

The Sound Bridge: Mastering english pronunciation for spanish speakers

El puente sonoro: Dominando la pronunciación del inglés para hispanohablantes

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Abstract

The Cinderella of the Curriculum: For decades, the teaching of English has stood on a single leg, prioritizing the architecture of grammar and the inventory of vocabulary while leaving the vehicle that carries them both—pronunciation—in the shadows

In the educational field, it has been rightfully called the “Cinderella” or the “orphan” of language programs, relegated to a corner while assuming that sounds will be learned by “osmosis”

This rehearsal arises from a palpable reality: despite English being the lingua franca of the global economy and education, many learners still face a “low proficiency” barrier

This work invites us to look beyond the written page to understand that language is not just a code, but a sound that must be carved with precision Through these essays, the reader will not find a rigid manual, but an exploration of how to overcome the inhibition and anxiety produced by “sounding bad”

It is an invitation to stop seeing phonetics as a technical barrier and start seeing it as a bridge toward intelligibility, where the goal is not native perfection, but the human capacity to be understood with ease

Keywords: Pronunciation, intelligibility, phonetics, L1 interference, english teaching

Resumen

La Cenicienta del plan de estudios: Durante décadas, la enseñanza del inglés se ha sostenido sobre una sola pierna, priorizando la arquitectura de la gramática y el inventario de vocabulario mientras dejaba en las sombras al vehículo que transporta a ambos: la pronunciación.

En el ámbito educativo, se le ha llamado con razón la “Cenicienta” o la “huérfana” de los programas de idiomas, relegada a un rincón mientras se asume que los sonidos se aprenderán por “ósmosis”.

Este ensayo surge de una realidad palpable: a pesar de que el inglés es la lengua franca de la economía global y la educación, muchos estudiantes aún se enfrentan a la barrera de un “bajo nivel de competencia”.

Esta obra nos invita a mirar más allá de la página escrita para comprender que el idioma no es solo un código, sino un sonido que debe ser esculpido con precisión.

A través de este ensayo, el lector no encontrará un manual rígido, sino una exploración de cómo superar la inhibición y la ansiedad que produce “sonar mal”.

Es una invitación a dejar de ver la fonética como una barrera técnica y empezar a verla como un puente hacia la inteligibilidad, donde el objetivo no es la perfección nativa, sino la capacidad humana de ser comprendido con facilidad.

Palabras clave: Pronunciación, inteligibilidad, fonética, interferencia de la L1, enseñanza del inglés

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INTRODUCCIÓN

The Sound Behind the Letter

English is, to the frustration of many, a “badly spelled” language.

Unlike Spanish, where there is a near-sacred correspondence between what is written and what is said, English throws us into an ocean of 44 phonemes represented by only 26 letters.

This disconnection is the source of the fear many intermediate learners feel when facing a real conversation: the betrayal of spelling over sound. This book aims to demystify that fear by integrating two paths: the intuitive-imitative approach, which appeals to our natural ability to listen and mimic, and the analytic-linguistic approach, which provides us with the tools of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to understand the mechanics of our own voice.

Throughout these pages, we will explore the so-called “scary sounds” for the Spanish speaker: those five specific phonemes (/ʃ/, /tʃ/, /ð/, /θ/, /dʒ/) that do not exist in our native inventory and force us to perform a different dance with our tongue and teeth.

The goal is clear: intelligibility. We do not seek to erase our identity or accent, but to master the segmental and suprasegmental features necessary so that our message travels without distortion from our mouth to the listener’s ear.

Welcome to a journey through the physics of speech and the psychology of communication, where we will learn that pronouncing well is, above all, an act of respect toward our interlocutor.

DEVELOPMENT

The phonetic map

The Linguistic Betrayal: From Graphemic Trust to Phonetic Opaque

I. The Sanctuary of the Mother Tongue Every language learner begins their journey from a place of biological and psychological safety: their mother tongue. For the Spanish speaker, this foundation is built upon a “sacred transparency” In Spanish, the social contract between the eye and the ear is rarely broken; there are five vowels, and they correspond to five clear sounds, creating a phonetic environment that is stable, predictable, and comforting

We grow up believing that “writing is speaking” and “speaking is writing.”

However, as the student—specifically the B1 learner in the Ecuadorian context—crosses the threshold into English, this structural comfort is not just challenged; it is shattered

English reveals itself as a “badly spelled” language

Here, the twenty-six letters of the Roman alphabet are forced to carry the weight of forty-four distinct phonemes

This profound disconnection is the “genesis” of the problem: a linguistic betrayal where the visual similarity of words like *though*, *thought*, and *tough* leads the learner into a labyrinth without a compass

II. The “Cinderella” of the Curriculum Philosophically, we must ask: why has the sound of the language been neglected for so long? In educational history, pronunciation has been the “Cinderella” area of teaching—relegated to the kitchen while grammar and vocabulary attend the royal ball

It is often treated as an “orphan” in the curriculum, an afterthought that teachers avoid because of a “feeling of doubt as to how to teach it”

In South America, and specifically in Ecuador, this neglect has historical roots. For decades, English was seen as a luxury for the socially privileged

When it finally became a compulsory subject, it was often taught by those without the necessary linguistic profile or expertise

The result is a generation of learners who rank in the “low proficiency” category (82nd out of 111 countries globally) not for lack of effort, but for lack of a map

Without the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), students are left to “parrot” sounds through an intuitive-imitative approach that often fails when the sounds have no equivalent in their native Spanish

III. The IPA: A Compass for the Voice To solve this crisis of trust, we must introduce a more reliable guide. If the traditional alphabet is a beautiful but flawed tapestry, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a precision-engineered map. Its power lies in its absolute consistency: in this territory, each symbol represents one English sound, and one sound only

The IPA does not distinguish between upper and lower case; it focuses purely on the essence of the sound, providing a visual representation for the invisible—the movement of air and the placement of the tongue

It categorizes the forty-four phonemes into twenty-four consonants, twelve pure vowels (monophthongs), and eight diphthongs

For the learner, this map acts as a vital bridge, allowing them to visualize the sounds of /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /ð/, /θ/, and /dʒ/ before they even attempt to produce them

By using the IPA, the teacher ceases to be a mere drill instructor and becomes a “pedagogical cartographer,” helping the student identify exactly where their voice needs to travel to be understood.

Territories of the Tongue: Dialects, Identity, and the Ethics of Intelligibility

IV. The Great Choice: Navigating GA and RP When the student first unfolds the phonetic map, they are immediately confronted with a fundamental question: “Which English should I speak?” This is not merely a technical choice but a cultural and identity-based decision. The sources identify two major territories that dominate the global landscape: General American (GA) and Received Pronunciation (RP)

General American (GA) is described as a variety that “outnumbers the antagonist accent”

With over three hundred million speakers in the United States, its influence is felt in every corner of the globe through the soft power of music, movies, and digital media

For many Ecuadorian students, GA feels familiar—it is the sound of the songs they hum and the films they watch

It is a massive cultural force that has even led to a widespread understanding of American vocabulary in Britain itself

In contrast, Received Pronunciation (RP)—often associated with the south-east of England—is frequently regarded as the “standard” of educated British English

However, the sources highlight a fascinating sociological phenomenon: RP carries a heavy baggage of perception. Speakers of RP are sometimes viewed as “distant, unfriendly, arrogant, or even dishonest”

Yet, for many, it remains the “ideal” model of prestige.

The teacher, acting as a lead cartographer, must navigate these waters with care. The sources suggest that these varieties should be treated as guidance rather than rigid norms

Since both GA and RP utilize the same IPA system for their consonants, the focus should not

be on forced imitation, but on providing students with the tools to choose their own voice within the global community

V. The Philosophy of Intelligibility: Moving Beyond the Mask One of the most persistent “ghosts” in the English classroom is the obsession with a native-like pronunciation

Many learners set unrealistic goals, believing that success is only achieved when they can hide their “Spanish-speaking soul” behind a perfect imitation of a native speaker. However, the sources propose a more profound and ethical objective: Comfortable Intelligibility

Professor David Abercrombie famously suggested that most language learners do not need “perfect” pronunciation; they need a voice that is “comfortably intelligible”—one that allows the interlocutor to understand the message without undue effort

This is a liberating concept. It shifts the goal from “sounding like someone else” to “being understood as oneself”

Intelligibility is a holistic achievement. It rests on abilities at all levels of language—if the wrong word is chosen or a sentence is uttered with an odd rhythm, the bridge of communication breaks. As the sources point out, even if a speaker makes mistakes in grammar or vocabulary, they can still succeed in their goal if their pronunciation is clear enough for the hearer to “decode the meaning of the message”

In this light, pronunciation is not a decorative ornament; it is the very foundation of the communicative act

VI. Conclusion: The Ethical Bridge To master the phonetic map is, ultimately, an act of respect toward the interlocutor. In a world where English is the lingua franca of economics, politics, and education, the goal is no longer to belong to a specific tribe in London or New York, but to belong to a world community

The use of the IPA allows the Ecuadorian student to move from the “low proficiency” rank toward a mastery where their voice travels clearly from the “mouth of the encoder to the ear of the decoder”

By focusing on intelligibility, we acknowledge that the student’s identity is not something to be erased, but a bridge to be strengthened. The map provides the structure, the IPA provides the precision, and the student’s desire to connect provides the lifeblood of the journey

The core of the problem

The Ghost in the Machine: L1 Interference and the Architecture of Betrayal

I. The Invisible Filter: Why We Hear Through the Mother Tongue

Philosophically, we do not perceive the world as it is, but as we are. In the realm of linguistics, this means that a learner does not hear the objective sounds of a new language; they hear them through the heavy, often distorting filter of their mother tongue (L1)

For the Spanish speaker, this filter is one of “phonetic transparency.” We are raised in a linguistic sanctuary where five vowels correspond to five clear sounds, and the written word is a faithful mirror of the spoken breath

This creates a deep-seated “trust” in the alphabet. However, when this learner encounters English, that trust becomes a liability. The brain, seeking comfort, instinctively tries to force the complex, multi-layered sounds of English into the limited phonetic boxes of Spanish

This phenomenon is more than a simple mistake; it is a “first language disorder” that affects how we process every syllable

When an Ecuadorian student sees an English word, their neural pathways—trained for

years to associate specific letters with specific movements—trigger a Spanish response. This is the “ghost in the machine.” The students are not just learning new sounds; they are fighting an internal battle against a system that has served them perfectly since birth but is now “betraying” their efforts to communicate in a new tongue

II. The Great Vowel Divide: 5 vs. 12

The most profound physical and psychological conflict occurs within the vowel system. In Spanish, the vowel landscape is simple and stable: five vowels, five sounds

English, however, demands the mastery of twelve pure monophthongs and eight diphthongs

This creates a mathematical and physical crisis for the learner. For every single vowel “space” in the Spanish-speaker’s brain, English requires two or three distinct sub-categories.

Because the student lacks the mental “folders” for sounds like the short /ɪ/ in ship versus the long /i:/ in sheep, the brain defaults to the closest Spanish equivalent

This is not merely a failure of hearing; it is a physical resistance. As the sources highlight, Spanish speakers find it deeply problematic to adjust their speech organs—specifically the velum, tongue, and lips—to the exact articulatory movements required for English

The tongue, used to the relatively relaxed and forward positions of Spanish, must be trained to retreat, tension, or flatten in ways that feel entirely alien, leading to what researchers call “visual mispronunciation”

III. The “Scary Five” and the Fear of the Foreign

Beyond the vowels lies the frontier of the consonants, specifically the five phonemes that this study identifies as the most challenging for the Spanish speaker: /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ð/, /θ/, and /ɰ/

These are not just sounds; they are physical obstacles. For example, the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ (as in think) requires the tongue to be placed between the teeth—a movement that exists in the Spanish of Spain but is largely absent in the Latin American context, where it is often replaced by a simple /s/ or /t/

This lack of equivalent sounds in the Roman Spanish alphabet creates a “genesis” of struggle

When a student cannot find a sound in their native inventory, they experience a profound sense of inhibition and anxiety

They may see the word shop but utter chop, or see they and utter day, because their brain cannot discriminate between the friction and the vibration required for the English phoneme

This confusion is often misjudged by listeners as a lack of knowledge or education, when it is a complex struggle of muscle memory and phonological awareness

IV. The Weight of Silence: The Social Cost of Mispronunciation

In the Ecuadorian educational context, this phonetic struggle has led to a measurable crisis. Ecuador currently ranks 82nd out of 111 countries in English proficiency, placing it in the “low proficiency” category

This is not due to a lack of grammar or vocabulary, but to the historical neglect of the “Sound Bridge”

For decades, pronunciation was treated as an “orphan” or the “Cinderella” of the curriculum, ignored by teachers who themselves felt a “feeling of doubt” as to how to teach it

The psychological cost of this neglect is high. Students who cannot sound “intelligible” often choose silence over speech to avoid being judged. They lack the confidence to utter words appropriately because they have never been

given the “explicit information” needed to demystify how sounds are built

Without this guidance, the English language remains a series of “scary” symbols rather than a tool for connection. To break this cycle, we must move away from simple imitation and toward a systematic understanding of the “mechanics of betrayal” understanding exactly why our mother tongue makes us stumble so that we can finally learn to walk in a new language.

The Anatomy of Confusion: Navigating the ‘Scary Five’

V. The Affricate and Fricative Battleground
If the vowel system is a sea of uncertainty for the Ecuadorian learner, the consonant system—specifically the affricates and fricatives—is a dense jungle of physical obstacles. The sources identify a specific set of five “scary” phonemes that represent a frontier of struggle: /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /ð/, /θ/, and /dʒ/

These sounds are problematic because they often lack a direct equivalent in the Spanish phonetic inventory, or they exist in a way that the brain fails to distinguish when processing English

This lack of equivalent sounds creates a “genesis” of struggle

When a student cannot find a sound in their native repertoire, they experience a profound sense of inhibition. For example, the voiceless palatal alveolar consonant /ʃ/ (as in shop) does not exist in Spanish, leading many learners to replace it with the sound they do know: the affricate /tʃ/ (as in chop)

This is not just a slip of the tongue; it is the brain attempting to resolve a physical conflict by reverting to the nearest “safe” muscle memory

VI. The Dental Frontier: /ð/ and /θ/ One of the most distinctive features of English is the use of the “th” digraph, which represents two different

phonemes: the voiced /ð/ (as in they) and the voiceless /θ/ (as in think)

For the Latin American speaker, particularly in Ecuador, these sounds are especially “scary” because the interdental placement required—sticking the tongue slightly between the teeth—is often absent in their local dialect of Spanish

This leads to a series of predictable confusions that impair intelligibility:

The /d/ vs /ð/ conflict: Words like they and day become indistinguishable

The /θ/ vs /s/ or /f/ conflict: The word thin might be pronounced as fin or sin

To produce these sounds accurately, the student must learn to control the airstream and the vibration of their vocal cords—a task that requires both a “bottom-up” awareness of their own anatomy and the “explicit information” provided by the analytic-linguistic approach

VII. Visual Mispronunciation: When the Eye Deceives the Ear A central theme in this linguistic battle is what researchers call “visual mispronunciation”

Because English is “badly spelled,” the student’s eye often betrays their ear

In Spanish, the letter ‘j’ always sounds like /x/; in English, the phoneme /dʒ/ (as in jet) requires a complex movement of the tongue and vocal cord vibration

. Without phonological awareness, the student sees the letter ‘j’ and tries to apply a Spanish sound, or confuses /dʒ/ with /z/ or /y/, turning jet into yet

The digraph ‘ch’ is perhaps the greatest trap. While in Spanish it is consistent, in English it can sound like /tʃ/ (church), /ʃ/ (chef), or even /k/ (school)

This inconsistency reinforces the learner's anxiety. They are not just learning sounds; they are learning to distrust the very alphabet they were taught to rely on

Conclusion: Moving Toward Intelligibility

The core of the problem is not a lack of ability, but a lack of a bridge. As noted in the sources, pronunciation has been an "orphan" or a "Cinderella" in the curriculum, leaving students without the tools to navigate these confusions

By identifying these "scary" phonemes and understanding the mechanics of how our mother tongue filters them, we can begin to build the "Sound Bridge" necessary for truly intelligible communication

The mechanics of speech

The Architecture of Sound: Re-tuning the Vocal Instrument

I. The Physics of Thought: Speech as a Physical Act If language is the garment of thought, then pronunciation is the physical thread from which that garment is woven. We often treat speaking as a purely intellectual or abstract endeavor, yet it is profoundly biological. To speak a language is to engage in a complex, high-speed choreography of muscles, air, and bone. For the Spanish speaker embarking on the journey into English, this realization is both a challenge and a liberation. The "Sound Bridge" is not built of wood or stone, but of the precise coordination of our organs of production—the tongue, the lips, the teeth, and the velum

The difficulty for many Ecuadorian B1 students lies in the fact that their "vocal instrument" has been tuned to the frequency of Spanish for nearly two decades. The muscles of the mouth have developed "habits" of movement that are efficient for Spanish but insufficient for the 44 phonemes of English

This creates a physical resistance. Philosophically, we must view the learning of English pronunciation as a "re-tuning" of this instrument. It is not about changing who we are, but about expanding what our bodies can perform

II. The Articulatory Ensemble: Understanding the Players To master the mechanics of speech, one must first meet the "players" in the articulatory ensemble. In the Analytic-Linguistic approach, we move beyond simple imitation to provide explicit information about how these organs function

The tongue is the undisputed lead actor in this drama, capable of subtle shifts in positions that completely alter the meaning of a word. However, it does not work alone. The velum (soft palate), the lips, and the alveolar ridge (the bony area behind the upper teeth) act as the stage upon which the air is shaped

A critical component of this ensemble is the vocal cords. This is the gateway to understanding the difference between voiced and voiceless sounds. When the vocal cords vibrate, they produce "voice" from the throat, turning a simple stream of air into a resonant tone

For many Spanish speakers, the failure to engage or disengage these cords at the right micro-second is what leads to common confusions, such as mispronouncing "they" as "day"

By becoming aware of this internal vibration, the student gains a new level of control over their communicative output

III. The Mechanics of Friction: Building the 'Scary' Consonants The focus of this study—the five "scary" phonemes—requires a specific type of physical mastery known as fricative and affricate production

These sounds are created by directing air through a narrow channel in the mouth, creating a distinct "friction" or "gap"

Take, for example, the voiceless palato-alveolar affricate /tʃ/ (as in church). The mechanics involve a momentary stoppage of the air followed by a release through a narrow gap between the tongue and the ridge behind the teeth

While this sound exists in Spanish (as in *choza* or *mucho*), its English counterparts—especially when contrasted with the voiceless palatal alveolar /ʃ/ (as in *shop*)—demand a different precision. To produce /ʃ/, the air must be continuous, flowing without interruption through a channel formed by the tip of the tongue near, but not touching, the upper gum ridge

IV. The Dental Frontier: The Tongue Between the Teeth The most physically “daring” movement for the Latin American student involves the dental fricatives: the voiceless /θ/ (as in *think*) and the voiced /ð/ (as in *this*)

To produce these accurately, the student must often do something that feels counter-intuitive in Spanish: stick the tongue out slightly between the teeth

For the voiceless /θ/, high-pressure air is pushed through the narrow space between the tongue and the top teeth without any vibration from the throat

For its voiced partner, /ð/, the position remains identical, but the vocal cords must join the performance, creating a resonant vibration

This distinction is the difference between a successful “Sound Bridge” and a breakdown in communication. Without this physical awareness, the student is left to “parrot” sounds they cannot truly grasp, leading back to the cycle of inhibition and anxiety that has historically characterized English education in the region.

From Theory to Performance: The Pedagogy of the Sound Bridge

V. The Alchemical Classroom: Integrating Approaches If the first part of this chapter explored the biological “hardware” of speech, we must now turn to the “software”—the methodology that allows a learner to translate anatomical knowledge into fluid communication. Historically, the English classroom has oscillated between two extremes: the Intuitive-Imitative Approach, which relies on the learner’s ability to listen and “parrot” sounds, and the Analytic-Linguistic Approach, which provides explicit, often technical information about phonetics

The philosophy of “The Sound Bridge” is one of integration

Pure imitation often fails when a sound simply does not exist in the student’s native inventory; the ear cannot hear what the brain has not been trained to recognize

Conversely, pure analysis can lead to “paralysis by analysis,” where a student becomes so focused on the position of their tongue that they lose the rhythm of the conversation

By combining these paths, we create a hybrid pedagogy where the student first notices the sound through IPA transcription and then internalizes it through guided mimicry

VI. The PPP Framework: A Structured Ascent To guide the Ecuadorian student through the “scary” territories of the five phonemes—/ʃ/, /tʃ/, /ð/, /θ/, and /dʒ/—we employ the Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) methodology

This is not merely a lesson plan; it is a psychological journey that moves from the safety of the teacher’s model to the independence of the student’s voice.

Presentation: In this phase, the teacher acts as a cartographer, using flashcards and the IPA to visualize the sound. We demystify the “betrayal” of spelling, showing that while “church” and “chef” both begin with the same letters, they

belong to different phonetic worlds (/ʃ/ and /ʒ/) Practice: Here, the student engages in controlled “drills.” This is the laboratory of the voice. Using minimal pairs—words that differ by only one sound, such as ship and chip—the learner trains their brain to discriminate between friction and explosion

This phase is critical for overcoming the “L1 interference” where the mother tongue tries to flatten these vital distinctions

Production: This is the summit of the climb. Through tongue twisters and interactive tasks, the learner moves the sound from isolated practice into a “natural” flow

When a student successfully navigates “She sells seashells by the seashore,” they are doing more than reciting a rhyme; they are reclaiming their confidence and proving that their physical instrument has been re-tuned

VII. The Ethics of Feedback and Assessment A final mechanical component of speech is the feedback loop. As Joan Kenworthy suggests, the teacher’s role is to provide a “mirror” for the student’s utterances

Assessment in this context is not about judgment, but about refinement

Using formative rubrics, we measure not “perfection,” but the progress toward comfortable intelligibility

We must conclude this exploration of mechanics by remembering that the goal is not to sound “native,” but to be humanly understood

When a speaker produces an intelligible utterance, the message travels successfully from the “mouth of the encoder to the ear of the decoder,” regardless of the speaker’s origin

The mechanics of the tongue and teeth are merely the tools; the connection between two

human beings is the ultimate architecture of the Sound Bridge

The “scary” five

The Sibilant Struggle: Mastering the Hiss and the Snap (/ʃ/ and /ʒ/)

I. The Acoustic Threshold: Why Certain Sounds Terrify In the previous chapters, we established that the English phonetic landscape is a labyrinth for the Spanish speaker. However, every labyrinth has specific chambers that induce more anxiety than others. In the Ecuadorian B1 context, students frequently encounter five specific phonemes that act as “gatekeepers” to intelligibility

These are the sounds that this study affectionately—and accurately—labels as the “Scary Five”: /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ð/, /θ/, and /dʒ/

Philosophically, these sounds are “scary” because they represent a loss of control. When a student lacks the phonological awareness to distinguish between a “hiss” and a “snap,” their message becomes a coin toss

To master these sounds is to reclaim one’s agency in a second language. We begin our deep dive with the sibilants: the voiceless palatal alveolar /ʃ/ and its affricate cousin, the voiceless palato-alveolar /tʃ/

II. The Voiceless Palatal Alveolar /ʃ/: The Sound of Silence The phoneme /ʃ/ (as in shop or she) is a phantom in the Spanish language

While English speakers use it to shush a noisy room, Spanish speakers often lack this continuous friction in their native inventory

To produce this sound, the tip of the tongue must be placed near—but not touching—the upper gum ridge, creating a narrow channel through which air flows without interruption

Crucially, the vocal cords do not vibrate; it is a “voiceless” whisper of air

For the Ecuadorian learner, the struggle with /f/ is often one of substitution. Because the brain cannot find a “file” for this sound, it defaults to the nearest available neighbor: the Spanish “ch”

This results in a “visual mispronunciation” where shop becomes chop, and sherry becomes cherry

This error is not just acoustic; it is semantic. A student intending to talk about a “ship” may inadvertently speak of a “chip,” fundamentally altering the receiver’s ability to decode the message

III. The Voiceless Palato-Alveolar Affricate /tʃ/: The Explosive Release In contrast to the continuous flow of /f/, the phoneme /tʃ/ (as in church or teacher) is a sound of sudden release. It is an affricate, meaning it begins as a “stop” and ends as a “fricative”

The mechanics involve stopping the airflow entirely with the tongue against the ridge behind the teeth, then releasing it through a narrow gap to produce audible friction

While this sound exists in Spanish (as in choza or mucho), its presence in English is more complex due to the inconsistency of the alphabet

The digraph “ch” can betray the student, sometimes sounding like /tʃ/ (church), but other times like /f/ (chef) or even /k/ (school)

This inconsistency reinforces the learner’s “feeling of doubt” and anxiety

Mastering /tʃ/ requires the student to move beyond simple imitation and understand the precise “snap” of the air release, ensuring that the vocal cords remain silent while the mouth performs its explosive work

IV. The Laboratory of Contrast: Minimal Pairs To move these sounds from “scary” to “familiar,” the educator must utilize the Linguistic-Analytic approach to contrast them directly. The most effective tool in this phonetic laboratory is the minimal pair—words that differ by only a single sound

By practicing contrasts such as ship/chip, wash/watch, and cash/catch, the student is forced to engage in “phonological noticing”

They begin to see that the difference between these two sounds is the difference between a “continuous hiss” and a “sudden snap”

This practice reduces the “first language disorder” (L1 interference) that causes Spanish speakers to flatten English distinctions

As the learner masters these contrasts, they build a “Sound Bridge” that allows them to communicate with comfortable intelligibility, ensuring their message travels clearly from the “mouth of the encoder to the ear of the decoder”. The Dental Frontier: Navigating the Interdental Maze (/θ/ and /ð/)

V. The Voiceless Dental Fricative /θ/: The Whisper of the Teeth If the sibilants were a battle of friction, the phoneme /θ/ (as in think, mouth, or thief) is a battle of positioning

For the Ecuadorian learner, this sound is often an alien landscape. In the linguistic inventory of Latin American Spanish, the interdental placement—where the tongue is physically placed between the upper and lower teeth—is almost entirely absent

To produce an accurate /θ/, the student must overcome a psychological barrier: the feeling that sticking one’s tongue out is “incorrect” or “silly”

Mechanically, this sound is defined by high-pressure airflow forced through the narrow space

between the tip of the tongue and the edge of the upper teeth. Crucially, the vocal cords do not vibrate; it is a purely breath-driven sound

The sources compare this sound to the “z” used by speakers in Spain (as in *zapato* or *corazón*), providing a rare point of reference for an otherwise foreign movement. Without this specific physical instruction, students tend to default to more “comfortable” sounds, leading to the classic confusion where *thin* is pronounced as *sin* or *fin*

VI. The Voiced Dental Fricative /ð/: The Resonance of Connection While the voiceless /θ/ is a whisper, its voiced counterpart, /ð/ (as in *they*, *mother*, or *weather*), is a vibration

The physical position remains identical—the tongue must still brave the gap between the teeth—but now, the vocal cords must join the performance

This creates a voiced friction that is resonant and deep

The difficulty with /ð/ lies in its proximity to the Spanish “d”

While they are similar, the Spanish “d” is typically dental (the tongue touches the back of the teeth), whereas the English /ð/ is interdental (the tongue is between the teeth)

This subtle difference is the source of a major communicative breakdown: the /d/ vs. /ð/ conflict

When an Ecuadorian student says *day* instead of *they*, or *dare* instead of *there*, they are failing to bridge the gap between their L1 habits and the requirements of English intelligibility

VII. The “th” Trap: One Digraph, Two Destinies A significant source of “visual mispronunciation” for learners is the fact that both sounds—the voiced and the voiceless—are represented by the same two letters: “th”

This inconsistency creates a “feeling of doubt” in the learner

Unlike Spanish, where each letter has a predictable sound, the English “th” forces the student to memorize which words require vibration and which do not

To master this frontier, the Analytic-Linguistic approach is indispensable. Students must be taught to physically feel the vibration in their throat for words like *brother* and *leather*, while identifying the silent flow of air for words like *nothing* and *birthday*

Using minimal pair exercises, such as contrasting them with *day* or breathing with *breed*, allows the student to notice these nuances and minimize the distortion caused by their mother tongue

Conclusion: Crossing the Dental Bridge Mastering the dental fricatives is a transformative step for the B1 learner. It represents a physical commitment to the new language willingness to move the body in unfamiliar ways to ensure a clear message

When a student can successfully pronounce “Three thousand spears were thrown at the throne” without defaulting to /s/ or /t/, they have moved beyond mere imitation and into a realm of phonetic mastery

The “Scary Five” are no longer obstacles; they are the pillars of a secure and intelligible Sound Bridge

The Vibrant Anchor: Mastering the Voiced Affricate (/dʒ/)

VIII. The Duality of the ‘J’ and ‘G’: A Phonetic Masquerade To close our journey through the “Scary Five,” we must encounter the voiced palato-alveolar affricate /dʒ/. Philosophically, this sound represents the ultimate test of a learner’s ability to balance power and precision. In Spanish, the letter ‘j’ offers a rough, throat-

based friction (/x/), but in English, it transforms into a vibrant, explosive anchor. This phoneme is a master of disguise, frequently appearing behind the letter's 'j' (job, jeans) and 'g' (angel, magic), creating a "double value" for the latter that often leaves the student in a state of linguistic vertigo

The physical production of /dʒ/ is a sophisticated act of coordination. Much like its voiceless partner /tʃ/, it begins by momentarily stopping the airflow with the tip of the tongue against the alveolar ridge behind the teeth

However, the defining characteristic of this sound is the immediate engagement of the vocal cords; as the air is released through a narrow gap, it must carry a resonant vibration from the throat. For the B1 Ecuadorian learner, this vibration is the bridge between a muffled, unrecognizable sound and an intelligible, confident utterance

IX. The 'Y' Trap: The Battle for the Initial Sound
Perhaps the most common "scary" encounter with this phoneme occurs when it is confused with the semi-vowel /j/ (the sound of "y" in yet). This is a classic case of L1 interference, where the Spanish speaker's brain tries to simplify the English system

Because the Spanish "y" and "j" can sound similar in certain dialects, students often fail to provide the necessary "snap" and vibration required for the English affricate

This results in the famous confusion between pairs like jet and yet, or Jess and yes

When a student says yet instead of jet, they are not just making a small acoustic slip; they are shifting the category of the sound from an explosive affricate to a smooth glide. To master this distinction, the student must utilize the Analytic-Linguistic approach, focusing on the physical "stop" of the air that characterizes /dʒ/, ensuring that the sound has a firm, grounded beginning rather than a sliding start

X. The Soft 'G' and the Architecture of Memory
The letter 'g' presents a unique pedagogical challenge, as it can represent both the "hard" /g/ sound (game) and the "soft" /dʒ/ sound (gem or orange)

As noted by researchers like Kenworthy, this duality requires the learner to develop a specialized phonological awareness

The student must learn to "notice" the environment of the letter—often becoming /dʒ/ when followed by 'e', 'i', or 'y'

In the classroom, we use minimal pair tasks and sorting exercises to help students categorize these sounds. For instance, contrasting age with egg or gym with gum forces the brain to choose between the voiced affricate and the voiced velar plosive

By practicing with words like bridge, judge, and knowledge, the student learns that the position of the phone, whether at the beginning, middle, or end of a word—does not change its fundamental need for vibration and precise articulation

Conclusion: The End of Fear
With the mastery of /dʒ/, the "Scary Five" lose their power to intimidate. What was once a source of inhibition and anxiety becoming a toolkit for intelligible communication

The Ecuadorian student, once ranked in the "low proficiency" category, now possesses the "Sound Bridge" necessary to navigate the complex waters of English pronunciation

We have moved from the "Cinderella" neglect of the past toward a future where every sound is an opportunity for connection

The phonetic map is complete; the voice is ready; the bridge is open

Two paths to mastery

The Dialogue between Instinct and Analysis: Bridging the Intuitive and the Linguistic

I. The Primordial Echo: The Intuitive-Imitative Approach Philosophically, the first way we encounter any language is through the ear. Before we understand the architecture of a sentence or the physics of a phoneme, we encounter the “music” of the other. The Intuitive-Imitative Approach is the oldest path to mastery, rooted in our biological capacity to mimic the sounds and rhythms of our environment without requiring explicit technical information

It is the path of the child and the “parroting” learner, relying on the teacher as a live model whose utterances are to be captured and repeated until they become second nature

This approach offers an immediate sense of accomplishment. By mimicking native-like intonation and rhythm from the very beginning, learners can build basic skills that boost their confidence and motivation

It allows the student to “feel” the language before they “know” it, contributing to more natural-sounding speech

However, the sources warn that for the B1 learner, imitation alone is often a fragile bridge

When an Ecuadorian student encounters a sound that simply does not exist in Spanish, their ear may fail to perceive it correctly, leading them to imitate a ghost of the sound rather than its reality.

II. The Anatomy of Certainty: The Analytic-Linguistic Approach If imitation is the heart of language learning, then analysis is its bone structure. The Analytic-Linguistic Approach provides the learner with the “explicit information” that the ear alone might miss

This path utilizes the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), articulatory descriptions, and

vocal charts to demystify the mechanics of speech

It asks the student to stop being a mere mimicker and start being a scientist of their own voice.

This approach is particularly vital for mastering the “scary” phonemes identified in this study. By providing contrastive information, the analytic method allows students to use both their vision (through phonetic transcription) and their hearing to identify the subtle differences between voiced and unvoiced sounds

It addresses the “L1 interference” directly, explaining why certain sounds are challenging and offering systematic ways to correct errors

However, we must be wary of “paralysis by analysis.” An overly analytical focus can sometimes prioritize correctness over the fluid grace of communication, leading to hesitant and fragmented speech

III. The Integrative Bridge: A Synthetic Pedagogy The true mastery of English pronunciation does not lie in choosing one path over the other, but in building a bridge between them. The sources advocate for an Integrative Approach, where the intuitive and the analytical are harmonized

In this hybrid model, the learner begins with the “intuitive” spark—listening to the rhythm and flow—but quickly supports that experience with the “analytical” steel of the IPA and articulatory mechanics

This synthesis is essential for the Ecuadorian context, where limited exposure to the target language requires a more structured intervention. By integrating these approaches, the classroom becomes a space where students “notice” the sound through transcription and then “internalize” it through practice

This ensures that the learner’s progress is not just a matter of luck or a “good ear,” but a result of

a comprehensive understanding of how English sounds are produced and combined

IV. The Teacher as the Alchemist of Sound
In this dual journey, the role of the teacher is transformed. As David Abercrombie suggested, every language teacher is, in some respects, a phonetician

They must act as the alchemist who knows when to encourage the student to simply “listen and repeat” and when to stop and provide the technical “explicit information” needed to fix a stubborn error

The teacher provides the feedback loop, establishing priorities and assessing progress toward the goal of comfortable intelligibility

By mastering both the intuitive and the analytical, the educator ensures that the “Sound Bridge” remains secure. The goal is not to sound like a perfect machine, but to use these two paths to find a human voice that is understood by the global community.

Beyond individual sounds

The Music of the Message: Rhythm, Stress, and Intonation

I. The Breath of Life: Speech as a Living Current
If the individual phonemes—the vowels and consonants we have meticulously dissected—are the “bricks” of a language, then the suprasegmental features are the mortar and the architecture that give the building its soul. To speak a language is to participate in a rhythm that exists beyond the mere sum of its parts. In English, this is often described as the distinction between segmental and suprasegmental characteristics. While a learner may master the “Scary Five” consonants, their speech will remain mechanical and potentially unintelligible if they do not capture the “music” of the language: the stress, pitch, contour, and rhythm.

Philosophically, this represents a transition from “accuracy” to “expression.” When we move beyond individual sounds, we stop focusing on the microscopic placement of the tongue and start focusing on the macroscopic flow of human connection. For the Ecuadorian student, this is often the most challenging frontier because the “heartbeat” of English is fundamentally different from the heartbeat of Spanish.

II. The Pulse of Meaning: The Role of Stress
English is a stress-timed language, which stands in stark contrast to the syllable-timed nature of Spanish. In the English phonological system, stress is a vital carrier of meaning. The sources categorize this into word stress and sentence stress. Word stress tells the listener which syllable is the “anchor” of the term, while sentence stress highlights the most important information in a thought.

As noted in the literature, even if every individual phoneme is uttered correctly, a sentence can lose its meaning if the stress pattern is “odd” or misplaced. This is because English listeners rely on these peaks of energy to decode the speaker’s intent. For a B1 learner, failing to stress the correct syllable is like playing a song with the wrong beat; the melody may be recognizable, but the “feel” is lost, leading to a breakdown in communication that even perfect grammar cannot fix.

III. The Melody of the Mind: Intonation and Pitch
Intonation is the “contour” of the voice—the rising and falling of pitch that signals emotion, certainty, or inquiry. It is the tool we use to transform a simple statement into a question or a sarcastic remark. Research indicates that in recent years, the focus of pronunciation teaching has shifted from individual segments to these broader suprasegmental features precisely because of their impact on intelligibility.

For the Spanish speaker, whose native intonation patterns are often more limited in pitch range, English can feel “theatrical” or exaggerated.

However, mastering these contours is essential for effective communication. Intonation allows the speaker to indicate “phrasing, stressing, timing, and rhythm”. Without it, the speaker sounds flat or “robotic,” which can lead to social misinterpretations—where a learner is judged as being uninterested or even arrogant, simply because they have not yet mastered the melody of the target language.

IV. The Integrative Goal: Sounding Like Oneself

The goal of teaching suprasegmentals is not to create an actor, but to empower a communicator. There is a balanced approach in modern pedagogy where both segmental and suprasegmental features receive equal attention. Some educators argue that if segmentals are taught first, the suprasegmentals will follow naturally, while others believe that the “music” should come first to provide a framework for the sounds.

For the student in Ecuador, becoming aware of these characteristics—rhythm, stress, and intonation—is the final step in crossing the “Sound Bridge”. It is about moving from being a person who knows English to a person who inhabits English. When a learner masters the timing and the phrasing, they no longer feel like they are “parroting” a foreign code; they feel they are sharing a sense of world community through a voice that is truly, intelligibly their own

CONCLUSION

The journey toward comfortable intelligibility

Building Bridges, Not Barriers: The Future of the Human Voice

I. The Awakening of Cinderella: From Neglect to Centrality As we reach the final milestone of this journey, we must look back at the landscape we have traversed. We began by acknowledging that pronunciation has long been the “Cinderella” or the “orphan” of the English curriculum—relegated to the shadows of grammar and vocabulary

for too long, the Ecuadorian learner was left to navigate the “scary” waters of English phonetics without a map, leading to a rank of 82nd out of 111 countries in global proficiency

However, through the exploration of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and the mechanics of the “Scary Five” phonemes (/ʃ/, /tʃ/, /ð/, /θ/, /dʒ/), we have brought this Cinderella to the royal ball

We have demonstrated that when pronunciation is no longer neglected, it becomes the very mortar that holds the bricks of vocabulary and grammar together to create real interaction in the classroom

The “Sound Bridge” is now more than a metaphor; it is a structural reality in the mind of the learner.

II. The Liberation of Intelligibility: Beyond the Native Mask Perhaps the most transformative realization of this study is the shift in our goal. For decades, learners have set “ideal” but often unreachable goals of achieving a native-like pronunciation

This book argues for a more ethical and human objective: Comfortable Intelligibility

As Professor David Abercrombie wisely suggested, the goal is not to sound like a perfect imitation of someone else, but to be understood by the interlocutor with ease

This perspective is liberating. It allows the learner to move from being “intelligible” to being themselves

We have learned that voice and accent play a critical role in our own perceptions, but they should never be a source of shame. When the receiver can decode the meaning of the message, even if minor mistakes in other areas of language are made, the goal of communication has been reached

The student's identity is not something to be erased, but a bridge to be strengthened.

III. The End of Anxiety: Empowering the Ecuadorian Voice The path to mastery has also been a psychological one. We addressed the inhibition and anxiety that many B1 learners face when they lack the confidence to utter words appropriately

By providing explicit information through the Analytic-Linguistic approach, we have demystified the sounds that once induced fear

The "Scary Five" are no longer phantoms; they are physical movements of the tongue and teeth that can be mastered through the PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) methodology

When a student can distinguish between shop and chop, or they and day, they are not just performing a phonetic exercise; they are reclaiming their agency

They are realizing that "sounding bad" was simply a lack of a guide, and with the IPA as their compass, that fear evaporates. The classroom has transformed from a place of "parroting" into a "communicative laboratory" where phonological awareness is the key to confidence

IV. The Teacher's Legacy: Cartographers of Connection Finally, we must recognize the role of the educator. The teacher is no longer just a source of input but a cartographer of sound and a provider of vital feedback

By integrating the Intuitive-Imitative and Analytic-Linguistic approaches, the teacher ensures that pronunciation is not an isolated drill but an integral component of communication

The teacher has the heart to touch the lives of their students by teaching them that English is the lingua franca that links the borders of the first and third worlds

Every intelligible utterance produced by a student is a success story—a proof that the gap between contents and oral practice has been filled

Final Reflection: The Open Bridge The "Sound Bridge" remains open. It is a path that leads toward a world community where we communicate not to be perfect, but to be connected

The Ecuadorian student, armed with the 44 phonetic symbols and a new understanding of their own vocal instrument, is ready to walk this bridge with pride

The journey toward comfortable intelligibility is, in the end, a journey toward understanding our shared humanity through the simple, profound act of a clear and resonant voice

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