

THE PHONETIC ALPHABET FOR BEGINNERS: A REVISION AND ADAPTATION TO ENGLISH FOR INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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In the following article I want to offer a revision and updating of Gabriel Tejada's original idea adapting the International Phonetic Alphabet for beginners in English in a non-native environment. I will seek to offer a presentation and discussion of the original proposal, by considering the paradigm of English as an International Language (EIL), followed by a series of suggestions that will make the use of a notation system easier and realistic for young learners of English. The strong points in the original suggestion are highlighted, and some new ideas are incorporated in order to adapt it to the new situation of English internationally and in the Spanish and Andalusian current teaching setting.

INTRODUCTION

Back in the 1990's, in Nieto García and Tejada Molina (1993) and in Tejada Molina and Nieto García (1995) we presented an adaptation of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for young learners of English, regarding their needs in addressing such a complex issue as English pronunciation. I still think that the principles behind this Phonetic Alphabet for Beginners (PAB) are perfectly valid for these times, although they need some degree of adaptation, after such landmarks as Cruttenden's (2001) rewriting of Gimson's fundamental book (1980) and, especially, Jennifer Jenkins' (2001) seminal work concerning the pronunciation of English as an International Language (EIL). In the next pages, I'm following our original ideas, as a warm, duly respectful homage to Gabriel Tejada's views on TEFL and especially of the importance that teaching the spoken dimension has for young learners (Tejada Molina, 1991; 2007).

Probably the main need for adaptation to a new situation comes from the inclusion of a new model for pronunciation, which is not necessarily a native variety of English, as was the case in 1995, but the inclusion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or, more generally speaking, English as an International Language (EIL). As we will see in the next pages, some of the ideas behind this new approach were already partially present in our previous studies, whereas others seem to be more than welcome at this moment. In recent proposals for the inclusion of a wider treatment of pronunciation from an international perspective, one of the keypoints has been the usefulness of dealing with just one variety of English or more than one. At this stage, we must be aware of our students' origin, but also of their future use of English for international communication, so that we must address English pronunciation specifically in the classroom bearing in mind that most of them will share Spanish as their common L1, but

also thinking that they are learning English precisely because they want to communicate internationally in a more efficient way in the future. The first notion will mean that we can use some form of adapted representation of pronunciation –Hancock (1994: 3) speaks of ‘imitated pronunciation’–, whereas the second will mean that, in later stages, we should go beyond this use, to make learners understand that other forms of English should be known, and this will mean an expansion of pronunciation models in the future –actually, Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2010: 33) pose doubts on to what extent a single Lingua Franca Core can work equally well for all learners of English internationally.

The basic principle we followed in the original notation system (Tejada Molina and Nieto García, 1995: 251-252) was the simplification and adaptation of some of the symbols employed in the IPA. For example, the enormous difficulties that we know young learners of English have to face when distinguishing between short and long vowels were simplified by incorporating just a regular set for five vowel symbols and using underlining to suggest that they could be long instead of short –a similar suggestion is included in Rogerson-Revell (2011: 11) when she presents a general view on a possible treatment of international English. Similarly, we suggested the use of up to three different forms for the /ə/ sound, depending on its position, to reflect perceptual differences, with the peculiarity that a smaller font was suggested for all these forms, so that an adaptation was offered. Some other basic ideas concerning accents of English internationally and aspects of connected speech were also present in our PAB, such as the inclusion of /r/ in all positions –we coincided in this with Jenkins’ later proposal that a rhotic pronunciation tends to be more intelligible to international speakers of English– and the presentation of

meaning groups as full chunks of information, plus the inclusion of the stress mark in a way that may be clearer, or more intuitively acceptable, to Spanish speakers of English. In the approach to consonants, finally, we again offered a simplification of some of the symbols, and also the possibility of finding variation in some sounds, depending on the position, and the linguistic context, of some of these sounds.

In this study I would like to update our previous findings, and adapt them especially to EIL and the principles behind the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), establishing priorities in how we address English pronunciation for beginners. I will divide my explanation in the three blocks that we originally presented, namely vowels, consonants and prosodic features, and will offer a reflection on those adaptations that stay the same and those that should be adapted to a new approach to English pronunciation internationally. In all these cases, I will include examples of how the pronunciation of words and phrases should be presented in this new approach which, for lack of a better term, I will refer to as “PAB-r” (Phonetic Alphabet for Beginners, a revision).

VOWELS

There is no major difference between our initial proposal and its evolution, with some minor exceptions that affect the repertory of sounds rather than their actual presentation. We know that one of the great difficulties that most young Spanish learners of English as a Foreign Language have to face is the great number of vowels, by Spanish standards, that they have to recognize and later imitate –see, on this, among others, O’Connor (1980: 146); Kenworthy (1987: 156); Yavas (2011:188-189). Table 1, then, is a reflection on the number of vowel symbols, from the original PAB to the modified PAB-r.

Symbol PAB	Symbol PAB-r	Original example	PAB	PAB-r
i	i	“ill”	íl	íl
e	e	“sell”	sél	sél
a	a	“pal”	pál	Pál
o	o	“top”	tóp	tóp
u	u	“put”	pút	pút
a	a	“cut”	kát	kát
o	o	“table”	téibol	téibol
e	e	“ago”	egóu	egóu
a	a	“paper”	péipa	péipar
i	i	“see”	sí	sí
e	e (+r)	“sir”	sér	sér
a	a	“far”	fár	fár
o	o	“saw”	só	só
u	u	“too”	tú	tú

Table 1. A list of the symbols for short and long vowels

The only significant difference here is the levelling of differences between the vocalic sound in “pal” and the one in “cut”, so that the symbol employed is the same. The general principle here is a double one: the priority established by Jenkins (2001: 159) for a neat

distinction between short and long vowels and the reliance on contextual factors to distinguish such tricky pairs as “cat” and “cut”, or “hat” and “hut”, going beyond a pure phonemic approach to EFL pronunciation, as already mentioned in Nieto García (2013: 133).

Symbol PAB	Symbol PAB-r	Original example	PAB	PAB-r
ei	ei	“pay”	péi	péi
ai	ai	“buy”	bái	bái
oi	oi	“boy”	bói	bói
au	au	“now”	náu	náu
ou	ou	“know”	nóu	nóu
ia	i (+r) or ía	“ear”	íar	ír
ea	e (+r)	“air”	éar	ér
ua	u (+r)	“tour”	túar	túr
eia	ei (+r)	“payer”	péiar	péir
aia	ai (+r)	“buyer”	báiar	báir
oia	oi (+r)	“coyer”	kóiar	kóir
aua	au (+r)	“power”	páuar	páur
oua	ou (+r)	“lower”	lóuar	lóur

Table 2. A list of the symbols for glides

In the group of glides, a new theoretical reduction in the total number of symbols is introduced. This is done by limiting the number of glides, in fact, to just the five closing diphthongs, as most centring diphthongs and triphthongs are usually followed by /r/, which is anyway present both in the PAB and in the PAB-r in these sequences. Given the open nature of the proposal, in any case, in those words where the centring diphthong, or triphthong, is not followed by /r/, the suggestion is the inclusion of the full vowel plus a schwa, as in 'idea' and 'enjoyable'.

As a summary, if we suggested in the original PAB a reduction of the number of symbols employed to represent English vocalic sounds,

mainly through the underlining of non-gliding long vowels, in this new version I am suggesting a further simplification, through the suppression of one symbol ("cut") and the limitation in the total number of glides.

CONSONANTS

In general, we can say that the adaptation of consonants is an updating of the PAB bearing in mind the general principles outlined by Jenkins (2001: 137-144), where she suggests that the pronunciation of consonants is not really a problem for intelligibility on an international basis, although some key elements must be respected. This can be seen in detail in table 3.

Symbol PAB	Symbol PAB-r	Original example	PAB	PAB-r
p	p	"put"	pút	pút
t	t	"top"	tóp	tóp
k	k	"cake"	kéik	kéik
b	b	"bed"	béd	béd
d	d	"dog"	dóg	dóg
g or gu	g	"gate"	guéit	géit
ch	ch	"church"	chérch	chérch
y or ch	y or ch	"George"	yórch	yórch
f	f	"five"	fáif	fáif
v or f	v or f	"very"	véri	véri
z	z	"thief"	zíf	zíf
d	d	"this"	dís	dís
s	s	"stop"	stóp	stóp
s	s	"zoo"	sú	sú
sh	sh	"ship"	shíp	shíp
sh	sh	"measure"	méshar	méshar
j	h	"hot"	jót	hót
m	m	"moon"	mún	mún
n	n	"name"	néim	néim
n	n	"bring"	brín	brín
l	l	"little"	lítol	lítol
r or ru	r	"run"	ruán	rán
i	i	"yes"	iés	iés
u	u	"white"	uáit	uáit

Table 3. A list of the symbols for consonants

Just a few basic changes have been introduced in my revision of the original model, although the main features in the original model remain the same, and these include levelling the difference between possibly difficult distinctions between the pair of affricates in ‘church’ and ‘George’ and the pairs of fricatives in ‘stop’ and ‘zoo’, ‘ship’ and ‘measure’ –see, on this last feature, similar solutions in ‘Amalgum English’, as presented by Rogerson-Revell (2011: 11)–, or the presentation of /ŋ/ as /n/. The main changes are explained next.

The treatment of the plosive alveolar d sound was intended to establish a difference between this sound and /ð/, but this does not seem to be functional any more, at a time when the separate treatment of this last sound is said to be a low priority from an international perspective, given the wide variety of actual realizations that we can find, and the low weight it has in Jenkins’ LFC. The suggestion, then, is just to suppress the distinction –see, on this, for example, Jenkins (2001: 137-138) and Rogerson-Revell (2011: 11, 57), in her reflection on “Amalgum English”.

The other three main changes between the original model and its updating are, again, cases of simplification, which comes closer to the way sounds are presented in standard IPA. For instance, the plosive velar /g/ sound was originally presented as /g/ or /gu/, depending on the sound following. Similarly, the glottal fricative /h/ was presented as /j/ and the flapped /r/ as either /r/ or /ru/. The suggestion is to simplify all these elements, so that young learners of English are better prepared to find these elements in the future as they will find them in standard pronunciation materials, so that no ‘alien’ elements, like the /u/ in /g/ or in /r/, may mislead them in the actual pronunciation that many common words will have in many forms of English internationally. This is specially noticeable in the presentation of /h/ as /h/, and not /j/, as most young learners are now really used to finding the aspiration of

this initial sound in many common words from very early stages, like the word ‘hand’ and many others.

As a summary, most of the original features are still included in the updating, including, above all, a treatment where no clear distinction is really established between most voiceless fricatives and their voiced counterparts, or the avoidance of some difficult distinctions which are affected by local or regional varieties in native and international English, like the /n/ - /ŋ/ differentiation. Beyond that, the adaptation obeys some basic principles that will help young learners of English get used to the IPA model in the future.

PROSODIC FEATURES

The treatment of prosodic elements in the original model was probably one of its most salient features, and there are no real changes in the adaptation. I would simply like to reflect on some of its main features that provided a perfectly adequate updating of the canon of English pronunciation from an international perspective, in the early 1990’s.

Probably the most salient feature in the treatment of prosodic features was the way the forming elements of speech were presented, with a factual incorporation of such aspects as elision and linking, and prominence levels, to simple English expressions. One such example might be “Point to the window” /póintu deuindou/. An analysis of the PAB presentation will tell us the following concerning the model: a) it establishes a clear distinction between prominent and non-prominent syllables; the prominent syllables are marked with a stress symbol, and quite often presented in a larger type than the vowels in the unstressed syllables; b) there is no space between the stressed elements and the dependent non-lexical words surrounding them, so that learners do not perceive them as separate entities, in rhythmical terms; and c) the elided

elements, such as the /t/ in “point” are not included in the PAB pronunciation, as we know Spanish speakers of English find it especially difficult to articulate some consonants in some positions. Like this, the treatment of consonant clusters coincides with Jenkins’ treatment, when she says that they should not be modified in syllable onsets but they can be made lighter in syllable codas –see, on general aspects concerning this field, Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin’s (2010: 283) reference to Gilbert’s priorities for young learners, where the following are established: linking between words, the number of syllables, word stress, prominence and thought grouping. Although it is true that EIL tends to leave many of these aspects outside the English as a Lingua Franca approach –see Walker’s (2010: 62) interesting comparison between the ELF and the EFL syllabi–, it is also true that most of them are easily incorporated to young students’ perceptions on differences between Spanish and English in general, and they will be better equipped in the future

to understand both varieties of English if an adequate presentation of natural speech is given to them from the start.

CONCLUSION

Most of the suggestions presented in the previous pages are simply an extension of the original model. This will tell us that the initial suggestion already considered international communication, and the establishment of priorities in this, as key factors in dealing with pronunciation and its importance for young learners of English. The new elements that we can find in this updating are the result of a reflection on some of the suggestions already made a number of years ago, and most of them are intended to make teachers aware of the need to approach other models that, in the future, will help learners adapt to the general systems that they are going to find in many information sources in dealing with the pronunciation of English.

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