, every time a student finds a syllable which is more complicated than the average syllable in his language, he will try to simplify it. In this sense, the most universal type of syllable structure is CV, and students will tend to transform difficult syllables into this particular form. They will do it through different means, the most relevant of which are cluster reduction (deletion of a consonant) and epenthesis (the introduction of a vowel where there should not be one).

Another idea that can be implied is that the more a speaker is instructed in the foreign language the fewer problems he will face when producing clusters. Thus, speakers with a better command of the foreign language, who have been taught in a formal way, and especially those who have received instruction on Phonetics and Phonology will have fewer difficulties than those other learners who have a low level of English and no knowledge about Phonetics and Phonology. Consequently, the second aspect of the hypothesis would be that by means of formal instruction the production of clusters can be improved.

3.2 SUBJECTS

The present investigation has been carried out by comparing two groups of subjects. The first group has a low level of English and the students have received no formal instruction on pronunciation. The second group, apart from showing a better command of the language, has received formal instruction on pronunciation.

The number of subjects is eight (four in each group), and all of them have Spanish as their native language. Their ages are quite similar, ranging from 21 to 27. There are four males and four females who are equally distributed in each group. All of them were University students.

The first group, as was mentioned, has a low level of English. Even though they have studied English for around seven years at Secondary Education, they have been taught by means of a grammar translation approach and they have not developed the speaking skill. The result is that they know quite a lot about grammar rules, but they are not able to communicate in English. They have not been taught pronunciation either.

The second group has a much higher level of English. Three of the four subjects have studied a degree in English and they have been taught Phonetics and Phonology. The remaining subject has done a degree in Tourism, which means that he has studied three years of English at University level. He has also received private lessons which involved pronunciation instruction. All of them have developed their communicative abilities and they are able to speak in English quite fluently.

3.3. TESTING INSTRUMENT

In order to carry out the present study, a test was designed. It consists of a list of eight isolated words, another list with ten sequences of words, and five sentences. Subjects are presented with a sheet of paper with the three tasks. Their role consists of reading everything aloud while they are being recorded. The subjects know that they are being recorded and they are aware of the fact that the language they produce is going to be analysed later on, but they do not know which particular aspects of their speech are going to be studied. It has to be remarked that the experiment is developed in a non-natural, quite formal environment (the students do not speak spontaneously, but read what they have in front of them and they are conscious of the fact that they are being recorded). Consequently, the level of anxiety can be said to be medium, since they may feel uncomfortable with the situation.

The words and sentences in the test involve many consonant clusters of several kinds. The different tasks have been designed so as to see how subjects produce those clusters when they find them both in an isolated word and in context. The idea is to explore whether the task itself is relevant for the result. Clusters appear both within words and at word boundaries in order to check if this fact has any effect on the students' production. The experiment focuses mainly on final sequences, but some initial sequences can be found as well (*train, brother, black, christmas*), and specially those which begin with /s/ (*slept, small, square, spring*) in order to check whether epenthesis is produced. The list of isolated words and of several words together has been taken from the examples in J.D. O'Connor's *Better English Pronunciation*.

3.4. RESULTS

Once all the subjects had been recorded, the consonant clusters they produced were analysed. Indeed, the results seemed to depend on the kind of task they were asked to perform, as will be explained in this section.

3.4.1. *Words in isolation.* Regarding the words in isolation, the results for all the subjects in the experiment were the following:

<i>Word</i>	<i>Correct pronunciation</i>
slept	50%
fact	37'5%
cups	100%
jobs	0%
lapsed	12'5%
written	25%
lifts	37'5%
milks	100%

Table 1: rate of correct pronunciation of words in isolation

Taking into account these figures, it could be implied that the ranking of words from easiest to more difficult to pronounce was the following:

1.	cups (100%) (consonant + s)
2.	milks (100%) (l + consonant + plural morpheme /s/)
3.	slept (50%) (plosive + plosive)
4.	fact (37'5%) (plosive + plosive)
5.	lifts (37'5%) (consonant + t + plural morpheme /s/)
6.	written (25%) (plosive + nasal)
7.	lapsed (12'5%) (consonant + s + t)
8.	jobs (0%) (consonant + z)

Table 2: ranking of difficulty of words

Therefore, it seems that both groups had problems with the same kinds of clusters. The easiest for them to pronounce was the sequence of consonant + s, as in the words *cups* and *milks*, which all subjects produced correctly, whereas the cluster apparently carrying more complexity was that in the words *jobs*. The case of *jobs* is somehow surprising, due to the fact that the subjects had no difficulty in producing the sequence of consonant + s, it could be expected that they did not have problems in producing the consonant + z cluster either. However, the problem seems to lie in the difficulty for Spanish speakers both to distinguish and produce the sound /z/. This may be the reason why all the subjects pronounced a voiceless alveolar sound instead of the voiced one.

The sequences of two plosives together had a medium difficulty. *Slept* was pronounced correctly by half of the subjects, whereas in the case of *fact* there was one more subject who was unable to produce the sequence. *Lifts* and *lapsed* also involved some difficulty since 3 consonants were found together (complex clusters are extremely rare in Spanish). It might be that in the case of *lapsed* the spelling also caused some confusion. Finally, the word *written* was also quite problematic, because the subjects tended to introduce a vowel between the /t/ and the /n/ and, consequently, they were unable to produce the nasal release.

The results should also be analysed from the point of view of the performance of the two different groups. The second group (the advanced one) did much better than the first group, as can be seen in the following table:

WORD	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
slept	25%	75%
fact	25%	50%
cups	100%	100%
jobs	0%	0%
lapsed	0%	25%
written	0%	50%
lifts	25%	50%
milks	100%	100%

Table 3: comparison of performance of group 1 and 2 in task 1

The distribution of mistakes among subjects was the following:

GROUP 1	GROUP 2
Subject 4: 20% answers correct	Subject 1: 40% answers correct
Subject 5: 30 % answers correct	Subject 2: 70% answers correct
Subject 6: 20 % answers correct	Subject 3: 40% answers correct
Subject 9: 30 % answers correct	Subject 7: 80% answers correct

Table 4: performance of each subject in task 1

Group 2 was again much better than group 1. The ranking of difficult words, although similar, also varied somehow for both groups:

GROUP 1	GROUP 2
1. cups	1. cups
2. milks	2. milks
3. slept	3. slept
4. fact	4. fact
5. lifts	5. written
6. written	6. lifts
7. lapsed	7. lapsed
8. jobs	8. jobs

Table 5: ranking of difficulty of words for group 1 and group 2

The results are quite similar, but group number 2 seems to be more conscious of the pronunciation of *written*. However, they still have the problems in the same areas as group 1, which seems to be obvious if we bear in mind that all of them share the same native language.

3.4.2. *Clusters at word boundaries*. The results of the clusters at word boundaries, that is, of words in combination with others are the following:

WORDS	CORRECT PRONUNTIATION
great care	100%
shop girl	100%
bed time	100%
watch cricket	87'5%
small square	12'5%
prompt start	25%
next spring	62'5%

she tempts strangers	25%
best man	87'5%
twelfth night	75%

Table 6: rate of correct pronunciation of clusters at word boundaries

The classification from most problematic to less problematic would be the following:

1. great care (100%) (plosive + plosive)
2. shop girl (100%) (plosive + plosive)
3. bed time (100%) (plosive + plosive)
4. watch cricket (87'5%) (sequence of 3 consonants)
5. best man (87'5%) (sequence of 3 consonants)
6. twelfth night (75%) (sequence of 4 consonants)
7. next spring (62'5%) (sequence of 6 consonants)
8. prompt start (25%) (sequence of 5 consonants)
9. she tempts strangers (25%) (sequence of 7 consonants)
10. small square (12'5%) (sequence of 4 consonants)

Table 7: ranking of difficulty in task 2

Contrary to the case of isolated words, here subjects seem to have no problem with the sequences of two plosives together. The rest seems to be quite logical: the more consonants they have the most difficult clusters are. The only remarkable thing is that whereas *small square* only has 4 consonants, it is ranked as the most difficult for the subjects. This seems to be due to epenthesis, which means that students cannot avoid introducing a vowel before the sound /s/. The same happens with the /s/ in *prompt start* and *next spring*, which leads to consider these phrases as very difficult. The case of *best man* should also be mentioned. Seven of the eight subjects drop the /t/, which is not considered incorrect, since it is one of the cases of disappearance. However, it is not so clear if the subjects do this on purpose because they know the rule or they do not pronounce the sound just because they are unable to do it. In most cases the latter seems to be the answer.

As for the differences between the two groups, on this occasion the results were more similar, getting the first group a 55% of the answers correct and the second group a 65%:

WORDS	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
great care	100%	100%
shop girl	25%	50%
bed time	100%	100%
watch cricket	100%	50%
small square	0%	25%
prompt start	25%	25%

next spring	50%	75%
she tempts strangers	0%	50%
best man	100%	75%
twelfth night	50%	100%

Table 8: comparison of performance of group 1 and group 2 in task 2

The distribution between the two groups is as follows:

GROUP 1	GROUP 2
subject 4: 40% answers correct	subject 1: 70% answers correct
subject 5: 50% answers correct	subject 2: 80% answers correct
subject 6: 60% answers correct	subject 3: 40% answers correct
subject 8: 70% answers correct	subject 7: 70% answers correct

Table 9: performance of each subject in task 2

In this case, although group 2 is still better than group 1, the results are more balanced. Even some of the members of group 1 are much better than some subjects in group 2 (for instance, subjects number 8 gets a 70% of answers correct, whereas subject number 3 only gets a 30%).

The ranking of clusters from easiest to difficult depending on the results of each group are the following:

GROUP 1	GROUP 2
1. great care	1. great care
2. shop girl	2. shop girl
3. bed time	3. bed time
4. watch cricket	4. twelfth night
5. best man	5. best man
6. next spring	6. next spring
7. twelfth night	7. watch cricket
8. prompt start	8. she tempts strangers
9. small square	9. prompt start
10. she tempts strangers	10. small square

Table 10: ranking of difficulty of expressions

The greater problem in both groups seems to be epenthesis, although it is more reduced in the case of group 2. All members of group 1 manage to pronounce five expressions correctly: *great care*, *shop girl*, *bed time*, *watch cricket* and *best man*. All the members of group 2 manage to pronounce correctly only four expressions: *great care*, *shop girl*, *bed time*, *twelfth night*. However, whereas, all the members of group 1 mispronounce *small*

square and *she tempts strangers*, there is one member in group 2 who is able to pronounce both of them correctly. This seems to illustrate that this subject has already learnt to avoid epenthesis. The fact that not all the members of group 2 are able to pronounce correctly *best man* is because one of the subjects pronounces *bets man* instead. Nevertheless, this seems to be a lapse, a slip of the tongue, rather than an error of competence.

3.4.3. *Clusters in sentences.* Concerning the production of sentences, the analysis has been done by examining the problems which subjects seem to have more frequently in each of the sentences:

(1) *Sentence number 1:* The train arrives at six o'clock.

The sequence that seems to cause the greatest difficulty in this sentence is that of /vz/ in the word *arrives*. None of the subjects in both groups is able to produce it correctly, since all of them pronounce a voiceless sound instead of the voiced one. As for the word *six*, there are three subjects (one belonging to group 2 and two to group 1) who do not pronounce the final /s/ of the sequence.

(2) *Sentence number 2:* Her rich brother bought her a black fur coat for Christmas.

What happens with the word *Christmas* is similar to what happened with the sequence in *best man*. All the students drop the /t/ and it is correct, but it is not clear whether they know it or not. Other minor problems are the words *rich brother*, since one of the subjects does not pronounce /tʃ/ correctly and he says something which seems a /t/. As for *bought her*, subject number 1 pronounces the final /t/ as a /T/ and subjects 4 and 8 seem not to pronounce any consonant at all.

(3) *Sentence number 3:* They rented a thatched cottage in West France for the month of August.

The sequence the subjects find more difficult to pronounce is that in *thatched cottage*. None of the subjects pronounce it correctly. Whereas the members of group 1 tend to add one vowel between the last two consonants in *thatched*, members of group 2 usually do not add any vowel but they do not pronounce the final consonant in the word either.

Again, we find another case similar to *best man* and *Christmas*. None of the subjects pronounces the /t/ in *West France*, but the reason for that seems obscure.

As for *France*, subjects 1, 4 and 8 find difficulty in pronouncing the final /s/.

Regarding the sequence in the word *month* most of the subjects in both groups pronounce it correctly, but subjects 1 (who does not pronounce the /n/) and 8 (who is not able to pronounce the /T/).

Finally, subjects 4 and 8 (both belonging to group 1) do not pronounce the final /t/ in *August*.

(4) *Sentence number 4:* I can't accept his attitude.

There are two main problems in this sentence: *can't* and *accept*. In the case of the first word, only one subject (curiously subject number 6 belonging to group 1) is able to produce a distinct final /t/. In the rest of the cases it is doubtful whether there is a final consonant at all.

As for *accept*, only two subjects (subjects 2 and 7, belonging to group 2) pronounce it correctly. The rest either drop the /p/ (subjects 1, 5 and 8) or the /t/ (subjects 3, 4 and 6).

Some subjects also have problems with the «cc» in *accept*. Subjects 1 and 5 say something like /T/.

Something similar happens with the «tt» in *attitude*, which some subjects pronounce as /kt/, probably due to a confusion with the Spanish spelling of this word.

(5) *Sentence number 5*: I would have told her more.

In this case the problems are with the words *would* and *told*. Concerning the former, only subjects number 2 and 7 (group 2) pronounce it correctly. The rest either pronounce the «b» (subjects 1, 3, 5, 6 and 8) or do not pronounce the /d/ (subjects 4, 5 and 6). As for the latter, only two subjects, subjects number 2 and 3 (group 2) manage to pronounce the cluster of consonants correctly. The others do not pronounce the final /d/.

The conclusion that could follow from the analysis of the clusters in the sentences is that, whereas members in group 2 still have some problems (most of them coinciding with those of the members of group 1) they perform better on the whole.

4. CONCLUSION

By analysing the data obtained from the recordings of the subjects, it seems obvious that the hypotheses proposed at the beginning of the study were fulfilled only in part.

As Contrastive Analysis predicted, students did not find any problem when consonant clusters were similar to those in Spanish (in initial sequences, for instance) and, at the same time, many of the mistakes made by the students in final sequences (those which differ in native and target language) can be traced to language transfer. In other words, students try to apply native language rules to their interlanguage, to the second language that they are learning, and this leads to errors most of the times.

The predictions of Markedness Differential Hypothesis were also somehow correct. It seems to be true that Spanish students tend to reduce to syllable structure to an open one (CV) because it is the most frequent in their language and, according to Language Universals Hypothesis, more universal as well. As it was also predicted, they do it by means of two different strategies: cluster reduction and epenthesis. This implies that either they delete a consonant or they add a vowel so as to have a syllable structure that they regard as more familiar. Cluster reduction was especially important in final sequences, while the role of epenthesis in /s/+ C clusters at the beginning of words should be highlighted. That means that Spanish students find really difficult to pronounce final sequences and they usually delete a consonant to solve the problem. Other times, but less frequently, their strategy involves introducing a vowel in order to create two different syllables instead of one (in *lapsed*, for instance). This introduction of a vowel is especially relevant in the previously-mentioned case, that of words which begin with an –s– cluster. This can also be explained on the grounds of Markedness Differential Hypothesis. It is considered that these types of clusters are especially marked because they violate the principle of sonority (segments should be arranged in such a way that the least sonorous elements are in the margins). Because of this, and as other studies have reflected, speakers of many languages tend to have problems with this kind of cluster, Spanish being among them. However, it should also be highlighted that epenthesis is considered less problematic than cluster reduction in terms of intelligibility. Apart from cluster reduction and epenthesis, sometimes students produce different consonants to those which appear in the cluster and they also change the order of

them. Nonetheless, this does not seem the result of any particular strategy. Rather, it could be explained in terms of slips of the tongue.

However, even though some of the predictions were confirmed there were others that were not. For instance, it seems evident that students did not find difficulty in some clusters where they were supposed to do so. They did particularly well in the case of sequences of *plosive+plosive* (*slept, fact, great care, shop girl, bed time*) and especially in clusters of *consonant+/s/* (*milks, cups*), in spite of the fact that they do not exist in Spanish. It also has to be admitted that in the case of clusters at word boundaries, the students did it very well because they did not introduce any kind of linking. If they had produced real connected speech they would probably have committed much more mistakes. In relation to this, the fact that different tasks were used also has to be mentioned. The students showed a variation in their performances depending on the task they carried out. In this study these particular tasks were chosen because it was thought that by means of controlled activities, such as the different readings proposed, the data would show more uniformity. Nonetheless, if other tasks had been chosen, such as some memory exercise or spontaneous speech, the results would have probably been completely different.

As for the second aspect of the hypothesis, it should be said that it seems more than obvious that formal instruction plays a significant role in the improvement of pronunciation. Students in group 2, those who had received formal lessons about pronunciation, performed much better. Even though they had some trouble in the same aspects as group 1 (probably because of the fact that they are native speakers of the same language) the mistakes were much less frequent and they showed a greater capacity of solving the problems. It should also be said that more difficult tasks gave rise to a greater number of errors in both groups. Yet, these errors were still more present in group 1. This idea is especially relevant for the scope of language teaching, since it has been proved that formal instruction will result in a greater intelligibility on the part of students. This is particularly important in the case of some grammatical aspects already mentioned (plurals, third person, past), which may produce real communication problems.

As a consequence, it is suggested that the pronunciation of clusters should be included in every teaching plan, since their benefits are more than evident. It would be a good idea that teachers integrate the teaching of consonant sequences into the rest of the program. For instance, a good idea would be that when aspects, such as plurals or past forms, are being taught, the teacher devoted some part of the lesson to the explanation and practice of the pronunciation rules for clusters.

Several activities can be proposed, such as flashcards with pictures and their matching pronunciations, some riddles, pairwork with questions and answers, guided story-telling (the telling of a story with some particular words that they have been given beforehand), all of them containing the most relevant clusters at each moment. In this way, students will be provided with the right tools to monitor themselves, they will be aware of the pronunciation of consonant sequences and they will improve their pronunciation and general intelligibility.

In any case, and as a general conclusion to this study, what seems to be obvious is that students can be helped to improve their pronunciation by means of formal instruction. And this is what a good teacher is expected to do.

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