

“GUIES DE PRONUNCIACIÓ DEL CATALÀ”: TOOLS AND REFLECTIONS TO MODIFY ARTICULATORY HABITS AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The teaching innovation group FONCAT, from the Universitat de Barcelona, has been working on improving a website, “Guies de pronunciació del català”, designed for students who need help in pronouncing Catalan sounds correctly. This paper presents the findings derived from the observation of 10 students from the degree Comunicació i Indústries Culturals of the Universitat de Barcelona. These students used the website with the purpose of improving their pronunciation in a course devoted to improve the oral skills in Catalan.

Keywords: Catalan pronunciation, TIC, teaching innovation in phonetics, teaching Catalan pronunciation to non-Catalan speakers.

1 GOALS

The goal of this paper is to present, on the one hand, the website “Guies de pronunciació del català”, and, on the other, to show the preliminary findings related to the functioning and success of the website. These data have been obtained from a small group of students who used the website and who have been attending the course Gèneres i formats de la Comunicació Escrita, from the degree Comunicació i Indústries Culturals, offered by the Universitat de Barcelona.

2 GUIES DE PRONUNCIACIÓ DEL CATALÀ

2.1 Introduction

The freedom of the individual to learn and self-manage, to find what they need and to adapt it to their environment is becoming a common practice. Initiatives such as Dale J. Stephens <http://www.uncollege.org/story/#the-story>, founder of what has been denominated “uncollege”, are acquiring in recent days an important role. In the current university domain, in which students can autonomously prepare themselves by using the proposals on offer at their universities, it is essential to create tools that contribute to improve their knowledge and skills in scientific fields, and, in our particular case, to improve the pronunciation of Catalan language.

2.2 Motivation behind the project

It is well known that speakers who have to learn a non-mother language are faced with a series of difficulties, mostly concerning the differences between the nature of their mother language and the language they have to learn.¹ This is why the comparison between L1 and L2 languages becomes essential when determining the problems that foreign language speakers

¹ According to [1], in the current context, the process of teaching-learning foreign languages strengthens the acquisition of competitive communications that damage the handling of phonetic phenomena. If a second language is analysed as a linguistic product, it becomes obvious that it is perceived through the filter of the mother tongue.

experience. Apart from this, the research on L2 learning has not only been focused on variables such as the age of the speakers, but on social variables such as the use of the L1 and the L2, the teaching and practice of the L2, the amount of time of residency, the aptitude, the motivation, and the cognitive abilities of each of the speakers (for more discussion about this, see [1]).

In the case of Catalan, there are some phonetic and phonological contrasting studies which mainly compare Catalan with Spanish, English and German. The non-Catalan speaking university students who want to work on their Catalan pronunciation in an autonomous and self-regulated way have very few opportunities to do so and the resources at their disposal for self-learning in this ambit are certainly limited. The textbook by [2] constitutes an approximation to the verbo-tonal method in Catalan. The one by [3] is addressed to Spanish speakers, and aims at integrating the sounds of Catalan through methods for recognizing and discriminating the sounds and through written explanations. The *Guia de correcció fonètica*, by [4], although it contains information relative to different varieties of Catalan, is essentially devoted to speakers with Spanish as L1 and learning Majorcan Catalan as L2. The project *Pronunciem*, by [5], develops instructions depending on the L1 and taking into consideration the linguistic diversity of secondary education students recently arrived to Catalonia, which are basically English, Arabic, Berber, Spanish, French, Romanian or Chinese. Finally, the project *GALÍ* [6] is a system used in all the language welcoming classrooms (known as “aules d’acollida” in Catalan). The portals *ésAdir* [7], *ReSolc* [8] and the *Dictionari de dubtes del català* [9] offer a quite amount of information about the pronunciation of lexical items, and in the two latter cases, also about dialectal pronunciation and lexis.

These new needs of universities and also of society were what drove the teaching innovation group FONCAT² to start in 2010 the development of a website aimed at helping those adults with Spanish as L1 and coming from different Spanish regions who wanted to learn how to pronounce Catalan. The website and the allied project are called “Guies de pronunciació del català” (www.guiesdepronunciacio.com) [10]. The initial idea of the project is indebted to an initial proposal by [11].

2.3 Description of the project

This proposal has been conceived to be a complementary and innovative tool of the materials already existing in the market specialized in the self-learning of Catalan pronunciation. In terms of content, the intention is to work with itineraries based on the language of origin of the speakers/learners. In terms of form, the idea is to include both segmental and suprasegmental properties of Catalan in relation to other languages. Obviously, the project is being developed in different phases and with the collaboration of a team of professors and investigators from the Universitat de Barcelona, the Universitat de Lleida, the Universitat Pompeu Fabra and the Institut del Teatre. The project has received funding from the UB (Ajuts i Projectes d’Innovació Docent PMID)³ and from “la Caixa” (Recercaixa 2011 program).⁴

The website is organized through tables containing the sounds of Catalan, which can be compared to those of other languages, for example those of Spanish. From this comparison, different groups of sounds are classified: 1) those that are common in both languages; 2) those

² Initially the members of the group were Maria Cabrera, Ana M. Fernández, Roser Güell, Maria-Rosa Lloret, Clàudia Pons-Moll, Gemma Reguant, Paolo Roseano and Josefina Carrera-Sabaté (IP). Afterwards, other external members were incorporated to the team: Imma Creus, Dolors Font, Joan Julià, Agnès Rius and Francina Torres. The internals are Enric Blanco, Lea Feliu and Eva Pons.

³ Guies de pronunciació del català (1st and 2nd phase) 2011PID-UB/43- 2012PID-UB/072. Leading investigator: Josefina Carrera-Sabaté.

⁴ Desenvolupament de recursos tecnològics per a l’ensenyament i l’aprenentatge autònom del català. Recercaixa 2011. Leading investigator: Clàudia Pons-Moll.

which are exclusive of one of the languages, and 3) those that are shared by both languages but which do not have the same distribution. (See Fig. 1). These three possibilities are depicted by an analogy to traffic lights, in the same order: green-colored sounds exist in both languages. Red-colored sounds are those that do not exist in the itinerary language. Amber-colored ones are those that could be problematic for a non-Catalan speaker (since these sounds appear in different contexts, etc.). The blue-colored sounds are the ones that don't exist in Catalan.

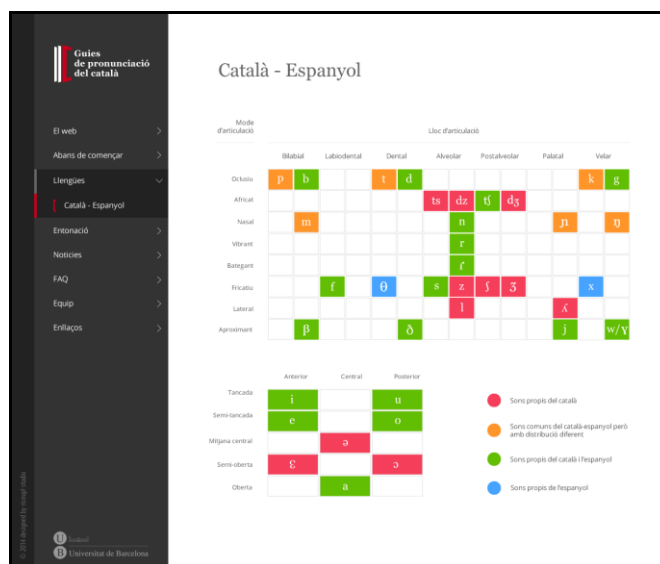


Fig. 1

For each of the sounds in groups 2 and 3, the user can find a variety of activities⁵ that consist in discriminating and using them in different ways:

- Example of the pronunciation of each Catalan sound that might lead to some kind of difficulty depending on the L1 is explained and shown, through oral explanations and audiovisual material.
- Perceptual discrimination and repetition exercises through audiovisual material.
- Intonation perceptual exercises according to the different sentence modalities in Catalan (this section is being conducted by a team of the UPF, lead by Pilar Prieto, with the collaboration of Joan Borràs Comes and Paolo Rosseano).

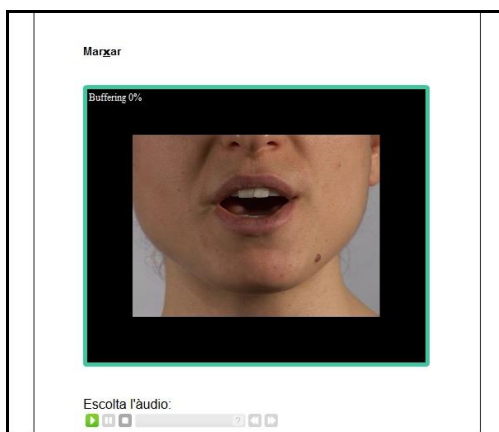


Fig. 2

⁵ The activities correspond to the recording of actors and previous students of the Institut del Teatre de Barcelona (Arnau Puig Casas, Martí Salvat Morín, Aina Sánchez Cuscó) under the guidance of Roser Güell, from the same institution.

D. A collection of Catalan folklore material in order to contextualize each problematic sound in a wider context and assimilate it in a more easy and natural way. The Catalan expressions and sayings, and the traditional songs and stories in Catalan try to help the speaker/learner to know about different aspects of Catalan culture. In addition, following the lines of European projects such as the “European Music Portfolio: A Creative Way into Languages”, in which they show how language learning can be benefited from music, the traditional Catalan songs included in this proposal have been harmonized and arranged following current musical⁶ tendencies so that the learning of sounds is more attractive to the speaker. The project has been developed together with training and speaking specialists for actors (see Fig. 3).⁷



Fig. 3

Few exercises on sound detection were introduced in one of the beginning stages “before starting the project”. These exercises, designed by Gemma Reguant Fosas, have as a goal to bodily prepare the users of the website by making them listen to the instructions so that the learning process is more successful (see [12]).

2.4 Characteristics of the survey

The students who took part in this project were attending the course *Gèneres i Formats de la Comunicació Oral*, from the degree *Comunicació i Indústries Culturals*. The test was carried out over the course and its results are as follow. At the beginning of the course students were asked to read a text and a list of sentences during a few minutes. Afterwards, they were asked to read this aloud in front of a camera. The contents to be read were done *ad hoc* and contained important aspects of standard formal oral Catalan.

The students who had problems in their pronunciation were contacted and were explained, individually and in groups, the aspects related to their own pronunciation that needed to be improved. They were shown how to best address their oral sound problems by means of the website, which allowed them to work progressively on audition and discrimination of sounds; repetition of items, minimal pairs, sentences, expressions, sayings, stories, songs, tongue-twisters, etc.

⁶ Josep Prenafeta Gavaldà, Pep Figueras Miró and Carlos Morera Perelló.

⁷ Begoña López López and Roser Güell Isern.

From here, and from the activities of continuous assessment of the subject, an individual monitoring of each student was performed. The didactic strategies used were the following: a) individual tutorials with the people involved (there were 12 students divided into two groups: one in the morning and another in the afternoon) who presented problems in their pronunciation of certain sounds; b) individual work and focusing on the sounds which resulted problematic for each student or group of students; c) monitoring of the evolution of students in personal tutorial sessions; d) work on perceptual sensibility starting with hearing exercises created by Gemma Reguant in order to bodily prepare students before the subject assessment (see [12]).

2.5 Results of the survey

We present here the findings from the intervention conducted on the students of the course *Gèneres i formats de la comunicació escrita* during the academic course 2013-2014. We will first focus on the findings obtained in the first test, and, afterwards, on the findings obtained after the innovative teaching intervention in the pronunciation of a few students through the guides.

The analysis of the findings from the first test allowed us to detect the student's problems in pronunciation in which we had to intervene, which were phonetic forms that had to be modified in order for the student to acquire an oral formal standard of the Catalan language. The errors were related with the articulation of the lateral palatal corresponding to the graphic form <ll> in words such as *llibre*, *bacallà* or *ull*; the articulation of the open vowels <o> and <e> in words like *col* or *cel*; the articulation of voiced sibilant <s> in words such as *casa* and in contact words like *els ous*. Next we exemplify the percentage of students who presented problems in each of the three observed aspects in relation with all the analyzed students (see Fig. 4)

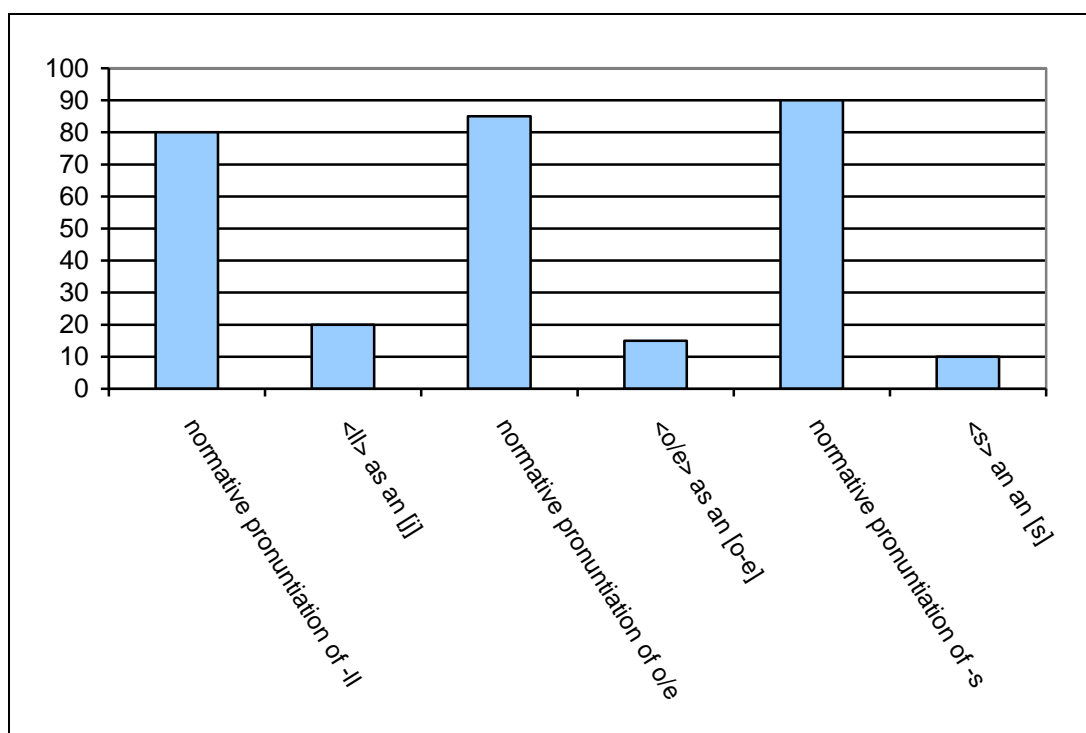


Fig. 4. Percentage of students who presented pronunciation problems in relation to the class group.

Comments on Fig. 4

1. Pronunciation of the lateral palatal in words such as *llibre*, *bacallà* or *ull*. In Fig. 4 it can be observed that 80% of the students pronounced the lateral palatal sound correctly, whereas the other 20% of students pronounced the lateral palatal like an approximant consonant. It was this 20% of students who needed to work on the pronunciation of <ll>.
2. Pronunciation of open vowels in words such as *trobo*, *os*, *cel*, *terra*. It can also be observed in Fig. 4 that 16% of students presented problems in articulating the mid open back vowels

<o> and <e> because they pronounced them as if they were close. It was on this 16% that the innovative teaching methods were performed.

3. Pronunciation of the voiced fricative consonant in words such as *casa* or in contact words such as *els ànecs*. Once again, in Fig. 4, it can be observed that 10% of students presented problems pronouncing the voiced fricative consonant because they articulated it as voiceless. It was necessary to work on these students' sound sensibility and their perception of sonority.

Regarding the general errors that were detected, it is important to note that the students were not systematic: there were those who had problems in the opening of the mid open vowels <e> (in words like *mel* or *nen*) and <o> (in words like *cosa* or *roba*), but not in the pronunciation of the lateral palatal <ll> in words like *llapis*; there were also students who only had problems with the lateral palatal <ll> and with the sonorous <s> in words such as *casa* or *uns ànecs*. The students' problems were varied and, therefore, a particular and individual intervention was needed.

With regard to the definitive findings, it is important to state that the alteration of the articulatory habits is a process that takes many hours and perseverance. The period of a university course of 6 Academic Credits does not offer enough time to modify the phonetic flaws of speakers (which have had for two decades), especially if they affect diverse sounds. Nevertheless, there has been an improvement in the pronunciation of these detected sounds, mainly because the speakers paid special attention to the errors that they were committing and so this leads them to be more consistent and to be more aware of the language on a formal level. More precisely, it can be said that the success in improving the pronunciation of certain sounds has to be related directly to the quantity of problems that the students experienced and also with the amount of hours spent on improvement. If the problem was with a single sound, the percentage of success in students was between 80 and 90%; if the problem was with two or three sounds, the success rate was around 50%. Moreover, if the students invested an average of 4 to 5 hours a week using the website, their progress was noticeable, but if they spent less than 2, then their progress was less evident.

One of the most important aspects to highlight is that students turned up for their oral exams with a *confidence* that they did not have at the start of the year (they lost the initial pressure and stress that they had in oral expositions due to language problems and they obtained similar marks to their classmates who didn't need to use the website). As a matter of fact, in every case, the use of the website was evaluated as an indispensable tool for individual work and personal progress.

With this intervention and with their autonomous work on the website, the students understood the importance behind pronouncing correctly the sounds in Catalan, especially in formal contexts. In addition, they have been given a methodology that has been demonstrated to be effective for modifying the articulation of sounds that they previously had difficulty in pronouncing. Regardless of the success of this resource, the students have positively valued the fact that it is a tool which allows them to work autonomously and advance at their own pace, and which offers other resources for further use. The students asked for a section of frequent questions to be added to the website, like a forum, so that users could state and share their own experience. At this given time, this proposal is being revised in order to incorporate this section into the website.

In the near future we hope to widen the scope of observation to include other studies and teachings in order to continue studying the impact of the website in the oral production of Catalan. We hope to do this in diverse fields of knowledge, even in those where Catalan is just a transversal tool. Specifically, we want to observe the behavior of students from the Facultat de Formació del Professorat, from the Facultat de Filologia in the Universitat de Lleida and in the Universitat de Barcelona, and also in the Institut del Teatre.

It is important to take into account, finally, that everything that has been presented is part of a pilot experiment and that the qualitative findings on the use of the website are very complex because it is in constant development. We hope it will benefit the use of Catalan as a transversal tool. So, the desired impact of this project is, on the one hand, to improve the pronunciation of the Catalan language in the whole Catalan speaking university community and also in sectors of society which use the language professionally (actors, public speakers, etc.), and, on the other hand, to help students from around the world who are studying Catalan to improve their pronunciation of the language.

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