

Svarabhakti Vowels, English Flapping, and a Little Magic: Strategies for Teaching Tap *r* in Spanish

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This presentation models one approach for training English-speaking students to produce the normative Spanish tap [ɾ] in all of the phonological contexts in which it appears. As a point of departure, it makes use of the automatic process whereby North American English speakers flap /t/ and /d/ in particular contexts, training them, through sleight of hand, to imagine the phonetic output as a rhotic rather than an obstruent. Once intervocalic [ɾ] has been practiced sufficiently, students are taught to extend the sound to contexts in which it does not exist in their native language: pre- and post-consonantly, and before a pause. In order to accomplish this, vowels are inserted in target words in order to create the intervocalic context that has already been mastered; the artificial vocoid is then shortened, as if it were merely a svarabhakti vowel, not uncommon in Spanish consonant clusters in the first place. Eventually, the student is able to delete the intrusive vowel (as much as anyone does, that is), and the tap [ɾ] remains in place.

Practice proceeds in such a way as to present multiple examples of a structure before varying the context in which [ɾ] appears. Another goal is to move the student away from the printed word, and this done by having students respond to illustrations designed to elicit particular consonant sequences.

Details of the lesson (Slide numbers from the first PowerPoint look **like this**, and from the second PowerPoint they look **like this**.)

One of the most important strategies for introducing tap [ɾ] is to “sneak up” on students, since native speakers of American English already produce the sound [ɾ] in intervocalic contexts, and its extension to other contexts for Spanish is not physiologically difficult. The challenge lies in getting students to “reanalyze” the sound in question as an /ɾ/, rather than a /d/ or /t/ (which it is in English). If you merely tell them that the *tt* sound they make in *Betty* is the same consonant sound found in Spanish *era*, they’re liable to start paying too much attention to their English pronunciation in the wrong ways—making, for example, an aspirated alveolar [t^h] (even though it would be totally artificial in this context).

Instead, show up in class with great fanfare on the day you are to teach /ɾ/, and simply say, in English, “Ta-dah!” **3** Say it several times, and then get everyone else to join in. “Ta-dah! Ta-dah! Ta-dah!” After you have made sure that everyone is on board, and that their /d/ is duly flapped, show them slide **4**: *¡Tará!* Say it again (but with a nice, dental, unaspirated [t]) in Spanish, and point to the word on the board. If everyone now continues to pronounce the word with a nice flap, you’ve “snuck up on them” and they are now producing a proper Spanish /ɾ/ in the proper context. (“Ta-dah!” It’s magic!)

Now that the secret is out, continue to practice /ɾ/ between vowels, using English phrases

to again “sneak up on” the Spanish phonetic parallels. On the next few slides are some other examples to use. Get students to say each English phrase several times before changing their vowels (and a few consonantal details) enough that they’ve converted the phrase into the Spanish word given. English *Betty* **5** morphs into Spanish nonce *veri* **6**; English *muddy* **7** can be massaged to become Spanish *Mari* **8**. English *I caught a cold* **9** can be shortened to *caught a cold* **10** and then changed into Spanish *caracol* **11**.

Now it's time to practice this sound **12** in some real words in Spanish in this intervocalic context **13** (where, as we've said, English finds the same sound). Go back to these slides until your students know the words and can pronounce them with the tap.

14 *loro* (or, if your students insist, *pájaro*)

15 *pera*

16 *oreja*

17 *lámpara*

18 *zanahoria*

19 *caracol*

The next step is to produce this tap [r] next to another consonant (such as in consonant clusters *pr-*, *tr-*, *gr-* or in coda position within a word: *perla*, *borde*). This is not much of a stretch; it is, in fact, much easier than most students (or even instructors) think. The key lies in the realization that word-internal flap [r] is, to some extent, always surrounded by vowel sounds in Spanish. **20**

Ask students to listen carefully to the words *tres*, *prado*, and *gris* as you say them slowly. They should notice that between the initial consonant ([t], [p], or [g]) and the flap [r], there is a very short vowel sound, as the following vowel “bleeds” across the *r* into the space between the first two consonants. (This svarabhakti vowel can be shown on a spectrogram if students are familiar enough with that tool. The one on slide **21** is from <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/Events/PLC/plc32/revised/schmeiser.pdf>) Knowing this, students can first practice their newly acquired flap [r] in the easier, intervocalic context, and then work on shortening the intrusive vowel to the point where it sounds good. This is how it might play out in initial consonant clusters **22**:

1. Use the English word *today* to “sneak up” on Spanish *Teresa*. (You might want to use a phrase such as *Today somebody is...*) Once *Teresa* has been mastered with a good flap [r], remove the final vowel. Then work on reducing the first vowel to a mere “transitional” vowel to allow the [t] and [r] to be spoken in close proximity of each other.

23 “Today somebody...” → 24 “Today some...” → 25 Teresa → 26 terés →
27 t[e]rés → 28 t[^e]rés → 29, 30, 31 tres

2. Use the English word *giddy* to introduce the flap of Spanish *gris*.

32 “giddy” → 33 guiri → 34 guiris → 35 guiris → 36 g[i]rís → 37 g[ⁱ]rís
→ 38, 39 gris

3. Need more practice? Try turning Spanish *parado* into *prado*.

parado → p[a]rado → p[^a]rado → prado

Now practice this strategy with these words, as illustrated on the slides:

1 *estrella*

2 *almendra*

3 *cruz*

4 *lágrima*

5 *cuatro*

6 *libro*

It should now be possible to use the strategies practiced above to expand the context in which students can use their new Spanish flap [r]. There is really only one context left to master: coda position. 7

In coda position, 7 students may want to continue inserting a vowel sound after the [r] in order to maintain their flap, reducing the vowel little by little until it is unnoticeable.

puéreta → puér[^e]ta → puerta 8

Here are some real words to practice on. By using pictures, you help students master the sound without relying on the visual cue of the written word.

9 *puerta*

10 *martillo*

11 *serpiente*

12 *linterna*

13 *leopardo*

14 *ardilla*

The same strategy could work in absolute-final position, as in:

mara → *mar[a]* → *mar^[a]* → *mar*

Here, however, instructors and students alike need to remember that dialectally all sorts of things are likely happen to /r/ before a pause: devoicing, assibilation, lateralization, etc. It is a very weak position indeed, and it's quite possible that the liquid they come up with will work just fine.

It is also possible to approach internal coda [r] directly from English phrases, much like we did at the beginning of this lesson. Consider, for example, the transformations suggested below:

15 *peddle a long way* → 16 *peddle a long way* → 17 *peddle a* → 18 *perla*

More practice:

Adam applied/arma

middle Ohio/mirlo

Now, as they continue to move away from the printed word, students can practice their newfound [r] by identifying pictures such as those on slide 20, using phrases in which the tap appears in a variety of contexts:

tres estrellas verdes

cuatro flores amarillas

un termómetro negro

un trébol anaranjado

tres cruces negras

dos corazones grises

dos triángulos amarillos
(*dos pirámides amarillas*)

cuatro sobres verdes

dos tijeras anaranjadas

Having just capitalized on the similarity of the Spanish tap *r* and English flap *d*, it is important to cement the differences between Spanish and English *d*, as well as the critical difference between Spanish *d* and tap *r*. Nowhere is this clearer than with minimal pairs 21, illustrating the difference between [ð] and [r] in intervocalic position.

It might be fun to challenge students to pronounce (and even "define"!) invented words containing their newfound tap 22 in its various phonological contexts.

I find it useful also to point out important orthographic and/or pronunciation idiosyncrasies between Spanish and English, in lists of "formas inesperadas" 23. For our study of *r*'s, these include *milagro* and *Argelia*, whose liquids have switched positions (compare English *miracle* and *Algeria*); *apropiado*, which has lost the second *r* still present in English *appropriate*; and *huracán* and *embarazada*, which have tap *r* where English writes *rr* in the corresponding or cognate form (*hurricane*, *embarrassed*).

All this would be followed, of course, by additional practice, including authentic texts and communicative activities. Listening activities will further focus on the discernment of taps vs. trills, and written work will ask students to determine which rhotic is called for in each instance of *r* in a given text. Although beyond the scope of the lesson at hand, these activities can be found in chapter 24 of *Sonidos en contexto: Una introducción a la fonética del español con especial referencia a la vida real*, by Terrell A. Morgan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).