

Verbo-Tonal Method: Improvement of English Pronunciation in Adult Spanish-Speaking Learners

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to test the adequacy of the Verbo-Tonal Method (VTM) for the teaching of English pronunciation to adult Spanish-speaking learners. As the method puts a big deal of emphasis on the motivation of students, they were tested to learn their limiting beliefs in relation to pronunciation learning. Subsequently, the best strategies to present students with a series of activities were design. These activities were based on the method to improve the students' weaknesses in pronunciation. The results from the motivational test were the expected ones according to bibliography, and the activities were designed to tackle one of the mistakes included in a system of errors that defines Spanish-speaking learners flaws that had been adjusted to the needs of the studied group. The activities were presented as a pronunciation seminar and threw good results. From the fact that this method has already been

assessed to teach the pronunciation of other languages and seems to be equally applicable to the pair English-Spanish, the logical evolution of this research would be to apply it to all profiles of Spanish-speaking students (not just adults), and at an earlier stage (which would help to fully deploy the VTM —speaking skills always before the writing one—). Another line of research, derived from the results of the motivation test, would be to study differences in pronunciation learning between male and female students.

Keywords: Verbo-Tonal Method (VTM), pronunciation, mature students, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), ASSLE (Adult Spanish-speaking Learners of English), motivation

Palabras clave: método verbo-tonal, pronunciación, estudiantes adultos, inglés como lengua extranjera, adultos españoles estudiantes de inglés, motivación

Introduction

There is a general belief that adults cannot learn a second language accentless, but this same belief can cause the autosuggestion resulting on a self-fulfilling prophecy (Cortés Moreno, 2000).

On the contrary, according to some authors (Flege, 1991; Králová, 2010...), adults maintain the capacity to perfectly acquire a new phonic system. The reason why they do not usually do it in practice does not have to do exclusively with physiological factors, but also with various external ones. The tendency of adults to let phonological aspects of their mother tongue interfere in their learning of a second language has more of a habit than of an inability or lack of aptitude. In fact, motivation is a key factor weighting much more that “age” in these cases.

The point is that many English learners do not understand what their pronunciation problems actually are (Zoss, 2016), their self-awareness of pronunciation is low, and this needs fixing, as a good pronunciation is most probably the best business card to favor interaction with native speakers (Zoss, 2016).

Contrastive phonetics (between L1 and L2) can be of help foreseeing those problems (Llisterri, 2003). But when teachers work with students, they must study their interlanguage too, and once the main difficulties are known, in theory —contrastive phonetics— and in practice —interlanguage—, a hierarchy of them needs to be established, a so called “system of errors”. This would lead to a drafting of the progression of contents needed to tackle, because not all errors deserve the same degree of attention. There exist two criteria for their hierarchical organization:

the degree of difficulty of the correction, and the communicative repercussion of the error ((MacCarthy, 1978, *apud* Llisterri, 2003).

Contrastive phonetics help determine the most common pronunciation errors, that happen to be those related to elements of L2 that do not exist in L1 or, worse, those elements of L2 that do not exist in L1 but the learner thinks they are similar (Flege, 1987a, 1991, 1996 as cited by Llisterri, 2003). This method, though, cannot foresee interferences derived from distribution differences, as the Verbo-Tonal Method does, because it focuses on the sounds, not the prosody, as does the VTM.

Moreover, research suggests (Zoss, 2016) that it is more practical for most English as a second language learners to focus on suprasegmental features to meet the communicative objective of the language. The Verbo-Tonal Method, based on the suprasegmental aspects of speech, has already been tested for the improvement of English pronunciation with learners other than Spanish-speaking, and the students' response was really positive, and the results could be seen quickly, therefore, the aim of this research is to prove its practicality in the context of an English class for Spanish adults.

From what has been told, the researcher understood that a possible progression in the learning process of pronunciation would be that which starts from suprasegmentals, such as intonation (the most relevant, according to Padilla, 2018) and rhythm, to get to sounds, not in the traditional order, though, but taking into account the priorities set up after the analysis and description of the students' system of errors. But, as Renard stated (1979), the principles which inspired the VTM take more than this into account and are also:

- maximal motivation
- absence of intellectualization
- respect for the structure and priority of the prosodic elements
- correction from error
- correction in the classroom

Therefore, motivation needs also to be cared for. It is actually a key factor that needs to be measured and boosted to tackle the teaching of pronunciation in the most efficient way, and this is why this study devotes a big part of its research to it, and a questionnaire was passed to three different class-groups within the same institution.

Once the motivational aspects that boost adult pronunciation learning are known, the actual teaching is structured addressing the other four principles, by means of a series of pronunciation seminars. In the end, three seminars on one specific aspect of pronunciation were held, two face-to-face and one online, and another seminar was held twice, one face-to-face and another one online. All of them were recorded for the verification of the findings, but the findings addressed in this research are focused on the results of just one class-group. One with a high degree of bonding and self-motivation.

Theoretical Basis

The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR, 2001) recommends teaching pronunciation right from the beginning of foreign language teaching with an emphasis in doing so to meet the communicative objective of the language. This research focuses on the study of the Verbo-Tonal Method, a method to teach pronunciation that has been tested for other pairs of languages than that of English-Spanish. It was adapted by Guberina from the field of deafness at the end of the 50's in Zagreb, although it was also implemented to teach the pronunciation of French as a foreign language and has been applied to other languages within the framework of the Structural-Global-Audiovisual Method (SGVA). It understands the speaking as a means of communication and, as such, it considers many elements that support the act of communication:

- The body, as issuer and recipient of the language
- The rhythm and intonation, as structurers of meaning
- The expressiveness and affectivity inherent to language
- The time and pause, as active elements of the phonic chain
- That what joins them all to a specific semantic context

It establishes perception as the principal link on the communication chain, but understood as something global, not a function strictly related to the inner ear. If perception is not correct, production won't be either.

In this case, the VTM will be studied as a method to teach pronunciation to adults, considered a "difficult" target for this learning precisely because of their "supposed" loss of sensory acuity, in particular, auditory.

But, Králová (2010) claims learners of any age are able to create additional phonetic categories for new language sounds which do not have a corresponding one in their mother tongue and Gilakjani (2011) states that stress, intonation and rhythm (prosody) affect intelligibility more than errors in single sounds, as well as that exposure, motivation, a positive attitude for learning the foreign language and openness to the target culture also determine learners' development of pronunciation. (This line of thought is on the basis for the present research.)

On the other hand, Cummins (1981) differentiated between Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and observed a clear advantage in adults for the former, where morpho-syntaxis, reading and vocabulary are present. And agreed on the generally accepted hypothesis that there exists a critical period for the acquisition of the phonetic component (Shen, 1990), which is related to sensory acuity, therefore, adults would not be that good at BICS. But Flege (1991), as Králová (2010), considered that adults maintain their capacity to perfectly acquire a new phonic system, the reason for not doing so in practice, they argue, doesn't have to do exclusively with physiological factors but also other external ones. Ur (1996), Cortés Moreno (2000) and Ruiz Calatrava (2009) helped to specify those factors, that have been considered in the present research:

- *Personality*: children are more spontaneous and less inhibited; therefore, it is easier for them to adopt a new system of linguistic behavior, that is: there are dissimilar bonding and motivational factors between children and adults.

Adults settle for being able to understand and make themselves understood, whereas children build their personality through their linguistic interactions. This is so because adults' curiosity is limited, for their intelligence is not in an expansive phase anymore and they resort to training just as long as it responds to an identified need.

- *Identity*: adults tend, more often than kids, to adopt negative attitudes towards other language communities, in part, due to their fear of putting their identity at risk, and, in part, to express their will of self-assertiveness, but, at another level too, because adults tend to resist novelty. From this, Cortés Moreno's research (1992) deduced that the tendency of adults to let the phonetic aspects of their L1 interfere in the learning of their L2 has more of a habit than a lack of aptitude or inability.
- *Input*: the one received by children tends to be accompanied by physical and playful activities which make it very easy to understand (Littlewood, 1984; Flege, 1987), apart from being more repetitive. Also, the subjects they talk about are not abstract or require deep thinking. Children talk about very specific, tangible subjects with a simpler input. Whereas

the complexity of the situations faced by adults make them feel frustrated when they experience an evident discrepancy between their ability to generate thought and that of expressing it in another language.

- *Self-consciousness*: as said, adults are very aware of their discrepancies in relation to the norm and this boosts their frustration and embarrassment. They expect to be corrected because most of them have the perception of making mistakes, which causes discomfort, uncertainty, and the feeling of not expressing themselves as adults.
- *Impatience*: because of their sense of economy of time and effort, adults tend to be more impatient.
- There is a general belief that adults cannot learn a second language accentless, but this same belief can cause the autosuggestion resulting on a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But these same authors also pointed out the pros to adult language learning:

- They oppose being a passive agent in their learning, i.e., they take responsibility. Therefore, they are more disciplined and cooperative.
- They know exactly why and what they are learning
- They are able of abstract thinking
- They can rely on past experiences (Carroll's associative memory)
- They choose what they want to learn, i.e., they have objectives
- They can have habits for learning strategies (Carroll's inductive capacity for analysis)

Later, Zoss (2016) found that adult English learners benefit from pronunciation instruction, reporting the importance of intelligible pronunciation for daily communication, employment, and higher self-confidence. His research indicates as well that suprasegmental pronunciation features, including stress, intonation, and rhythm, affect intelligibility more than segmental features (individual phonemic sounds) as was previously mentioned by Gilakjani (2011) and is backed-up by many other authors (Munro & Derwing, 2011; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Field, 2005; Levis, 2005; Hahn, 2004; Parrish, 2004; Derwing, 2003; Gilbert, 1983). Therefore, in order to help learners improve their intelligibility, practitioners should consider teaching suprasegmental pronunciation features (prosody). Although, something else must be taken into account in doing so, which is that language self-confidence is a significant part of language learning and relates to greater communicative competence and increased L2 usage too (Noels & Clement as cited in Hummel, 2013), what might affect how to tackle the teaching, more so in the case of adult students.

As Zoss, Ruiz Calatrava (2009) agreed on that adults need an indispensable minimal instruction. Therefore, when programming a didactic unit for them, practitioners need to rely on a playful oral practice that may allow them to develop their memory, spontaneity, and creativity. What this means is that the methodology must be communicative and has to highlight the speaking and listening skills (like when using pronunciation teaching techniques such as listening and repeating, reading aloud, recording learners' pronunciation, etc. (Reid, 2016)), as well as trying to mimic the reality outside the classroom.

Then, Padilla (2018) introduces us on the general proposals of the Verbo-Tonal Method, compatible with this needed communicative approach:

- *Focus on perception*, because without it there is no correct pronunciation (as it depends on the inner ear-brain stimulation)
- *Focus on suprasegmentals*: Prosody (stress, rhythm, and intonation) should precede sounds in the sequence of teaching (top-down sequence of learning vs the traditional articulatory method), with a special accent on intonation
- *Spoken vs written language*: Using the writing system in early stages of learning is a mistake (as in a film with subtitles), and teaching should be done in the foreign language
- *Extra-linguistic factors* (mood, personality, age, context and learning expectations...) influence the way in which students relate to pronunciation (Renard, Van Vlasselaer, 1976; Intravaia, 2005); therefore, a positive attitude and learning atmosphere are key psychological factors to pronounce foreign sounds
- *Non-verbal language*: macroception (perception of general body movements) and microception (perception of articulation) interact in oral communication (Guberina, Murillo, 2008); therefore, accordingly, teachers should teach pronunciation in a dynamic way: standing, sitting, back-talk, etc. and be able to pass on this knowledge onto their students

Padilla (2018) also introduced us in some phonetic correction techniques in the classroom:

- The playful-affective component necessary to avoid phonetic intellectualization. Games create a good propitiatory environment (Badia, 1992; Hancock, 1995; Cortés, 2003) and 20-30 minutes are enough to develop an activity. As Llisterri (2003) stated, pronunciation classes are a place of communicative motivation whose objective is to solve the problems related to perception and production.
- The suprasegmentals. Sounds are not a chain of independent units but hierarchical blocks (Cantero, 2002). Inside these blocks, the vowels (especially stressed ones) have the main

perceptive function. Two levels are distinguished then: the word (phonic) and the sentence.

In relation to the sentence:

- The rhythm in English is stress-timed: speakers try to keep an equal time between stressed syllables (Roach, 1997), and unstressed syllables are reduced and relaxed. On the contrary, the rhythm in Spanish is mainly syllable-timed.
- Intonation may be reinforced with visual elements and, as the method highlights perception, it also proposes to exaggerate the error to favor contrast and perception (tinged pronunciation)

In summary, a favorable prosodic system: the position of sounds in the syllable, the word, or the sentence, favors or makes it more difficult their pronunciation, therefore, the prosody can be used to correct possible pronunciation mistakes.

From all that has been exposed so far, the present research understands that adults maintain their capacity to perfectly acquire a new phonic system, and that the reason for not doing so in practice, as it does not have to do exclusively with physiological factors, is the existence of the extra-linguistic ones mentioned by Padilla (2018), therefore, there is a need to tackle those factors to help adult learners to become proficient in English pronunciation and outgrow some limiting beliefs.

This research has chosen the Verbo-Tonal Method because it works on the basis of language self-confidence being a significant part of language learning, which relates to greater communicative competence. And because it understands that motivation, a positive attitude for learning the foreign language and openness to the target culture are key starting points that need to be measured to develop the right strategies for the pronunciation instruction that adults are in so much need of. This methodology too is a communicative one and highlights the speaking and listening skills because of its focus on perception. And, finally, it is based on prosody (stress, intonation, and rhythm), that has been previously proved to affect intelligibility more than errors in single sounds. Summarizing, it has proven to deal with all the factors that affect foreign language pronunciation learning by adults so, the innovative approach of this research is to test its efficacy for the English-Spanish pair, even though for a very specific target.

The research questions and objectives set at the beginning of this journey (2 February 2022) have not changed, but guided all the process of research from the election of data collection tools and individuals, to the specificity of the pronunciation work done with them and the assessment of their outputs at different stages, and are showed in the following text box.

Research questions	Objectives
Do adult Spanish-speaking English learners believe they could improve their pronunciation?	Detect self-imposed limitations of adult Spanish-speaking English learners to their improvement of L2 pronunciation Taking their beliefs into account, boost learners' motivation in order to improve their pronunciation outputs (using the Verbo-Tonal method)
Is there a <i>system of errors</i> characteristic of ADULT Spanish-speaking English learners?	Find or define the <i>system of errors</i> governing English pronunciation learning by ADULT Spanish-speakers (a case study within the EOIBD)
Can the Verbo-Tonal method help improve the pronunciation of adult Spanish-speaking English learners?	Investigate the efficacy of the Verbo-Tonal method for the improvement of English pronunciation of adult Spanish-speaking learners (a case study within the EOIBD)

Figure #1. Research questions and objectives as defined during the theoretical phase of the research

Methodology

General Methodology

This research has used a mixed methodology (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2008), that is, it has used qualitative and quantitative methods, such as classroom observation for the former and a questionnaire and evaluation of outputs for the later, in the understanding that both methods are supplementary and work towards the common aim of collecting evidence for proper research.

Before anything else, as the final goal is to test the Verbo-Tonal method among adult Spanish-speaking students in their learning of English as a Foreign Language, a test on beliefs related to the learning of pronunciation was passed onto the students. The aim was to know their self-imposed limits and to find a way to counterbalance them through the appropriate planning of motivational activities. These activities were also aimed at achieving the best results in pronunciation improvement, specially reflecting on the beliefs that seem more closely related to age. This is so because, as Llisterra (2003) points out, one of the main strategies used by the Verbo-Tonal system is to create situations that involve the student emotionally to avoid mental block or, as Renard stated (1979), maximal motivation is one of the principles that inspired this

methodology, in the understanding that motivation is a key factor weighting much more than “age”.

From the questionnaire, the students' motivational needs were deduced to develop a didactic unit. This means the research mixes also what it is an intervention project (pronunciation workshop) and a case study (Mikkelsen, 2005 as cited by Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2008), when obtaining data from the reality of three groups of students at the Official School of Languages where the research was carried out.

But, as Llisterri (2003) explained, the methodology for addressing the teaching of pronunciation and phonetic correction from an essentially Verbo-Tonal approach also includes the following steps:

1. Observation of the students' interlanguage, which served to determine exactly which pronunciation difficulties were going to be addressed during the seminars
2. Contrastive analysis of phonetics, which served the same purpose (being both the two sides of the coin of the previously addressed “system of errors”) and which, in this case, had to do with elements of L2 that do not exist in L1 because they exemplify the most common pronunciation errors
3. The setting up of objectives and progression, according to communicative criteria, which was done adopting the top-down sequence of learning, i. e., tackling prosody before sounds
4. The setting up of correction strategies taking into consideration all the specifications of the VTM: the playful-affective component, teaching in L2, the non-verbal language (macroception and microception) and so forth
5. The setting up of basic parameters for the evaluation, in this case, based in perception and including peer and teachers' assessment to guaranty inter-rater reliability

As the main objective of the research and all previous work was directed towards the observation of a potential improvement in English pronunciation in ASSEL by using the VTM, and this improvement was analyzed more in depth on one group of students, the research covers the paradigm of quantitative research. Moreover, since results are important to know if improvements have taken place in their pronunciation, this study offers a second justification to be considered quantitative.

Participants: Placement

The place where the data was collected from was one of the Official Schools of Languages (EOI, for its acronym in Spanish) in the city of Barcelona, Catalonia (Spain).

Official Schools of Languages are publicly financed centers dedicated to the teaching of languages to adults (although that is changing as teenagers are growingly taken into account in the curricula). The aim of their language teaching is the development of:

- The students' skills in the effective use of the language as a means to communicate
- The recognition and respect towards linguistic and cultural diversity as tools for the dialog among people

The Official School of Languages where the research took place was created by National Decree 3134/1964, the 24 September, and is currently regulated by the National Organic Law of Education of 20 April 2006.

It is the oldest among the EOI in Catalonia. It answers to the Education Department of the Catalan Government and belongs to the national net of Spanish EOI. 15 languages can be learned at this school: German, Arab, Catalan, Korean, Chinese, Spanish, Euskara, French, Greek, English, Italian, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese and Russian. But the department of extra-curricular courses also offers tuition in Hebrew, Polish, Swedish and Turkish. This linguistic and cultural variety makes the center a privileged hub of dialog, and valuation and nurturing of diversity.

Participants: Individuals

During the researcher's training, the courses attended were extracurricular, therefore, the teaching program for these classes did not comply with the official curriculum but obeys its own.

For the research, work was done with three different groups with the same B2⁺ level. These courses are though for those people who want to improve their English but are not in need of a certificate and the pace of their learning can be slower as long as they get to use the language and do not forget what they already know. Therefore, these courses are shorter: 75h instead of the 130h of official courses, they are taught one session per week —instead of twice a week—, and combine face-to-face with online sessions, that is: students and teachers meet in person every other week. This school year, official courses were face-to-face in all instances (post-pandemic context).

In this particular case, the level, B2⁺, means that the curriculum covered a review of the most important aspects of the contents of B2 courses, while started introducing contents of level C1.1.

The courses accept 20 people per class in their enrollment, therefore, ideally, quantitative data would have been based in 60 individuals. But the mean number of attendees per session is between 8 and 10 students. The limiting beliefs questionnaire would have been then ideally answered by 27 individuals, but Google's data collector only registered 21 respondents, that is, a turnout of 77.8%.

All respondents were native Spaniards. 9.5% of them considered themselves bilingual in Spanish and Catalan, 52.4% Spanish and 38.1% Catalan. Therefore, 61.9% considered Spanish as their mother tongue and all of them were functional in both languages.

Only 4.8% of respondents were 16 to 20 years old, therefore, the vast majority were adults, and most of them over the age of 35 (80.9%).

75% were woman.

Data Collecting Tools

Two tools were used: a questionnaire (on limiting beliefs) and the evaluation of outputs. In both cases, classroom observation was used. In the first case, to adapt the questionnaire to the target respondents, and subsequently adapt the contents of the seminars in pronunciation to the class-group's system of errors. In the second case, to facilitate inter-rater assessment (peers and teachers) on the improvement in their pronunciation performance.

The *questionnaire* designed (V3, February 2022) aimed at measuring the degree of interference of limiting beliefs in adults when faced with the learning of English as a foreign language, in particular its pronunciation.

As mentioned in the introduction, motivation is a significant factor in language learning, surpassing that of age. Whereas a child feels a deep motivation to become fluent in a language that will allow him/her to relate to his/her environment and support his/her personality, adult's motivations seem superficial in comparison. But considering that motivation is key to put in practice the VTM, studying all that restrains the mature student's motivations seems of paramount relevance to reach the best results in this research. Therefore, the investigation on this matter was carefully tailored to the needs of the research.

The design of this first tool was based on the BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) questionnaire by Horwitz (1987), a tool that measures limiting beliefs in the learning of languages. It suffered a first adaptation to the case of pronunciation by making the statements more specific or deleting those which were not relevant. It was, then, customized for the B2⁺ class according to data emanating from the previously implemented classroom observation and studied bibliography; and it adopted an online form. The idea was to design a more accurate quantitative tool through a qualitative method (observation of target individuals and bibliographic research), to obtain more meaningful evidence for the research. As the researcher accompanied two English teachers working in their classes at the EOI, the age group of students responded to the needs of the thesis.

This can be classified as 'field research', one in which the researcher was the one carrying the classroom observation that helped accurately design the questionnaire on beliefs, therefore, it was an individual and direct field observation.

Previous observations on the same premises had been done in a very structured manner and that helped a lot to get the information aimed at gathering. This is why it was considered crucial for a better result of this research: #1, to observe, and #2, to structure that observation (i. e., to look for specific data).

The questionnaire was also graded adapting Likert scale by limiting possible answers to four items instead of the original five.

Due to the number and profile of students, the questionnaire was not probabilistic (Meneses, 2008), it just helped the researcher address the motivational aim previously explained for a specific group of students: the class-group with the lower level of absenteeism.

The *evaluation of outputs* took place during the seminars. The starting point for them were the students' errors. The study of the system of errors of Spanish-speaking (L1) students learning English (L2) through the analysis of the existent bibliography on contrastive phonetics came first. This helped classroom observation and the selection of two specific types within the system of errors for the EOI case study group. As a result, a series of activities were developed to correct those two specific problems on a workshop format: "sentence stress" and "consonant clusters at the beginning of words". The researcher proposed models that put the emphasis on the sounds the students did not perceive adequately, integrating them in structures that favor their production. It must be taken into account that intonation cannot be dissociated from the

statement's communicative content and its syntactic structure, and that it actually makes up the framework that supports the segmental elements, therefore, intonation was dealt with in the first place.

In the end, results were evaluated during the first workshop (on “consonant clusters at the beginning of words”) and a few weeks later (during the second seminar on “sentence stress”), to have some follow up on its real usefulness. It was done through peer review and teachers' assessment —the permanent and the training teachers— to guarantee reliability through inter-rater assessment.

Data Collecting Process

Answers to the questionnaire on limiting beliefs were collected between the 16 February and the 8 March 2022 using Google Forms. The questionnaire was not passed during class hours. The researcher kindly asked the survey respondents to fill in the form discretionarily. There were 21 responses, from an initial potential of 24 to 30, given the degree of presenteeism in the three class-groups to which the questionnaire link was passed. Google Forms presented the data in the form of percentages, that served perfectly well the aim of the present research.

The evaluation of outputs took place during the seminars on pronunciation. Although the questionnaire was passed to three class-groups and seminars were a total of five —two on “sentence stress”, one face-to-face and one online, and three on “consonant clusters at the beginning of words”, two face-to-face and one online—, the outputs were only evaluated for the one class-group with a higher degree of presenteeism (10-12 students per session). The first group of seminars took place between Wednesday 2 and Wednesday 9 March 2022 (weeks 4th and 5th of the teacher training), and the second group between Thursday 17 and Wednesday 23 of March 2002 (weeks 6th and 7th, the last one, of the practicum). As the assessment was planned to be done by peers as well as by the teachers, it was decided to focus on the evaluation of the seminar on “consonant clusters at the beginning of words”, as it was understood that peer review would be easier in that case than asking students to evaluate sentence stress. Outputs for that type of error were assessed at the beginning of its seminar: to record the departing point of students in this matter; at the end of the seminar: to make sure the perception on that specific type of error had changed, and during the second seminar a few sessions later: to check the degree of internalization of the pronunciation corrections. The time lapse between those two sessions was of two full weeks. All sessions (face-to-face and online) were voice-recorded —even the ones that were not finally assessed— to make sure findings could be verified.

Data Analysis

The data emanating from the online questionnaire was analyzed using percentages, as the questionnaire was done using Google forms and the data was obtained directly from the program. Those results were grouped in five different aspects defined by Horwitz (1987): aptitude for the learning, the learning of languages, the nature of learning, communication and learning strategies, and motivation and expectations.

The data obtained from the classroom observations and their recordings at the pronunciation seminars was also described in the form of percentages. In this case, the researcher took notes on the outputs of the studied individuals during the seminars, that were later on corroborated going through the recordings, and on an assessment session with the permanent teacher. In this case, therefore, the assessment was measuring productive skills in a discrete manner (just one of the types of difficulties described in the “system of errors”). It was an informal assessment carried out during the sessions, subjective (even though the subjectivity was minimized as much as possible through the inter-rater assessment done by peers and two different teachers), forward-looking (although further follow-up would be advisable), direct and took place in a contextualized environment. It was also criterion referenced, as the system of errors defined the pattern to follow. The approach to this assessment was always formative, but its purpose changed depending on the moment it was taking place: it was a diagnosis at first (beginning of the seminar), an assessment of achievement later on (at the end of that same seminar), and a progress check at the end (during the second and last seminar on pronunciation).

As it can be classified as a secondary activity related to this research, it has not been explained thoroughly, but it should not go without notice that an assessment of the interlanguage of the individuals taking part on this research was carried out during the first three weeks of the teacher training. It was done to select the most adequate examples of pronunciation errors to work in class during the seminars, from the range provided by the system of errors defined by means of the bibliographic research.

FINDINGS

From the Questionnaire

It has been deduced from the Google Form that all respondents were native Spaniards. 9.5% of them considered themselves bilingual in Spanish and Catalan, 52.4% Spanish and 38.1% Catalan. Therefore, 61.9% considered Spanish as their mother tongue and all of them were functional in both languages.

Only 4.8% of respondents were 16 to 20 years old, therefore, the vast majority were adults, and most of them over the age of 35 (80.9%).

The findings obtained from their answers will be approached in sections, as was originally foreseen by Horwitz (the original author of the BALLI questionnaire).

In terms of *aptitude for the learning of pronunciation*, the results show that most adults think everybody can learn English (71.4%); in any case, they are sure it is easier for children to learn the pronunciation of EFL (90.5%) than it is to adults, and that some people find it easier to pronounce it than others (81%). They think it would be easier if they already knew a second language (61.9%) and consider that women are better at it (85.7%). They almost unanimously think Spaniards are quite bad at English pronunciation (95.2%).

In relation to *the learning of English pronunciation*, the results were as follows: 76.2% thought English pronunciation was more difficult than that of other languages and 71.4% thought learning its pronunciation was difficult, full stop, without comparing it to other languages; 85.7% thought it was easier to read and write than to understand and speak and, if they had to choose, 66.7% considered it was easier to understand than to speak. The vast majority thought a mean over 5 years is needed to learn it properly (81%: 49.2% between 5 and 6 years and 38.1% over 6 years). Therefore, learning to speak is considered by far the most challenging of all skills in second language acquisition.

In what has to do with *the nature of English learning*, there was a total consensus (100%) in that English pronunciation differs from the Spanish, but there is no need to be proficient to dare speaking. And, although most of them considered very important to have a good accent (90.5%) and that learning the language in an English-speaking country helps (95.2%), they did not agree that much on the importance of learning the culture to be proficient in the language, only 57.1%

considered it of need. Asked about the skills they considered of greater importance to be proficient in, the list from more to less important went as follows: pronunciation (28.6%), grammar (23.8%), vocabulary (19%), all of them (19%) and a result of specific needs (4.8%).

The results on *communication and learning strategies* tell us that most learners think pronunciation is key to communicate (90.5%), and English is a *lingua franca* to be talked to either natives or non-natives (76.2% use it with non-natives as well). While talking, 80% of respondents think that guessing the right pronunciation of unknown words is a good strategy, even though a 42.9% still feel ashamed of their command of the language and that improvement is difficult if they did not get it right the first time (47.6%). Nonetheless, 90.5% think it is important to practice through audiovisual means.

Finally, in relation to *motivation and expectations*, 70% of respondents think they will reach a proficiency level in English. 95.2% of Spanish-speaking respondents are convinced the language is very important, but also the culture (85.7% are interested also in the culture). They believe they will get a better job being proficient at English (95%) and 95.2% are willing to make the effort to learn it properly. Only 57.1% are motivated to learn it just to be able to talk to friends.

From the Classroom Observation

The 9 March 2022 took place the first seminar for this class-group, the seminar that introduced the type of error related to “clusters of consonants at the beginning of words” but, more precisely, clusters of consonants starting with an “s”. It was attended by 12 individuals. Faced with the “problem” of their pronunciation for the first time, within sentences, none of the individuals (0%) were able to figure out what the problem was. This means their perception was not working appropriately, as Renard (1979) would have put it.

When each and every student was asked to pronounce aloud at least one of the words with this particularity (within the sentences), 4 individuals (33.3%) were able to distinguish what the problem was, because they had been limited their focus of attention: they had been asked to focus their attention on the words with this clusters of consonants and how all of them pronounced them. Still, not all the individuals that were aware of the problem were also able to pronounce the word correctly, only 3 did it (25%). But when the students were asked to pronounce the words again once the problem had been identified (as said, always within sentences whose distribution helped the pronunciation of the sound), the output changed a lot and 9 people (75%) were able to pronounce it adequately.

This pronunciation error was worked in different forms throughout the session and by the end of the seminar just 1 individual (8.3%) was still unable to pronounce it correctly. It is important for this research to point out that actually that individual was a young adult under 35 (as was previously mentioned, 80.9% of the class-group were adults over 35 years of age). This example illustrates Renards', and other authors' mentioned in this research, assertions related to the ability of adults of learning a foreign language accentless.

On 23 March 2022, a second seminar on pronunciation was held and some time was devoted to regaining the knowledge acquired on the pronunciation of "clusters of consonants starting with an 's' at the beginning of words". The findings were that the individual unable to pronounce them properly after the first seminar still presented the same problem and, as analyzing the reasons behind this output surpasses the limits of this research for it could entail a case study in itself, this research did not go deeper into it. This means the seminar had a positive impact on 91.7% of the students. In fairness, 2 individuals were still struggling with the correct pronunciation, but it had improved since they had identified the problem, therefore, even if the research considers that only 75% of the students gained pronunciation awareness with this method, the result is considered positive.

DISCUSSION

80.9% of the students were over 35 years of age and all of them Spaniards either with Spanish as their mother tongue or bilingual in Spanish and Catalan, which serves the purpose of the present research.

They were asked about their EFL beliefs to tailor the pronunciation sessions based on the VTM, which, as mentioned, fully lays down on motivation.

As an introduction to the sessions, they were told about the conclusions of recent research (Padilla, 2018; Zoss, 2016; Gilakjani, 2011...) on adult learning of languages, as 90.5% of them believed the extended assumption that children find it easier to learn pronunciation, they almost unanimously thought (95.2%) Spaniards are quite bad at it and that pronunciation is difficult, full stop (71.4%), English pronunciation more so (76.2%). Therefore, it was important for them to know other facts against these beliefs, facts that hopefully would boost their motivation.

From the four competences usually addressed at language classes, speaking was considered the most difficult (85.7% of respondents thought it was easier to read and write than to understand

and speak, and, if asked to choose between understand and speak, 66.7% considered it was easier the former). And getting the right pronunciation seems to be the hardest achievement of them all. The European Union has put the accent in the communicative aspect of languages, the reaching of functional bilingualism or plurilingualism and, as researchers show, pronunciation is key to this end (Zoss, 2016). Students are aware of its importance too (90.5% think pronunciation is key to communicate), so pronunciation was given its space in the classroom in the form of several seminars (presenting and using the VTM), a format that, because of its rarity within the foreign language class, was very welcomed and guaranteed their attention.

These seminars took advantage of audiovisual means because 90.5% of students thought it is important to practice the language through their use, so the researcher tried to boost their motivation, again, by following their beliefs.

Also, as this time the sessions were tailored for the students at the master's training post, the research took into account that 95.2% were convinced of the importance of learning the language but also the culture (85.7%) so the seminars tried both approaches to pronunciation on the activities planned, such as listening to the same piece of information with different accents or asking the students to rehearse their pronunciation based on the script of a fun movie known to most of them.

47.6% of adult learners think their improvement in pronunciation is a chimera if they do not get it right the first time, and 42.9% still feel ashamed of their command of the language, but the Verbo-Tonal Method helped them overcome those fears because the whole class, one by one, is asked to intervene and students learn from their mistakes and those of others. They see that everyone produces differently but all of them are intelligible and able to improve their first outputs through practice, being aware of what others do wrong to improve their own. This is obviously also possible thanks to the fact that another pillar of the VTM is the care given to the class atmosphere: all students are treated equally, and all of them learn from mistakes (because nothing can be improved if it is already perfect, or the student does not dare trying). In this case, the teacher/researcher knew everyone by name and asked everybody to take part on the activities, many of them individual (such as when using repetition as a form of making sure the student was grasping the idea, etc.) Moreover, much care was put into building the bonding teacher-students while in the training because the collection of data for the present research was foreseen and it was known that class atmosphere was a key factor. The bonding was built with easy strategies such as learning everybody's names and using them during the sessions or

sharing a few minutes with them at the cafeteria during breaks so as to get to know them personally, the same way they were getting to know the teacher.

But obviously, the research presents some flaws and here are described some points to be considered if further research is planned:

- **ON PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE:** The research was successful in addressing the research questions and objectives, but further study is always possible, advisable, and welcome. Moreover, considering that the research would have benefited from a research team more versed on phonetics and the VTM. This is so because even if it does not work as the phono-articulatory method, based on the students' conscient positioning of their articulatory organs when emitting a sound—which requires a high level of intellectualization not apt for everybody—, this knowledge from the part of the teacher would certainly help the planning of the sessions and his/her interventions in the correction of the students' mistakes... even though, as the VTM imposes, not much intellectualization should be put into it.
- **ON RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE (profile of respondents in relation to motivation):** The students that took part on the research follow a very particular type of course, an extracurricular one from an Official School of Languages (Spain), which is though for those people who want to improve their English but are not in need of a certificate. The pace of their learning can be slower as long as they get to use the language and do not forget what they already know. Therefore, this course is shorter: 75h instead of the 130h of official ones, are taught one session per week—instead of twice a week—, and combine face-to-face with online sessions, that is: students and teachers meet in person every other week. Instead, this school year official courses were face-to-face in all instances.

This could lead to think their results in motivation and expectations could differ from students attending other courses and, even though it seems it was not the case because the results were similar to the studied bibliography, it may have been a flaw on the planning of the questionnaire if the focus is put on the planning of classes based on the VTM for pronunciation in the future only based on these results.
- **ON RESULTS ON THE EVALUATION OF THE VTM OUTPUTS (profile of respondents in relation to motivation):** There has to be said as well that the introduction of this methodology in the classroom (or any other, for that matter) was pretty easy anyway, as the research was done counting on a group of students that were coming highly motivated from home: 95.2% were willing to make the effort to learn the language properly (maybe because 95% of them thought they will get a better job if they are proficient at it!). This might be the case with

other adult students, but the research has considered just a very specific profile of adults and has not included a significant number of teenagers in it, therefore, the results might not be interpolable to other profiles of respondents.

- ON SELF-MOTIVATION (profile of respondents in relation to group bonding: same objectives): Zoss (2016), apart from talking about perceptions of pronunciation, also refers to language self-confidence, understood as to the speakers' self-perception of their ability to communicate in their L2 and the levels of anxiety they associate with it (Noels, Pon, & Clement as cited in Hummel, 2013). This self-confidence is affected by context, who the speaker is talking to and the subject matter of their conversation. From this, the researcher understands that the findings of the present research might have changed if the VTM was implemented with another group of students, because, even if the VTM always takes into account motivation in the process of pronunciation correction, it will not always be applied in such good conditions as the ones given in the class-group studied, with such a starting point of high self-motivation, positive attitude for learning the foreign language and openness to the target culture, as well as group bonding.
- ON FOLLOW UP: Finally, as Llisterri (2003) points out, after the correction techniques are put into practice, a follow up and an evaluation should take place (in the long run: to gather materials for future use and correction techniques fact-checked). The assessment of acquired knowledge on pronunciation errors and improvement of the outputs in this research was done only two weeks after the introduction of the contents to the students, therefore, the research cannot foresee the results in the long run, and it is understood that another check in the medium and/or long term is advisable to confirm the results of this study.

Summarizing, though, the research was successful in addressing the research questions and objectives (at least to a certain degree, because further study is always possible, advisable, and welcome), as well as the principles that inspired the Verbo-Tonal Method.

- Through the questionnaire in limiting beliefs, this research detected self-imposed limitations of ASSEL to their improvement of L2 pronunciation, as it was the objective. And taking these beliefs into account, the researcher was able to boost learners' motivation to improve their pronunciation outputs (using the VTM), as planned.
- Then, through bibliographic research and classroom observation a *system of errors* governing English pronunciation learning by adult Spanish-speakers was found and tailored

for the case study of a class-group of an extracurricular B2+ course within an Official School of Languages (Spain).

- And, finally, the research investigated the efficacy of the VTM for the improvement of English pronunciation of adult Spanish-speaking learners to the point of being able to answer positively to the main research question: “Can the Verbo-Tonal Method help improve the pronunciation of adult Spanish-speaking English learners?”

As for the principles that inspired the VTM, the maximal motivation approach has been dealt with thoroughly throughout this discussion. Respect for the structure and priority of the prosodic elements has been another principle deeply treated within the present document, as well as correction from error and correction in the classroom. The only one last principle to tackle: the absence of intellectualization, was also dealt with during the research but, in this case, from a more flexible approach since, as Ruiz Calatrava (2009) or Zoss (2016) point out: adult English learners benefit from pronunciation instruction, and so, the seminars held included a small portion of it.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions drawn on the application of the VTM for the improvement of English pronunciation in ASSEL have been dealt with over the last two paragraphs of the above-mentioned discussion in relation to the ability of the research in addressing the questions and objectives initially foreseen, as well as the principles that inspired the VTM. But this conclusion of success must be accompanied with the prudence mentioned by Mikkelsen (2005) in the sense that: generalizations cannot be made lightheartedly from a study case, as this one is the result of a specific theoretical frame of reference that needs constant updating with new data obtained from further study cases.

Obviously, within the time frame given during the training, there was no opportunity to cover all what the Verbo-Tonal Method implies, but just gaining a little understanding of what it has to offer. Therefore, further study on the evolution of the training in other examples of difficult pronunciation derived from the system of errors identified for Spanish-speaking learners is of advice. As well as a mid-term or long run follow up.

In any case, what has not been approached in this research at all is the fact that:

- 75% of English students were woman

- 85.7% of respondents of the questionnaire on beliefs on pronunciation thought that women are actually better than men at it

A fact that could indeed lead to another completely different path of research, and that could probably be related to the latest findings we have got from neurosciences, in the sense that it would be interesting to study if the variable “sex” should be an element to be considered in the methodology of language (and, more precisely, pronunciation) learning/teaching. The pursuing of this line of research is also based on the findings of the present research, as the one student unable to improve his pronunciation of “clusters of consonants starting with an ‘s’ at the beginning of words” after the seminar given on that matter was in fact a male student (and it should be reminded that only 25% of students were male), and a young one! As mentioned in the findings, this student was a young adult under 35, by his looks closer to his teens, a fact that should have worked in his favor if we stand by Cummins (1981), Shen (1990) and other authors’ research findings... and people’s beliefs!

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