

TEACHING FRENCH FINAL CONSONANTS AND GRAMMATICAL GENDER OF INANIMATE NOUNS

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Because most final consonants are mute in French but pronounced in English, Anglophones tend to pronounce them in French. The pronunciation of final consonants in French indicates the presence of a final e, which marks the (feminine) grammatical gender of animate nouns in French. Thus, errors in the pronunciation of final consonants are pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary mistakes which risk hindering comprehensibility. In this lesson, participants learn and apply morpho-syntactic and phonetic patterns. After listening and repeating 10 French nouns similar to English nouns (*bracelet, secret...*) while looking at the written words, and their corresponding pictures, they are shown pictures of the same words without the written forms to retrieve the nouns, articles and pronunciation. For transfer, participants are given new words with the same phonetic and grammatical (gender) rule so they can apply the rules to novel words, thus demonstrating they have internalized the phonetic and the grammatical rules.

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INTRODUCTION

Even though pronunciation is a very important part in learning a language, and pronunciation instruction helps learners improve their pronunciation (Thomson & Derwing, 2015), the teaching of pronunciation rarely has the place it deserves. Darcy's (2018, p. 19) three main reasons for this include the "time obstacle" (not enough time to teach pronunciation), the "method obstacle" (what to teach and how to teach it), and the "focus obstacle" (what is most important to teach in a language class).

Learning a language at a beginner level requires learning at least vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar (sentence structure). However, time is often limited to 3-4 hours a week in a L2 language classroom. Given this time restriction, language instructors invariably select what they find most important and what is emphasized in the curriculum: vocabulary and grammar.

One of the difficulties of French is the grammatical gender of inanimate nouns, which is associated with words endings. For example, inanimate words ending in *-age* are masculine. The gender of words also determines the attribution of gender agreement to articles, adjectives, pronouns and past participles. Thus, gender is an important grammatical feature. It is notoriously difficult for non-native (L2) speakers to master (Keller, 2013) due to numerous word endings. In addition, gender mistakes can compromise communication and language mastery and accuracy. Yet, according to Surridge (1995), it is rarely taught; and if it is, it is not taught adequately, as it is rarely taught explicitly, systematically, or over a long period of time.

An important question is how to teach vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, when there is such little time. According to the Usage Based Model (Ellis, 2002), once speakers have acquired

a sufficient number of items (word sequences, chunks and formulaic language) with their lexical, morphosyntactic, and phonetic properties in their database, they can naturally create abstract categories which enable them to apply rules systematically and produce novel sequences they have never heard before.

In order to transfer a rule outside of the classroom, learners need to build abstract lexical, morphosyntactic and phonetic categories and to successfully register complete and accurate information in their database. To be capable of using this database proficiently, learners need to have heard and practiced numerous items and sequences of the same structure. Hence, an efficient way to teach the interaction of pronunciation and grammar is to teach the words and the word properties together, organizing them by linguistic categories, concentrating on one structure, giving minimal explanations with maximal practice until learners can use the new structure with automaticity. Repetition and automation teaching are necessary, as Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005) advocate with the ACCESS method, a Task-Based Language Teaching methodology.

To achieve the first step of automation, learners need to hear word sequences until they have an auditory memory of them. Then they need to practice these items and receive feedback to ensure learning and to counterbalance the potential interference of their L1. Finally, after hearing and practicing a certain number of items, learners can apply a rule to novel items and in communicative contexts.

In teaching the pronunciation signaling grammatical gender in French, I will explain here what to teach, why teach it, how to teach it, what the theoretical background for the choice of activities is, and how to maximize teaching time. I will give examples of class activities language teachers can use to teach grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation together.

BACKGROUND

As mentioned in Seymour et al. (2003, p. 145), in languages that have shallow orthographies (e.g., Spanish) each letter in written language corresponds transparently to the sounds it represents. Other languages, like French and English, have deep orthographies, and their written letters can be pronounced in different ways or sometimes not at all. This is the case for French final consonants. Languages with deep orthographies take longer for native speakers to acquire. They also can cause difficulty for L2 learner, making it necessary to teach pronunciation in relation to deep orthographies.

When teaching French pronunciation to beginners, the instructor can start with French phonemes. This can be done during the first two lessons with listening, discrimination, and repetition exercises. The next step is to teach letters in context. For example, c + a is pronounced /ka/. The third element to teach is the pronunciation of final consonants.

One phonetic rule which is challenging even for advanced learners is the pronunciation of final consonants. French final consonants are usually mute except C, R, F, L (for a mnemonic tool = CaReFuL).

Dos (back) is pronounced [do].

Ticket (ticket) is pronounced [tikɛ].

Bec (beak) is pronounced [bɛk].

The final letter Q is also pronounced, but there are only two words with this ending: *cinq* (five) and *coq* (rooster), so there is no need for a rule. The final consonants of foreign borrowings are pronounced as well: B (*baobab, club, pub, snob...*), G (*bang, gang, Viking...*), K (*anorak, feedback, flashback, look, network...*), and there are other particular cases such as in liaisons (linking). Although there are many more rules about final consonants I am not mentioning here, as well as exceptions, this teaching tip will focus on final consonants that reflect grammatical gender. First, one must understand the rule and the terminology used to explain the rule, that is, one must know enough words to associate words to the rule. Then, one must not get confused between the different rules and exceptions. Finally, one must practice the rule with exercises to create comfort with how the words sound in French. In particular, an area that creates consistent difficulty for learners is mute final consonants because learners tend to pronounce many of them. Because mute final consonants are more frequent than pronounced ones, it seems logical to start teaching mute final consonants and then study the cases when final consonants are pronounced.

In addition to the inherent difficulty of understanding, learning, and mastering a rule, the phonetic rules of an L1 can hinder the acquisition of the phonetic rules of an L2, especially if the two languages have a different phonetic system, as it is the case with French and English. L2 learners tend to apply the graphophonetic system of their L1 when faced with new words. This causes errors in the L2 when the rules and phonemes are different. When the written form and the meaning of the words are the same in both languages, but the pronunciation is different, this often causes even more errors because of the familiarity of the words in one's L1, they use the pronunciation they are accustomed to hearing in their L1, which is not accurate in the L2. For example *ticket* is pronounced [ti.kɛ] in French but is pronounced ['tik.it] in English. Because final consonants are usually pronounced in English (*grand, pot, Denis*), Anglophones tend to pronounce them in French.

Except for the “CaReFuL” final consonants which are pronounced (*bec, mer, relief, bol*), the pronunciation of final consonants in French indicates the presence of a final <e>, which marks the (feminine) grammatical gender of animate nouns, some inanimate nouns, and adjectives in French as illustrated in the examples below.

Justin est mathématicien. [ʒys.tɛ̃.ɛ.ma.te.ma.ti.sjɛ̃] Justin (male) is a mathematician.

Justine est mathématicienne. [ʒys.ti.nɛ.ma.te.ma.ti.sjɛn] Justine (female) is a mathematician.

Pronouncing a mute final consonant of a masculine adjective or noun is both a pronunciation and a grammatical mistake. The interlocutor will wonder whether the subject is masculine or feminine because of conflicting information. Furthermore, the pronunciation of a mute final consonant can change the meaning of inanimate nouns. For example, *navet* [navɛ] means “turnip,” and *navette* [navɛt] means “shuttle.” These meaning differences are signaled in speech by the pronunciation – or not – of the final consonant. Thus, errors in the pronunciation of final consonants also reflect grammar and vocabulary mistakes which risk comprehensibility.

In addition to pronunciation, L2 learners must learn vocabulary and grammar. Among the notorious difficulties of learning French is French grammar with its conjugations, grammatical gender of inanimate nouns, and agreement of determiners and adjectives. Nouns are either masculine or feminine, and the gender of inanimate nouns is not based on their meaning but on their endings. To make it more complex, there are numerous endings and many exceptions. For example, words ending with a phonetic vowel /a/, /e/, /i/... are masculine (*le ballet*), unless they end in -té (*la communauté*), tié (*une amitié*), -tion (*la situation*) or end with a vowel + e (*une idée*).

For example, words ending in /ɛ/ are masculine, but words ending in /ɛt/ are feminine. Thus, if students pronounce the mute final consonant /t/, they cannot determine the gender of words according to their phonetic ending, and they may even pronounce another word. In order to learn grammatical gender of inanimate nouns, students should first learn how to pronounce words and their endings. Pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and spelling are interrelated, and pronunciation is the base of the other ones.

THE PRONUNCIATION LESSONS

Because there is little time to teach vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation separately, and because students need to learn phonetic and morphosyntactic linguistic properties of words, teaching words with their linguistic properties is a promising alternative. Otherwise “L2 learners often have inaccurate long-term memories (or phonolexical representations) for the words in their L2” (Darcy, 2018, p. 15), and their acquisition is incomplete. If too many representations are incomplete, the database is incomplete, and the learners cannot develop abstract categories (i.e., master the rule).

Lesson 1 – Words ending in -et

The purpose of this 8-minute lesson is to teach the pronunciation of final consonants, grammatical gender of inanimate nouns, and vocabulary at the same time. French and English share a large proportion of words which are the same or almost the same. Selecting words that are similar in the students’ L1 can be of great use for adult learners because they already know the meaning of the words in the new language.

This lesson can be done at any level, but the best time to do it would be for beginners after they studied the language phonemes, in the third or fourth lesson. The longer pronunciation teaching is postponed, the more the mistakes are ingrained, and the more difficult it is to correct these types of inaccurate phonolexical representations.

The first step is to present the new rule (here, mute final consonants in French). The instructor does not need to explain the rule explicitly, if the examples are chosen carefully. The instructor reads at least 10 words with the same phonetic structure, and words which are similar or very close in spelling and meaning in both languages (*secret, ballet...*). This has several advantages. It empowers the learners by showing them they already know several hundred words before they even start learning the language. This is very encouraging given the difficulty of learning new words. It facilitates memorization, and it gives them confidence they can guess the word in the new language, and they can also understand quite a lot. Because students don’t have to deal with

the meaning of words, they can concentrate on their form. They observe the new sounds and the correspondence between written words and spoken words. The instructor should speak slowly, quite loudly and exaggerate articulation as they repeat the words twice.

Example : *le banquet, le bracelet, le budget, le buffet, le cabaret, le corset, le cricket, le criquet, le secret, le sorbet.*

Then, students repeat the 10 words with the same ending, after the instructor reads aloud each word, while looking at the written word accompanied by corresponding pictures. Several senses are used simultaneously (hearing and sight). There is no need to explain the meaning because the repetition allows participants to absorb the rules intuitively, as would be the case for children in a natural environment. If there is an explanation, it should be as simple and quick as possible: words ending in *-et* are masculine; the final T is mute.

Here is an example of an easy and quick presentation of a grammatical rule and use of definite articles:

<i>Le</i> = the (masculine singular + consonnant)	<i>Le secret</i>
<i>La</i> = the (feminine singular + consonnant)	<i>La situation</i>
<i>L'</i> = the (masculine or feminine singular + <u>vowel</u>)	<i>L'alphabet</i>

The pictures help define the words and their meaning, but also help to make the lesson more appealing. The instructors can read the words aloud in class or can be prerecorded if they feel uncomfortable with their own pronunciation and want to provide students with native input. If there are different L1 in the class, students can also benefit from the same type of instruction consisting in presenting words with pictures, words which have the same grammatical and phonetic rule.

After reading the list of words the first time (introducing the rule), the instructor now reads aloud each word separately and asks students to repeat each word. The instructor says: Repeat after me: “*Le banquet*”. Students repeat together: “*Le banquet*” (looking at the picture of a banquet).

If students’ production is inaccurate, the instructor can repeat and give constructive feedback. For example, “the final T is not pronounced in French.” The instructor reads aloud the second word sequence: “*Le bracelet*” then asks students to repeat “*Le bracelet*” showing the picture of a bracelet. The same thing is done with the eight other word sequences: *le budget, le buffet, le cabaret, le corset, le cricket, le criquet, le secret, le sorbet*. If the learners L1 has different sets of cognates, the simplest words are better choices. For example, “bracelet” is easier to understand than “budget” or “cabaret” for non-English speakers.

Next, participants are shown pictures of the same words without the written forms. They are asked to retrieve the nouns with the right article and the right pronunciation. Because they already have heard words with the same rule at least 30 times (once when the instructor read the list of 10 words, once when the instructor read each word and asked participants to repeat, and once when they repeated them), and saw the words written 30 times, they should remember the words themselves, their article and pronunciation. If students do not pronounce accurately, the

instructor can repeat and ask the student to repeat the correct form. It is not necessary to make comments or explain a rule, unless some students still do not pronounce accurately after completing all exercises or making grammatical mistakes.

Activities gradually progress from drills and repetitions into more communicative activities.

The instructor shows a picture without words and asks: *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* (what is it?)

The students retrieve the words previously shown (*le banquet, le bracelet...*).

Note that the instructor asks the question, *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* (what is it?) ten times.

Some basic words are added in order to make a full sentence: *C'est* (it is) + le masculine noun (Answer: *C'est le banquet, c'est le bracelet*).

Students are now making a full sentence at the third or fourth lesson. Presenting words, asking beginners to repeat them, and asking the same question helps them get accustomed to French phonemes, French intonation of questions and affirmations, and the phonetic system in general, in addition to words and sentence structure.

In the end, participants are given new written words with the same phonetic and grammatical (gender) rule for which they will use the appropriate definite article and the appropriate final mute consonants. The participants are expected to apply the rules to novel words (*projet, bouquet*), thus demonstrating whether they have internalized the phonetic (mute final consonants) and grammatical (words ending in -et are masculine, hence the article "le") rules.

Lesson 2 – Words ending in -ent

In the next 8-minute lesson, the same activities are done with words ending in -ent. This time, two phonetic rules are studied: the (non)pronunciation of mute final consonants, which was previously studied, + the pronunciation of the nasal vowel /ã/. Ten masculine adjectives ending in -ent are presented: *content, compétent, différent, fluorescent, incompetent, inconscient, innocent, prudent, transparent, urgent*. Because these words are adjectives, some basic words should be added in order to make a full sentence.

Il est (he is) and *c'est* (it is) + masculine adjective. *C'est* was already presented in the first lesson.

Example: *Il est compétent* (he is competent).

This way, participants can make a simple sentence; "he is prudent," or "it is urgent.": The sentences will end with a word in -ent, thus practicing several things at the same time: *il est /c'est*, the adjectives in -ent, the masculine agreement of adjectives and the pronunciation of mute final consonant and the nasal vowel /ã/. The more advanced the students are, the more complex the sentences they hear and produce. Because this lesson is targeted to complete beginners, the sentence structure is minimal. After listening to and repeating the adjectives first in isolation, then in short sentences, students will read aloud new adjectives they haven't heard before (*absent, conscient, excellent...*).

These lessons may seem repetitive, but in my experience, they are not perceived as such. Beginning students need and want the repetition to identify and remember new phonemes and new words. It is also a way to expose students to different sounds in restricted input with familiar words. It is gratifying for beginners to be able to pronounce the new language accurately, and to know the gender of inanimate nouns without explicitly teaching rules or employing long-winded explanations. It is also gratifying to recognize and use words in a sentence and be able to communicate quickly and effectively after just a few lessons. The pictures will help to make the lesson engaging for students.

Games, too, can bring variety to classes and achieve the same purpose: repetition, production and practice. The instructor can select objects which have the same ending, bring them to class, and place them under a sheet so students guess what they are touching but cannot see, after having studied the corresponding vocabulary, and name the object: *c'est un rat*, *c'est un chat*, *c'est un avocat*... The instructor can always add a new rule implicitly or explicitly (linking between *c'est* and *un*).

When students know how to pronounce words and short sentences in French accurately, it gives them confidence. They feel competent and they are more likely to participate in oral activities and improve their oral skills.

CONCLUSION

Learning grammatical and phonetic rules may be complicated, because there are many rules and many word endings. Learning words with their linguistic properties (gender, meaning, pronunciation) is more efficient and is easier for the learners. As mentioned earlier, Darcy (2018, p. 19) identified three obstacles for not teaching pronunciation: the “time obstacle,” the “method obstacle,” and the “focus obstacle.”

Time is not an obstacle if pronunciation and grammar are integrated into the language lesson. We saw here that in an 8-minute lesson it's possible to teach the gender of nouns, the pronunciation, the spelling (the final consonant is not pronounced but is present) and 10 words.

As for the method obstacle, we saw that a pronunciation lesson can be short, simple, and can provide opportunity for practice with few explanations and without complicated terminology. An instructor does not need native pronunciation or be a specialist in phonetics to teach basic pronunciation rules such as mute final consonants in French. The content to be taught can be found in pronunciation textbooks, but also by simply observing students' productions. In order to be efficient, the lesson should provide repetitions of the same phonetic and grammatical structure. Pronunciation should be integrated to the rest of the lessons, not studied in isolation. According to Darcy (2018, p. 23), “integration of pronunciation practice in other skill areas and into every lesson is one component of a possible solution to this problem” (of achieving transfer from class lesson to everyday practice outside the classroom). In a class in which learners speak the same L1 (English in Ontario, Canada), phonetic features which are particularly difficult to learn for these speakers is worth concentrating on (here mute final consonants).

Using already known vocabulary (which is the same in the students' L1) allows students to concentrate on phonetic and grammatical form: the grammatical gender and the pronunciation of

final consonants. Thus, students can learn the vocabulary with the corresponding gender and the accurate pronunciation, building a database of accurate information about the new language. If there is a short grammar and pronunciation lesson integrated to each language lesson, by the end of their first year, beginner students will have studied, practiced and transferred the bases of pronunciation, which in turn will have helped them learn grammar, spelling, and vocabulary.

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