

7 Pronunciation Mistakes

Spanish speakers make — and how to fix them

Your grammar is fine. Your vocabulary is fine. So why do people still ask you to repeat yourself? These are the seven sounds giving you away — and the drills that fix each one.

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Coach Seven

English Coach & Communication Specialist

[CLEARACCENTACADEMY.COM](https://clearaccentacademy.com)

You don't have an English problem. You have a feedback problem.

Here's what nobody tells you. You've studied for years. You know the grammar better than most native speakers do. You can read, you can write, you can follow a movie without subtitles. And people *still* say "**sorry, what?**"

That's not a knowledge problem. It's a **correction** problem. Nobody in your daily life is going to stop you mid-sentence and tell you that your **/v/** sounded like a **/b/**. They'll just nod, guess from context, and move on. So the mistake stays. For years.

THE REAL MATH

Spanish runs on roughly **22 sounds**. American English runs on **around 44**. That's not a small gap — it means about half of the sounds you need were never in your mouth growing up. Your brain maps them onto the closest Spanish sound it knows, and that substitution is what listeners hear as an accent.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN YOU FIX THIS

- **You get understood the first time.** No repeating, no spelling your own name out loud.
- **You stop shrinking in meetings.** Most hesitation isn't about ideas. It's about bracing to be misunderstood.
- **People stop asking where you're from** in the first thirty seconds of every conversation.

I've spent seven years coaching intermediate and advanced speakers — people who are already good and are tired of being treated like they're not. These seven mistakes come up more than everything else combined. **Fix them in order.** The first three change how you sound more than the last four, and almost nobody teaches them.

Giving every syllable the same weight

You say **"I WANT TO GO TO THE STORE."** A native says **"I wanna go tuh thuh STORE."**

WHY IT HAPPENS

Spanish is **syllable-timed**. Every syllable gets roughly equal length and equal volume, and every vowel keeps its full value. English is **stress-timed** — it sprints through the unimportant syllables and lands hard on the important ones. When you give English the Spanish rhythm, every word arrives at the same size, and a listener can't tell what matters.

This is the single biggest thing separating "correct English" from "natural English," and it has nothing to do with individual sounds.

THE FIX — MEET THE SCHWA

English has one sound that appears more than any other: the /ə/, called the **schwa**. It's a lazy, neutral "uh." It has no character at all — that's the point. In unstressed syllables, English collapses almost every vowel into it.

banana isn't *ba-na-na*. It's *buh-NAN-uh*. **problem** is *PROB-luhm*. **about** is *uh-BOUT*. Your instinct will be to pronounce those vowels properly. Resist it. **Being lazy is correct here.**

DRILL — CRUSH THE SMALL WORDS

Say each line twice. First slowly and wrong, giving every word equal weight. Then fast and right, letting the underlined words almost disappear. Feel the difference.

I need to talk to her about the project.

What are you going to do for dinner?

He was a friend of my brother from college.

I can do it, but I don't want to.

2 MISTAKE TWO · WORD STRESS

Stressing the wrong syllable

You say **"I need to speak with the ma-NA-ger about my COM-fort-a-ble hotel."** Nobody catches either word.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Spanish stress is predictable and written down — the accent mark tells you where to go. English stress is neither. It's baked into each word individually, it isn't marked, and it moves when the word changes form: *PHO-to-graph* becomes *pho-TO-gra-pher* becomes *pho-to-GRAPH-ic*.

Get the stress wrong and native listeners often don't recognize the word **at all**, even when every individual sound was correct. This one is invisible to most learners because their teacher never flagged it.

THE FIX — LEARN THE BEAT, NOT JUST THE WORD

From now on, when you learn a word, learn **where the punch lands**. Say the stressed syllable louder, longer, and a little higher in pitch. Everything else shrinks toward the schwa from Mistake 1 — the two work together.

Fast test: hum the word without saying it. If someone could still guess the word from the rhythm alone, your stress is right.

DRILL — FIND THE PUNCH

Say each word and exaggerate the bold syllable. Make it twice as long as the others.

de-**VEL**-op

COM-fort-a-ble

im-**POR**-tant

MAN-a-ger

op-por-**TU**-ni-ty

IN-ter-est-ing

ne-**GO**-ti-ate

CAT-e-go-ry

a-**VAIL**-a-ble

TEM-per-a-ture

Now the movers. Same root, different beat:

PRE-sent / pre-**SENT**

RE-cord / re-**CORD**

CON-tract / con-**TRACT**

OB-ject / ob-**JECT**

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MISTAKE THREE · ENDINGS

Dropping the ends of your words

You mean **"I worked hard and finished the report."** They hear **"I work har an finish the repor."** — and now your past tense is gone.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Spanish words overwhelmingly end in a vowel or in one of a few soft consonants. English ends in **everything** — and stacks them: *asked, texts, twelfths*. Your mouth has no habit for closing a word on a hard consonant, so it lets go early.

The cost is bigger than a slight accent. English carries **grammar** on those endings. Drop the **/d/** and your past tense disappears. Drop the **/s/** and your plural does. You sound like you're making grammar errors you're not actually making.

THE FIX — FINISH THE WORD

Deliberately over-pronounce final consonants while you practice. Yes, it will feel exaggerated. Native speakers do soften these in fast speech — but they soften from a **full** sound. You're softening from nothing, and there's a difference the listener can hear.

Watch the voicing too. **bed** and **bet** aren't the same word. Keep your voice on through the end of the **/d/**.

DRILL — LAND THE ENDING

Hold each final consonant an extra beat. Feel your tongue and lips actually arrive.

bed / bet

hard / heart

cold / colt

prize / price

bag / back

save / safe

Now in sentences. Every ending gets its full value:

I askeded him and he helpeded me a lot.

She wanteded both contractss signeded today.

The clientss calleded and left threee messagess.

I workeded late, finisheded it, and sentt it.

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MISTAKE FOUR · VOWELS

Collapsing the two English "i" sounds

You meant to say **"sheet of paper"** or **"I'll sit here."** This one has embarrassed more of my students than any other on the list.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Spanish has one "i." English has two: the long, tense /i/ in *seat*, and the short, relaxed /ɪ/ in *sit*. Spanish speakers pronounce both as the Spanish "i," which lands close to /i/. The result is that half of these words come out as the wrong word entirely — occasionally a much worse word.

THE FIX — RELAX, DON'T SHORTEN

Most people are told /ɪ/ is just a "short i." That's misleading, and it's why it never sticks. **It's a different mouth position, not a faster one.**

For /i/: lips spread wide like a smile, tongue high and pushed forward, muscles tense.

For /ɪ/: **let everything go slack.** Corners of the mouth relax, tongue drops slightly and pulls back. Your jaw barely moves between the two — the change is in tension, and that's the whole trick.

DRILL — TENSE VS. RELAXED

Do this in front of a mirror. Say the turquoise word with a hard smile, then let your face go completely lazy for the coral one.

seat / sit

sheet / shit

beach / bitch

leave / live

feel / fill

reach / rich

green / grin

heat / hit

Then run them together so both live in one breath:

Please sit in that seat.

I live here, so I won't leave yet.

Did you fill it, or did you feel it?

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MISTAKE FIVE · CONSONANTS

Making B and V the same sound

"I have a very good bike" comes out as "I habe a bery good bike."

WHY IT HAPPENS

In Spanish, *B* and *V* are the same phoneme. *Vaca* and *baca* sound identical, and there's nothing wrong with that — in Spanish. In English they're two completely different sounds made in two completely different places in your mouth. Because the letters look familiar, most learners never realize a change is required.

THE FIX — TEETH ON LIP

/b/ is a bilabial plosive. Both lips press together, pressure builds behind them, and the air pops out. Lips only. No teeth involved.

/v/ is a labiodental fricative. Your top teeth rest on the inside of your bottom lip and you push air through the gap while your voice is on. The air never stops — you can hold a **/v/** for ten seconds. You cannot hold a **/b/** at all.

Shortcut: say *fff*. Freeze your mouth exactly there. Now switch your voice on without moving anything. That buzz is **/v/**. You should feel your bottom lip vibrating.

DRILL — LIPS VS. TEETH

berry / very

ban / van

boat / vote

best / vest

curb / curve

rebel / revel

Now the hard part — both sounds inside one word or phrase:

Beverly is very busy.

We bought a van in November.

I believe the behavior improved.

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MISTAKE SIX · THE R

Rolling or tapping the English R

"My brother works on Thursday" with a Spanish R is the single fastest way to tell a listener where you're from.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Spanish has two R sounds — the tap in *pero* and the trill in *perro*. Both involve the tongue **touching** the roof of the mouth. The English /ɹ/ touches **nothing**. It isn't a harder or softer version of the Spanish R; it's an entirely different sound that happens to share a letter.

THE FIX — TOUCH NOTHING

Pull your tongue **back and up** into the middle of your mouth, bunch it with real tension, and keep the tip floating free. Nothing contacts anything. If your tongue taps the roof of your mouth, you've made a Spanish R.

Your **lips matter too**, and this part gets skipped. Push them forward and flare them slightly, like the start of a small trumpet shape. Round lips are a real part of the English R — you can often spot it just by watching a native speaker's mouth.

Shortcut: say "er" like you're thinking, and hold it — *errrrrrr*. That's the sound. Now attach it to the front of a word: *errrr—ed* becomes *red*.

DRILL — STRETCH EVERY R

Go slowly and hold each R far longer than feels natural. You're building a muscle memory that doesn't exist yet, and length is what builds it.

My brotherr drives to work early.

The red car is really rusty.

Three reports were ready on Thursday.

We prerfer to rent near the river.

Her brother-in-law runs a restaurant.

Adding an "e" before S-words

"I went to e-school to e-study e-Spanish." You almost certainly don't hear yourself doing this.

WHY IT HAPPENS

No Spanish word begins with s plus another consonant. Spanish solves it by putting a vowel in front — *escuela, estudiante, español*. That habit is decades deep and completely automatic, so it follows you into English, where those clusters are everywhere: *school, street, sleep, small, speak*.

It's a small sound. But it's a strong accent marker, and it interrupts your rhythm every time it fires.

THE FIX — START ON THE S

The trick isn't to say the vowel faster. It's to **begin the word already hissing**. Start the ssss with your mouth closed and your voice off, then open into the rest of the word. There's no space for a vowel to sneak in if the S has already started.

Shortcut: take a word that already ends in an S sound and glue it on — *bus-stop, miss-peak*. Then drop the first word and keep the feeling.

DRILL — NO RUNNING START

Hold the S for two full seconds before releasing. Ssssss-chool. Then speed up gradually without ever letting a vowel in front.

school

study

speak

small

street

sleep

special

strong

stress

skill

Now in speech, where it's much harder to control:

My son studies at a small school.

I still need to speak Spanish at work.

The street was strangely silent.

Ten minutes a day beats two hours a week

Pronunciation isn't knowledge. It's a physical skill, like a golf swing. Reading this guide changes nothing on its own — your mouth has to build habits your first language never gave it, and muscles learn through short, frequent repetition, not long occasional sessions.

YOUR DAILY TEN MINUTES

- **Two minutes — one sound only.** Pick a single mistake from this guide. Not all seven. One.
- **Three minutes — minimal pairs, out loud, exaggerated.** Slower and bigger than feels normal.
- **Three minutes — the drill sentences.** Record yourself on your phone. Play it back.
- **Two minutes — free speech.** Talk about your day and try to catch the sound in the wild. This is where it transfers.

DO THIS

- **Record yourself.** You cannot hear your own mistakes live. Your brain hears what you meant to say.
- **Use a mirror.** Half of these fixes are visible on your face.
- **Exaggerate.** Overshoot in practice so normal speech lands right.

NOT THIS

- **Don't practice silently.** Reading a drill in your head trains nothing.
- **Don't chase all seven at once.** One sound per week beats seven per day.
- **Don't wait to feel ready.** It will feel strange for about two weeks, then it won't.

THE HONEST CATCH

There's one thing you can't do alone, and I'd rather tell you now than let you find out in six months. **You can't correct what you can't hear.** If your ear still maps /ɪ/ onto Spanish "i," you'll record yourself, play it back, and hear it as correct — because to you it is. That's not a discipline problem. It's the reason people plateau for years with perfect grammar. At some point you need someone outside your head to stop you and say *"that one. right there."*

You've got the list. Now get the feedback.

These seven fixes will move you further than another year of grammar study. But drilling alone only takes you to the edge of what your own ear can detect — and then it stops.

That's the whole reason Clear Accent Academy exists. I work with **intermediate and advanced speakers only** — people who are already good and are done being underestimated. No beginner material, no polite nodding, no pretending something was fine when it wasn't. You talk, I stop you, we fix it, you say it again correctly. That's the entire method.

PHOTO

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