

# CLD CORNER: Techniques for Working on Tap/Trill /r/ in Spanish: Tackling Strategies and Overcoming Challenges Along the Way

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The CLD Corner was created in an effort to provide information and respond to questions on cultural and linguistic diversity. Questions are answered by members of the TSHA Committee on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD). Members for the 2015-2016 year include **Raúl Prezas**, PhD, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Brittney Goodman Pettis**, MS, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Amanda Ahmed**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Mary Bauman**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Phuong Lien Palafox**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Alisa Baron**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Judy Martinez Villarreal**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Mary Bauman**, MS, CCC-SLP; and **Ryann Akolkar**, BA, student representative. Submit your questions to [TSHA\\_CLD@gmail.com](mailto:TSHA_CLD@gmail.com) and look for responses from the CLD Committee on TSHA's website and in the Communicologist.

Many bilingual speech-language pathologists (SLPs) probably have found that targeting and remediating the Spanish tap /r/ and trill /r/ can be both rewarding and also challenging. The tap /r/ and trill /r/ are perhaps among the most complex for bilingual speech-language pathologists to remediate, and there is often debate as to how, how long, when, and when not to remediate these sounds. In 2015, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) reviewed survey data from members and found that, of the 173,737 professionals represented by ASHA (including audiologists, SLPs, and other professionals), 11,197 (6%) indicated they met the ASHA definition of a bilingual service provider. Of those, most (7,029, or 63%) were Spanish-language service providers. Forty-four percent of these bilingual service providers were employed in schools.

As practitioners who work with the bilingual population, it is a rare occurrence when a student comes onto a caseload for remediation of tap /r/ and trill/r/ and can be dismissed within a few weeks. This article includes a few techniques (as well as some challenges) shared via online resources and also by practicing SLPs in Texas.

## Productions of Tap /r/ and Trill /r/ and Online Recommendations

First, it is important to discuss production. How are tap /r/ and trill /r/ produced? The tap and trill share the same place of articulation, the alveolar ridge. The feature that differentiates the two sounds is their "manner" of articulation.

- For the Spanish Alveolar tap, the tongue muscles are **contracting** to "flick" the tip of the tongue against the alveolar ridge.
- For the Spanish Alveolar trill, the tongue muscles are **relaxing** and directing air over the top of the tongue in a way that causes the tip to vibrate rapidly on its own.

In an online video tutorial by Aaron Ralby from Linguisticator, practical suggestions for teaching the trill /r/ are provided. Before beginning to instruct the production of this sound, it is important to remember that the trill /r/ is not produced by the active movement of the tongue. Ralby describes it more as a "flag flapping in the wind." This is an accurate description and may be a great strategy for our visual learners. The key to producing a trill /r/ is to release all the tension in the tongue. The actual trill sound is made by the airflow as it is going over the tip of the tongue. Ralby provides the following suggestions:

1. Establish airflow, a constant stream of air that can be used to experiment with your tongue.
2. This can be done by asking the student to make the "f" sound. This restricts the airflow, and then you flick your tongue tip up to the alveolar ridge behind the front teeth. A verbal cue to push tongue up and forward may be helpful.
3. It is very important to have the tongue completely relaxed.
4. Lastly, add voicing.

Sounds easy enough, right? But how do you teach your speech students to contract and relax the tongue muscles? Practice, practice, and then more practice!

SLP Maureen Wilson shared the following tips in her SLP blog, *The Speech Bubble*.

Wilson suggests starting with the goal of shaping a Spanish /r/ to eventually produce a tap /r/. For most students, a tap /r/ can be shaped pretty nicely from /d/. Wilson outlined the steps as follows:

- 1) Have the student start by producing an initial /d/ word in Spanish such as *día*. Have them say the word a few times, then just the /d/.
- 2) Have them keep repeating /d/ and slowly move their lips to a rounded position. They should hear the sound change.
- 3) Finally, have them hold their tongue as if they were to say /d/ but have them move it a bit farther back toward the alveolar ridge and say a medial /r/ word such as 'mariposa' (butterfly).

Wilson points out that although most SLPs would typically start with an initial /r/ word, the majority of initial Spanish /r/ words are trilled.

### **Tips and Recommendations from Practicing Bilingual SLPs**

Many SLPs who responded to our request to share their techniques for working on trill /r/ recommended using sound shaping if the student can produce or approximate production of tap /r/. Practicing bilingual SLPs were asked to share their most trusted technique that has been most successful when addressing the trill /r/.

SLP **Patricia Villarreal**, currently employed with Bilingualistics, shared the following information:

"When working on the trill /r/, we start off by making the /d/ sound and talking about tongue placement on the alveolar ridge. Then I usually move toward playing a game to see who can say the word 'day' the fastest in 30 seconds. (All the kids I have done this with have been bilingual, but you can do /d/+any vowel). This game becomes a routine that we do two to three times a session for a few weeks as we cycle through other sounds. What they do by saying /day/ in rapid succession is that they naturally retract their tongue and reduce the hard stop to a quick tap, because they want to be faster than me! They basically set themselves up to produce the tap /r/. Then, a few sessions later, I explain the differences between a /d/ and a tap /r/, and I explain that we are going to try something new. We are going to chant, 'day, day, day, rey, rey, rey.' I have used pictures (three suns, three kings) so that students are not just imitating and I can hear them chant on their own. We usually begin to hear distinctive sounds pretty quickly after trying this method. If it's not working, I might drop back to doing 30-second /day/ drills and then press on to the chant. Parent involvement is also a crucial component. The more consistently they practice these games/drills /chants at home, the sooner we notice improvement."

SLP **Rebecca Eagleson**, currently employed at Hays CISD, shared the following technique:

"When working on the medial /r/, if the client can produce /d/, I start by first replacing the medial /r/ with a /d/ sound. Once they demonstrate some proficiency with that, I move toward adjusting the tongue position so that the tongue touches the hard palate. Lastly, I move on to minimal pair exercises where they produce medial /d/ (Doda) and then /r/ (Dora) so that they can hear the subtle difference.

For production of the trilled /r/, we begin by imitating motorcycles, racecars, and engine sounds. One of my students said, 'Como una pistola,' and then began with a vibrating /t/ that he was able to shape into the trill /r/. We eventually replaced 'pistola' with something less violent. Another technique I have tried involves shaping a really exaggerated /x/ to /r/ by visualizing the vibrations moving up toward the tongue. Begin by having them practice te-de-te-de-te-de-te-de, dere-dere-dere-dere. Next, have them press the tongue tip behind the top teeth. Then progress on working on flexing the tongue and relaxing the tongue. Once a student demonstrates proficiency with this, we move toward blowing over the relaxed tongue. The students who have had some success with this technique usually make a voiceless vibration (like that vibrating T). Lastly, we work on adding voicing to it."

SLP **Anahi Diaz Parsons**, currently employed with Himmel Home Health, shared the following technique:

"Begin by asking the students to form a cup with their tongue and hand. In my experience, this works best if the students can cup their hand at the same time as cupping their tongue because they have a visualization of what their tongue needs to look like. Sometimes, placing a drop of water on their tongue 'cup' with a straw and asking them to hold the water for a few seconds while trying to approximate the trill /r/ sound yields good results. The students always seem to enjoy trying to hold the water with their 'cup.'"

SLP **Beata Korytkowski Longo**, creator of Bluebird Speech on TeachersPayTeachers, shared the following techniques:

Tap /r/

- First, practice /t r/ /d r/ blends like dragon, dentro, tendrá, triste, highlighting that /t/, /d/, and /r/ have similar placements right behind the teeth. Have client look in the mirror if necessary or view videos of tongue placement online.
- Then, practice saying the /d/ while flicking the tongue back like the beginning of a retroflexed /r/. This should produce a tap /r/.

Trill /r/

- First, practice making raspberries with the lips and tongue to highlight the desired speed.
- Then, have students produce an H sound for maximum airflow while closing off the airflow with the tip of their tongue and their front teeth. Repeat slowly until mastered; then increase speed until you hear a trill /r/.

## **Conclusion**

What is the best practice when your Spanish-speaking student cannot produce these sounds but can produce a beautiful vocalic and intervocalic /r/ in English? Becca Eagleson shared that if a student has medial /r/ and /r/ blends but not the trilled /r/, she usually recommends dismissal, especially if the student has been receiving speech therapy for years and has transitioned to using mostly English. It gets incredibly frustrating (for the child) to continue to work on the trill /r/ when they have not had success by age 8 or 9. Moreover, it is important to consider overall severity and intelligibility and factor in educational need (in the school setting).

The techniques presented in this article have been used by SLPs who have tried different strategies to see what works best for their clients when teaching production of the Spanish variations of the /r/ phoneme, the tap /r/ and the trilled /r/. One thing practicing clinicians know about teaching production of sounds in articulation treatment is that explanations and techniques that work for one student may not work for another. Although the techniques mentioned here are not comprehensive, hopefully this article has provided some resources and insight into ways you can work on tap and trill /r/ with your Spanish-speaking students.

The CLD Committee would like to express our thanks to the following practicing bilingual SLPs for contributing anecdotal information for this article: Patricia Villarreal, Rebecca Eagleson, Anahi Diaz Parsons, and Beata Korytkowski Longo.

## **Resources**

American Speech Language Hearing Association. (2016, Mar 1). Demographic Profile of ASHA members Providing Bilingual Services March 2016. Retrieved from: <http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Demographic-Profile-Bilingual-Spanish-Service-Members.pdf>

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