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TEACHING TIP

FRENCH PRONUNCIATION AND VOWEL TENSION

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INTRODUCTION

French pronunciation is characterized by considerable muscular tension (Grauberg 1997, p.148). The degree to which the muscles in articulators such as the tongue, lips, and jaws are tensed during pronunciation is particularly significant in vowel production. Indeed, unlike their English counterparts, the vowels in the French spoken in France¹ are pronounced with muscle tension that is sustained for the entire duration of the sound, resulting in significantly briefer (“me” vs. *mi*) and more stable (“bow” vs. *beau*) sounds (Tranel 1987, p. 34, Valdman 1993, p. 5).

As Valdman explains, pronunciation mistakes rarely lead to significant misunderstandings, mostly because languages are redundant enough for the other parts of the message to make up for the confusion resulting from the pronunciation mistake (1993, p. 3). However, in French, there are at least two instances in which lack of vowel tension can affect intelligibility and potentially lead to communication breakdown: in the case of the definite article of nouns that have the same feminine and masculine form (e.g., *le réceptionniste*, *la réceptionniste*), and with the third person singular direct object pronoun (e.g., *apporte-le*, *apporte-la*, bring it), especially when the context does not provide further clues. Beginner and intermediate Anglophone learners rarely pronounce the vowels in *le* and *la* as respectively a schwa and a [a] that are clearly distinct from each other. Instead, they produce a reduced version of them, which sounds like a hybrid of the two sounds. On the one hand, this pronunciation spares the speaker the obligation to take a firm position as to the gender of the noun. On the other, it can severely impact the intelligibility of the message.

Since the definite article is introduced as early as the first day of instruction, as all common French nouns are paired with an article, and since sustained vowel tension is an unfamiliar concept in English, Anglophone learners typically form the habit of pronouncing a reduced vowel for the schwa in *le* and for the [a] in *la* early on. Consequently, learners’ pronunciation habits would benefit from early introduction to – and repeated review of – the concept of vowel tension.

PRESENTATION OF MUSCLE TENSION

¹ Relaxed vowels exist in Canadian French (Walker 1984).

One way to present muscle tension to learners is by contrasting the articulation of the French noun phrase *l'eau* (the water) with that of the English adjective “low.” While *l'eau* is pronounced with sustained tension of the muscles in the mouth, cheeks, lips, and the pharynx for the entire duration of the word, muscle tension only applies to the beginning of “low,” i.e., to the consonant and the first part of the vowel. The second part of the vowel is articulated with progressive relaxation of muscles, corresponding to the onset of velarization transforming the vowel into a diphthong.

As mentioned earlier, a reduced version of the vowels in *le* and *la* can significantly impair the intelligibility of a message. It is then mainly with activities focusing on the perception and pronunciation of the articles and object pronouns *le* and *la* that we can help learners better appreciate the necessity to tense their muscles when they pronounce French vowels.

PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

Perception

The first proposed activity focuses on perception practice. It can be presented to students as early as the beginner level since it features vocabulary (i.e., objects found in a classroom) introduced during the first days of instruction. Students listen to a recording in which a French native speaker mentions objects using the masculine and feminine object pronouns *le* and *la*. The students’ task is to select each object referred to.

A. Une nouvelle colocataire ! (A new housemate!) You are spending a year in France on a study abroad program. You’ve lived with French students for a month. One of your housemates just moved out and Christine, a French student, is moving in. She asks you to help her unpack. Listen and choose between the two objects which one she asks you to bring (*apporter*) into her room, based on the word (either *le* or *la*) she used.



Christine : « S’il te plaît,

- (1) apporte _____
- (2) apporte _____
- (3) apporte _____
- (4) apporte _____
- (5) apporte _____
- (6) apporte _____
- (7) apporte _____

- a. le poster b. la tablette
- a. le poster b. la tablette
- a. le cahier b. la règle
- a. le cahier b. la règle
- a. le marqueur b. la trousse
- a. le marqueur b. la trousse
- a. le sac b. la trousse

Merci ! »

Script: *S'il te plaît, 1. apporte-la (tablette). 2. apporte-le (poster). 3. apporte-le (cahier). 4. apporte-la (règle). 5. apporte-la (trousse). 6. apporte-le (marqueur). 7. apporte-le (sac). Merci !*

Translation: *Please, 1. bring it (tablet). 2. bring it (poster). 3. bring it (notebook). 4. bring it (ruler). 5. bring it (pencil case). 6. bring it (marker). 7. bring it (bag). Thank you!*

Perception (Student B) and production (Student A)

As mentioned earlier, it is important to regularly revisit the notion of muscle tension all along the learning process. The next activity can be introduced a few weeks after the beginning of classes, in the middle of the first college semester or the first high school year.

This activity is more challenging than the previous one, as students must pay particular attention to the article since the feminine and masculine versions of the nouns featured sound alike. After checking vocabulary comprehension, students complete the activity in pairs. It is structured in such a way that it focuses both on perception (for one student) and on production (for the other student). Each student is given a script that the other cannot see. Two scripts are provided so that the students in the pair can practice both their perception and production skills. However, students do not have to adhere to the proposed script, in the sense that they may choose the article they will use as long as they remember which one they selected, so that they can verify their partner's answers at the end of the activity.

A. Un entretien d'embauche. (A job interview.) Christine gets you an interview for a part-time job at the hotel where she works. While you wait, she discretely informs you about the persons going about the lobby. Listen to your partner read a script and decide whether Christine is referring to a man or a woman.

Regarde ! Là, c'est _____ de l'hôtel.	1.	a. la propriétaire	b. le propriétaire
Derrière, c'est _____.	2.	a. la réceptionniste	b. le réceptionniste
A côté, c'est _____.	3.	a. la secrétaire	b. le secrétaire
Et devant, c'est _____.	4.	a. la comptable	b. le comptable
La personne près de l'ascenseur, c'est _____.	5.	a. la chef du personnel	b. le chef du personnel
Et là, c'est _____.	6.	a. la responsable	b. le responsable
voir : ils sont tous très sympas !		service client	service client

Script A: *1. Regarde! Là, c'est la propriétaire de l'hôtel. 2. Derrière, c'est le réceptionniste. 3. A côté, c'est le secrétaire. 4. Et devant, c'est la comptable. 5. La personne près de l'ascenseur, c'est le chef du personnel. 6. Et là, c'est la responsable service client. Tu vas voir : ils sont tous très sympas !*

Script B: 1. *Regarde! Là, c'est le propriétaire de l'hôtel.* 2. *Derrière, c'est la réceptionniste.* 3. *A côté, c'est le secrétaire.* 4. *Et devant, c'est la comptable.* 5. *La personne près de l'ascenseur, c'est la chef du personnel.* 6. *Et là, c'est le responsable service client.* Tu vas voir : ils sont tous très sympas !

Translation: 1. *Look! Over there is the owner of the hotel.* 2. *Behind is the receptionist.* 3. *Next (to him/her) is the secretary.* 4. *And in front (of him/her) is the accountant.* 5. *The person close to the elevator is the staff manager.* 6. *And over there is the costumer services manager.* You'll see: *They're all very nice!*

The last activity also allows students to practice both their perception and production of the same sounds. However, it is designed for a higher proficiency level. Indeed, while the transparency of the vocabulary of the music instruments is furthered by the included visual illustrations, the remaining vocabulary and the variety of the featured structures is better suited for the end of the first college semester or high school year. This also explains the use of the target language in the context and directions.

B. Musique! Vous êtes à un concert de musique classique. La personne assise à côté de vous fait des commentaires sur les musiciens pendant qu'ils s'échauffent (*warm up*). Lisez ces commentaires pendant que votre partenaire décide si on parle d'un homme ou d'une femme.



1. Regardez comme _____ violoniste est jeune !
2. Vous voyez _____ flûtiste ? Ses doigts bougent très vite !
3. C'est pareil pour _____ pianiste. Quelle dextérité !
4. Ah, voilà _____ clarinettiste ! On dit que c'est une star de la musique classique.
5. Oh, _____ contrebassiste vient de casser une corde !
6. Hmm ! _____ trompettiste joue un peu trop fort, non ?
7. J'espère qu'on va bien entendre _____ harpiste : j'adore cet instrument !
8. Et le violoncelle aussi. J'espère que _____ violoncelliste va jouer suffisamment fort... Ah, ça va commencer...

Script : 1. *Regardez comme la violoniste est jeune !* 2. *Vous voyez le flûtiste ? Ses doigts bougent très vite !* 3. *C'est pareil pour le pianiste. Quelle dextérité !* 4. *Ah, voilà la clarinettiste ! On dit que c'est une star de la musique classique.* 5. *Oh, la contrebassiste vient de casser une corde !* 6. *Hmm ! Le trompettiste joue un peu trop fort, non ?* 7. *J'espère qu'on va bien entendre le harpiste : j'adore cet instrument !* 8. *Et le violoncelle aussi. J'espère que la violoncelliste va jouer suffisamment fort... Ah, ça va commencer...*

Translation: Music! *You are at a classical music concert. The person sitting next to you is making comments about the musicians while they warm up. Read these comments while your partner decides whether it is a man or a woman that is mentioned.*

Script: 1. *Look how young the violinist is!* 2. *Can you see the flutist? His fingers move very fast!* 3. *Same for the pianist. How skilled!* 4. *Ah, here's the clarinetist! People say she's a classical music star!* 5. *Oh, the stand-up base player just broke a string!* 6. *Hmm! The trumpet player is playing a little too loud, isn't he?* 7. *I hope we can hear the harp player well: I love this instrument!* 8. *And the cello as well. I hope the cello player plays loud enough... Ah, it's about to start...*

CONCLUSION

Vowel tension is one of the fundamental characteristics of French pronunciation, as it is part of what constitutes the articulatory basis of French (Valdman 1993, p. 5). While it rarely results in unintelligibility of the message (outside of the cases covered in this teaching tip), it can affect the comprehensibility of the message and make it difficult for the interlocutor to understand the speaker. If only for these reasons, it is worth investing learner and teacher resources in the study and practice of vowel tension in French pronunciation acquisition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viviane Ruellot is an Associate Professor of French at Western Michigan University, where she teaches French, French linguistics and applied linguistics. Her research focuses on the pedagogy and acquisition of French pronunciation by non-native speakers. She studies how feedback may help learners bridge the gap between perception and production and improve their pronunciation. She is also interested in the stages of pronunciation acquisition and the history of French pronunciation teaching.

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