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The French Review, Vol. 68, No. 4. (Mar., 1995), pp. 638-651.

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Phonetics in the Beginning and Intermediate Oral Proficiency-Oriented French Classroom

by Diane Dansereau

Oral proficiency and pronunciation

MUCH ATTENTION HAS BEEN FOCUSED in recent years on the Oral Proficiency approach to second language teaching. Many articles describe classroom activities which develop oral proficiency at the beginning and intermediate levels of language study and others address the question of testing oral proficiency at these levels. Notably lacking from the literature is, however, a discussion of the acquisition of good pronunciation habits in the beginning and intermediate oral proficiency-oriented classroom. This is curious in light of the key role played by pronunciation in the early phase of language study.

Students completing the first year of college-level language should be able to perform at the Novice-High level in speaking (using the ACTFL rating scale) (James 5; Magnan "Speaking Proficiency" 433) and at the Intermediate-Mid level by the end of the fourth semester college course (Magnan "Speaking Proficiency" 430, 434; Freed 140). In all of the official descriptions of the Novice and Intermediate speakers, the importance of pronunciation is evident. The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR),¹ Clifford and Lowe's "Functional Trisection" of oral proficiency, and The Educational Testing Service (ETS) Oral Proficiency Manual all describe the lower levels of oral proficiency in terms of intelligibility (Lowe 24, 28; ETS 29). Since correct grammar and vocabulary without reasonably correct pronunciation are unintelligible, it follows that at these levels, intelligibility depends largely on pronunciation. The ACTFL provisional generic descriptions of speaking provide more detail about pronunciation, using the terms "phonemes," "articulation," "stress," and "intonation."

It is generally agreed that the three parts of the Functional Trisection (functions, content, and accuracy) are equally important and that classroom activities should be based on various combinations of all of them (see, for example, Heilenmane and Kaplan 60). Yet, of the numerous proficiency-oriented activities published, virtually none addresses the question of acquiring good pronunciation habits.² At the same time, it is clear that many teachers realize the importance of pronunciation at the beginning and

intermediate levels of language study, since they routinely grade pronunciation on oral examinations (Jarausch 594; Magnan "Achievement" 141). Furthermore, when oral aptitude is measured by the use of the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), as it often is in classroom situations, and when the OPI is used also to test for the satisfaction of a language requirement (see Freed and Magnan "Speaking Proficiency"), Magnan's 1988 study shows that OPI testers include pronunciation in their evaluations (274).

This inclusion of pronunciation in oral testing highlights the goal of the proficiency-oriented classroom: to produce students who can function in real-world situations at their linguistic level. As we have just seen, at the lower-end of proficiency levels, functioning is defined in terms of intelligibility, which depends in turn largely upon pronunciation. Nevertheless, the inclusion of pronunciation in outcome assessments can be justified only if pronunciation is taught systematically throughout all levels of language study. Chun has argued for the incorporation of the teaching of intonation into the foreign language curriculum, citing its importance to "successful and coherent communication" (301). This argument should be extended to include other elements of phonetics. The choice of which phonetic features to emphasize and when and how to teach them needs to be defined by linguists and language teachers working together: specific practical guidelines need to be produced for the introduction and teaching of good pronunciation habits in beginning and intermediate language classes. The following proposes such guidelines for the French language.³

Definition of elementary and intermediate level phonetics

Phonetics is commonly defined as the study of the sounds of speech, their production, combination, description, and representation by written symbols. Beginning language teachers need be concerned with teaching only two aspects of phonetics: the production of sounds and sound-symbol correlation.

Naturally, the detail of phonetic information given in first and second year classes will not equal that of a French phonetics course, which should be reserved for the third year of college study (Rivers 144, 145; Valdman "Linguistics" 481). Only the basic rules of sound-symbol association need be taught and the technical description of sound production should be kept to a minimum.⁴ Another aspect of advanced phonetics which should be kept out of the beginning and intermediate classroom is the use of phonetic symbols. Phonetic symbols can be confusing, since many represent sounds different from the corresponding alphabet letter (e.g., [y] corresponds to the letter "u"). Many students are already overwhelmed by the concept of one new foreign language; it is important they know that teachers do not expect them to learn two new languages—phonetics along with French. Pronunciation can be illustrated just as easily by the use of orthographic

examples, such as [u] as in *vous*; a model word can be selected for each sound at the beginning of the year and referred to throughout the course.

Goals of elementary and intermediate level phonetics

In teaching basic phonetics to beginning and intermediate students, foreign language instructors should have two goals in mind. The first of these is the ultimate goal of the proficiency-oriented classroom—that students learn to function in the foreign language at their linguistic level. Thus, at the lower levels, the goal is to teach comprehensibility. In linguistic terms, when phonetic differences convey differences in meaning, they are considered phonemic. To teach comprehensibility, then, one must stress phonemes, that is, the sounds and prosodic features⁵ which are essential to meaning. For instance, the sounds [u] and [y] are phonemes because they serve to differentiate the words *cours* and *cure*. The rising intonation of a yes-no question (without *est-ce que* or inversion) is also phonemic because it is the sole feature which differentiates the question from a statement.

The second goal of teaching phonetics in elementary and intermediate French classes is to help the student to avoid typically “American” pronunciations (Léon “Phonétique corrective” 4). Accordingly, teachers must also stress some features which are not essential to comprehension (sub-phonemic features) but which lead to overall good French pronunciation habits. For example, if a student pronounces the French *papa* like the English *papa*, three things are wrong: the [p] is aspirated, the second [a] is diphthongized, and the accent is on the wrong syllable. Although the student can be understood by a native French speaker, there will be no doubt he is a foreigner. So features such as (non-) aspiration, (non-) diphthongization, and stress accent, which are sub-phonemic, are nonetheless important.

Experts agree with Omaggio that “there should be a concern for the development of linguistic accuracy from the beginning of instruction” (36) (see also Nachtmann 1; Rivers 155–59; Léon “phonétique corrective” 2, 3). Accordingly, certain basic aspects of phonetics should be introduced on the first day of the first elementary class and then should be stressed systematically throughout the elementary and intermediate levels of study. The advantages of such a strategy are two-fold: first, students who are constantly aware of phonetics tend not to develop bad pronunciation habits (a “reading” pronunciation) and second, when the oral component of language learning is continually stressed, students learn not only to pronounce better, but also to listen better. Such students develop better auditory discrimination habits.

In what follows, I shall discuss those sounds and prosodic features of the French language which, because of their impact on comprehension or on the “Frenchness” of pronunciation, are important enough to be included in early classes, and those which should be left to more advanced study. In addition, I shall look at methods of presenting and practicing these phonetic

features, at the integration of phonetics into other classroom activities, and finally at different techniques of testing phonetic contrasts.

Important phonetic features

The basic phonetic features which are important to beginning French instruction can be divided into three categories: 1) vowels, 2) consonants, and 3) prosodics.⁶ In this section I suggest when to introduce each vowel, consonant, and prosodic feature. This timetable is a guideline only: the point is that all of these sounds and prosodic features should be presented systematically near the beginning of the introductory and intermediate French course. Consistent emphasis on each feature in later classes is also important in order to review and reinforce usage.⁷

In the following discussion of individual sounds (vowels and consonants), a strong emphasis is placed on spelling in relation to pronunciation. All of the vowel and consonant sounds are taught as equivalents of written letters or combinations of letters. Once these sound-letter correspondences are learned, students can approach most new words and almost always (since exceptions are few⁸) correctly guess the pronunciation (Nachtmann 2). Furthermore, whenever possible, cases of what appear to be "irregular" usage in French pronunciation are explained through etymology or by reference to similar English usage. Nachtmann makes the point that "an apparent idiosyncrasy of French spoken language or pronunciation should seem much simpler to the learner if he can be shown that it already exists in English or if the precise reason for his problem in French can be pinpointed at its source in his own language" (1).

VOWELS

Vowels are the basic sounds of a spoken language since virtually every syllable by definition has one at its center (Grundstrom 59).⁹ It is therefore not surprising that vowels are the class of phonemes which foreign language teachers stress the most, starting on the first day of the first beginning class. In the following, a suggested order of classroom presentation of the French vowels is given. Features suggested for introduction "later" are meant to be emphasized later in the semester on the first occasion that they become relevant, for instance in connection with a new vocabulary item or a grammar point.

The vowel sounds [a], [ɔ], [i], [o], [y], which correspond to the vowel letters of the alphabet can be introduced, through their alphabet equivalents, as early as the first day of the beginning class. These sounds should be repeated first in isolation and then compared to the equivalent English letter sounds: in the cases of the letters "a", "e", "i" and "u", the difference in pronunciation is *phonemic*, and therefore essential to comprehension. French vowel tenseness and non-diphthongization should also be stressed,

even though these features are sub-phonemic. As for the vowel [y], it should be pointed out that no equivalent English vowel exists and then demonstrated that [y] is actually a rounded version of [i]. Since it is so difficult for Anglophones to produce and because its correct pronunciation is often crucial to comprehension, the vowel [y] needs special attention, especially in relation to the sound [u], which will be introduced within a few days. This is not to say that after endless repetition, students should be expected to produce a perfect [y]. The emphasis on this vowel is intended to boost students' awareness of its existence and to help put them on the road to eventual mastery of the sound.

Next (in a later class), these five vowel sounds can be repeated in words. This can be done in the elementary class by use of both cognates and French words students will recognize: "ah!" "oh là là!" "Canada." At the intermediate level, one can expand beyond cognates to elementary vocabulary, and then further to short sentences using this vocabulary: "oh là là," "Papa," "Canada," "Oh là là! Papa va au Canada!" Groups of students could also be asked to write down all the words they can think of with the vowel and then to combine them into sentences for the whole class to repeat (or even memorize). In addition, rhymes, poems, and tongue twisters containing the sound can also be repeated.

Within the first week of the elementary class, two new vowel sounds should be added to the students' phonemic inventory. The vowels [ɛ] and [ɛ̃] should be introduced as the oral equivalents of the spellings "é" and "è," "ê" respectively. The same types of repetition drills can be used as for the other vowels, with the addition of words and phrases which contrast the two sounds [ɛ] and [ɛ̃]: "Hélène," "Thérèse," "les pères."

The sound [u] should also be introduced during the first week, as the equivalent of the spelling "ou." This sound can be drilled in the same manner as the other vowel sounds, but it should also be contrasted extensively with the vowel [y]: the difference is phonemic and although students should not be expected to produce it for quite some time, it should be stressed over and over in the beginning and intermediate classes. The importance of distinguishing [y] from [u] can be underlined through pairs of words whose mispronunciation would be amusing: "nous"/"nu," "poule"/"pull," "pouce"/"puce."

An explanation of written accent marks other than the ones mentioned above ("é," "è," "ê") may be saved for "later," since their usage usually does not affect pronunciation.¹⁰ Students do need to know, however, that although these accent marks are unrelated to pronunciation, there is often a logical explanation for their usage. When an example does come up, as in the word "où," it should be explained that the accent mark serves to differentiate two words: in this case, the question word and the conjunction. The lesson might then be reinforced by asking students for other examples they have seen of this "differential" usage of accent marks: "à"/"â," "sur"/"sûr," "du"/"dû." The other use of the circumflex accent can be explained in

another lesson: this accent mark is often a remnant of an earlier *-“s”* in the language. The older form is often seen reflected in the modern English equivalent (*“forêt”* = forest), since the English was borrowed from an older form of French. Or, in certain irregular verbs, the form with the circumflex accent is the one not followed by an *-“s”*: *“connaître,” “je connais.”*

The openness of the vowel [ɔ] (as in *“bonne”*), should be taught through imitation.¹¹ The slight difference in pronunciation between the front rounded mid-vowels, [ø] and [œ] (as in *“peu”* [pø] and *“peur”* [pœr]), is rarely phonemic and can be avoided altogether at the beginning and intermediate levels. The correspondence between the spelling *“eu”* and these two vowels [ø] and [œ] is, however, very important. (Anglophones usually want to say something close to the vowel [u] for this spelling.) This sound-symbol relationship should be stressed the first time it comes up, which is early in the beginning class, usually in connection with the verbs *“vouloir”* and *“pouvoir”*: *“il veut”* [il vø], not [il vu] (here the pronunciation is phonemic). The correct pronunciation of the ending *-“eur”* should also be constantly insisted upon: *“professeur”* [prɔ fe søer] not [prɔ fe sʊr]. (This is a mistake which is often baked-in and hard to correct in the speech of upper-division students. It can sometimes lead to miscomprehension: for example, if *“lecteur”* is pronounced [lek tur], it may be misinterpreted as *“lecture”* [lek tyr].)

To be left for advanced study is the back vowel [ɑ], which is found in a very small number of words and has been eliminated from the speech of the majority of French speakers in favor of the front vowel [a] (Dansereau 74). Also to be avoided are explanations of the complicated use of the mute *“e.”* Instructors should instead always provide a good example of pronunciation: for example, insisting on the correct pronunciation of the prefix *“re-”* [rə], comparing it to *“ré-”* [re]: *“regarder”* [rə gar de], *“réservé”* [re zɛr ve].

The pronunciation of the French nasal vowels should be explained systematically somewhere in the mid-beginning class, whenever the question of a nasal pronunciation first comes up. Beginning students should be made aware that French contains four nasal vowels (or three, depending on the instructor's pronunciation). These can be demonstrated in the phrase *“Un bon vin blanc.”* Pronunciation should then be compared to that of the English nasal vowels, which exist only in conjunction with a *pronounced* nasal consonant.¹² The basics of oral-nasal usage across syllable boundaries and in word-final position (*“i/nutile”* vs. *“in/stable”*; *“semaine”* vs. *“demain”*) may also be given in the beginning class. The nasal vowel sounds can be practiced in pairs with the corresponding oral vowel (*“Jean,” “Jeanne”*), in cognates (*“américain”*) and in contrast with the other nasal vowels (*“vin,” “vent,” “vont”*).

As for the three semi-vowels, [j], [ɥ], and [w], these may be reserved for advanced study (see note 6). The only notable exceptions are the combination [wa], corresponding to the spelling *“oi”* (which needs to be stressed in order to avoid the spelling pronunciation of the English vowel sound in the

word "boy") and the combination consonant + "-ille," which students should know is normally pronounced consonant + [ij] (the three main exceptions are the words "mille," "ville," and "tranquille" and their derivatives).¹³

CONSONANTS

The teaching of the French consonant sounds requires less attention than that of the vowels, since there are fewer instances of consonantic phonetic features which pose problems for students. Some important phonemic differences (as compared to the English system) do exist, however, as well as several sub-phonemic ones, and these should be stressed. Early in the beginning class, after work on the vowels in the alphabet, the consonant letter names should be taught. The next logical step is to spell words out loud—e.g., students' names and cognates. Later in the semester, the consonant sounds of the alphabet are recalled in elementary-level words and sentences, which students can be asked to provide. Tongue twisters can be used at the intermediate level: "Pépé n'a pas pu partir sans parapluie." The insistence on the pronunciation of these seemingly unimportant letter names serves to underline two sub-phonemic but nevertheless important features of the French consonants: word-initial stops are not aspirated,¹⁴ and French consonants are tenser than their English equivalents.

The other French consonant sounds (which do not correspond to a single alphabet letter) should be discussed later in the semester, as their relevance comes up. The consonants [ʃ], [ʒ] and [ŋ] (like the other consonants and the vowel sounds) should be taught according to orthography, even though exceptions to the sound-symbol correspondances do exist: [ʃ] = "ch," [ʒ] = "j," [ŋ] = "gn." (The exceptions should be saved for advanced study; see Danseureau 181 and 191, for lists of exceptions.) The written letter "h" should be pointed out early on and stressed because it is never pronounced. As for the French [r], its mispronunciation will usually not interfere with comprehension. Nevertheless, it is a difficult sound for Anglophones to learn and its mispronunciation contributes greatly to the "American" accent, so it should be practiced often. Next, there are the pronunciations of "hard" and "soft" "g" and "c" ("hard" followed by the letters "a," "o," "u;" "soft" by "i" and "e"), and the use of the cedilla or the letter "e" to "soften" these consonants. A very brief lesson on these consonants (when an example of one comes up) will suffice. One need only give other examples of these letters in words which students will recognize ("garage," "Gigi," "golf," "guide," "cage," "certain," "civil," "coca," "cure," "Français"). Students appreciate learning that (except for the cedillas) French usage is the same as English in this case.

Other consonantic features of importance for beginning and intermediate students are: the pronunciation of single *vs.* double intervocalic "s" ("poison" *vs.* "poisson"); the silence of most written final consonants ("chaud" [ʃo]); the CRFL rule for pronounced written final consonants,¹⁵

and the release of pronounced final consonants (this is in some cases phonemic, e.g., to distinguish feminine from masculine adjectives—"indépendante" vs. "indépendant"—or plural from singular verb forms—"ils vendent" vs. "il vend").

PROSODICS

In order to discourage the creation of bad pronunciation habits which contribute to the "American accent," French tonic accent, syllabification, and intonation should be stressed early in the beginning year and throughout the study of the language. The question of stress accent arises on the first day of the beginning class, in cognates of more than one syllable, and then later in sentences which are used to practice a sound. Although stress accent in French is sub-phonemic, it is so completely different from English stress accent that it should not be ignored.¹⁶ A good way of practicing this phonetic feature is through repetition of groups of cognates, first of two syllables, then of three, and so forth. Another good exercise (for the second half of the elementary class and at the intermediate level) uses sentence building drills, which are discussed below (*Phonetic exercises and activities*).

The second important (although sub-phonemic) prosodic feature is open syllabification. Whereas in English words, syllables end more often with a consonant sound, the French language favors open syllables, those ending in a vowel sound. In early elementary classes this can be illustrated through the use of cognates, contrasting them with their English counterparts: "mé-té-o-ro-lo-gie," "té-lé-phone." Later, the same principle should be demonstrated in sentences, where open syllabification continues across word boundaries: "Anne arrive au lycée" [a na ri vo li se]. A good way to practice open syllabification is also through sentence building drills.

The last prosodic feature to mention is intonation. This can be at times phonemic, as in the rising intonation of a yes-no question. (This pattern should be pointed out and practiced early on, as soon as questions are introduced.) However, since intonation patterns are more or less the same in the two languages, students generally have no problem with them.¹⁷

In addition to the basic phonetic features just discussed, instructors should consistently single out and correct common mispronunciations: "femme," "Monsieur," (silent) third person verb endings, the vowels in "faire," no liaison after the conjunction "et",¹⁸ and so forth. It is good to be able to stop at any time in a lesson to correct or to praise a student's pronunciation. In either case (correction or praise), the instructor may often want to turn the incident into a mini-review of the feature. For these cases of parenthetical pronunciation review, it helps to have on hand extensive examples of phonetic features and exercises.

Phonetic exercises and activities

In the preceding, a number of exercises for practicing phonetic features were mentioned. These are summarized below, along with some others. (For a more detailed description of phonetic exercises, see Rivers 152–68.) Repetition of the following is useful: single sounds (alphabet), cognates, known words (never use anything unfamiliar to students), words increasing in number of syllables (5 words with one syllable, 5 words with 2 syllables, etc.), sentences using the sentence building technique. Sentence building drills can work in two ways: words can be added to the back of the sentence or to the front. In either case, each repetition should form a complete phrase (in drills which build onto the back of a sentence, the accent always remains on the same last syllable, thus highlighting the syllable-final position of the French stress accent). For example: “Georges.” / “Monique et Georges.” / “Avec Monique et Georges.” / “A midi avec Monique et Georges.” / “Anne déjeune à midi avec Monique et Georges.” / “Anne et Sylvie déjeunent à midi avec Monique et Georges.” Memorization can also be used to practice pronunciation. Students can memorize, for instance: sentences, tongue twisters,¹⁹ children’s verses, songs, poems.

Most of these exercises can be done either as choral or individual drills. In the construction of phonetic exercises, as with other exercises, it is always best to go from simple to hard: short to long words, one syllable to many, short to long sentences, easier to hard vowels. In addition, exercises should be long enough to provide sufficient practice to all students, so a large class requires more items. Often textbook drills can be used as a base but need to be greatly augmented.

Obviously, a student’s good pronunciation and good auditory discrimination skills go hand in hand with a strong oral emphasis in the foreign language classroom. Students should therefore be provided with substantial time for speaking.²⁰ For instance, class time can be structured to include many small group activities and work in pairs. Other ways to encourage speaking include oral presentations (discussed below, under *Testing methods*) and regular language laboratory work. (For more discussion of oral activities, see Omaggio 175–220 and Rivers, chapters 1, 2, and 4.)

Listening to French, without depending on the written word, is also important and should be emphasized. A reading exercise can be turned into a listening exercise through the use of listening comprehension passages, described below, under *Testing methods*. Students should also be asked often to read out loud in class, an exercise which can turn into a springboard for a mini-review of phonetics.

Even grammar exercises can, and often should, evolve into phonetics lessons. Virtually every grammar point is closely related to at least one of the basic phonetic features introduced early in the course and might

prompt a review of that feature. The following are just a few examples: 1) the pronunciation of the partitive provides an excellent opportunity to review the vowel [y]; 2) the pronunciation of feminine adjective endings leads to a review of final consonant release; 3) the difference between the singular and plural of many present-tense irregular verb forms hinges on a nasal-oral vowel contrast; 4) the only difference in pronunciation between "ils ont" and "ils sont" lies in the number of intervocalic "-s"'s; and 5) the reason that four out of six persons of present tense first conjugation verb forms are homonymous is because most written final consonants are unpronounced.

Testing methods

Because it is often difficult to evaluate each student's pronunciation and assign an oral grade, the testing of pronunciation alone is often completely overlooked in the foreign language classroom. Yet, in order to emphasize the importance of pronunciation and, as Magnan says, "to test what we teach and expect, we must then offer more oral tests based on the activities and expectations of our classrooms" ("Achievement" 11). Ideally each student should have at least two private conferences with the teacher so that progress can be noted. These speaking tests should take place at mid-semester (a diagnostic test, not graded) and near the end of the semester (for a grade). Possible components of the test are: a) having the student read a paragraph in French, one either unknown or one on which the whole class has worked; b) free French conversation between the student and the teacher; c) a mini-oral presentation, in which the student talks about a prepared topic prepared. From part a), instructors can tell students which phonetic features they need to work on. Since parts b) and c) contain grammar and vocabulary as well as pronunciation, they should be used as a more general test of pronunciation; for instance, trends in mispronunciation of certain sounds and words could be pointed out. (See Blue et al., Jaraus, Omaggio 336-55, and Rivers 335 for more suggestions on oral testing.)

Unfortunately, given the crowded conditions of most foreign language classrooms, speaking tests, as outlined above, are impractical in most cases. Part c) of the test, however, (the oral student presentations) can be included regularly throughout the semester. These presentations, given without notes in front of the class, can vary from simple descriptions ("Devinez qui c'est") to more complicated dialogues and "how to" presentations. Unlike other specifically phonetic activities, which fall into Rivers's category of "skill-getting" activities (4), requiring immediate correction of the phonetic feature being stressed, oral presentations involve "skill-using" and correction should therefore be delayed until the end of each presentation. This decreases dependence on the teacher and helps students develop self confidence. The delayed correction of the features can then serve as a

group review at the completion of the activity. The instructor should keep each student appraised of those features which require the most work, keep a record of each student's progress, and give a final oral grade on that basis.

The importance of certain phonetic features can also be tested on written exams through the use of auditory discrimination items. Although this is a written exercise, it does test phonetics, since a student who can *hear* the difference between sounds will be most apt to try to pronounce that difference. Auditory discrimination exercises involve lists of three or four items (words or phrases) which are similar in pronunciation. The student must circle the one read by the instructor. This exercise can test sounds ("les cours" / "le cœur" / "liqueur" / "les cars") or grammatical items (e.g., the tense of the verb).

Less specifically phonetic but also important, are other oral sections of each written examination: sections in which students respond in writing to oral cues. If students are encouraged to develop good auditory discrimination habits, their oral skills will improve, just as the reverse is also the case.

Yet another type of auditory examination is the listening comprehension exercise, which can be done regularly in beginning and intermediate classes. The instructor reads a paragraph unfamiliar to the students and then asks questions, in French, about the content. The answers can be short (comprehension is being tested, not grammar), but must be written in French. The grades for these exams can be averaged into the final oral grade.

Conclusion

By means of the early introduction of the basic phonetic features detailed above and the systematic emphasis on phonetics in all classes (both in classwork and in testing), French instructors provide students with the unique opportunity of learning to pronounce French in a manner clearly understandable to native speakers and also relatively free of an American accent. In addition, because of the emphasis on the spoken language, these students tend to develop good listening skills. It is hoped that this article has helped highlight the importance of a systematic phonetics program in the beginning and intermediate proficiency-oriented French classroom, and has provided useful suggestions for the implementation of such a program.

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT DENVER

Notes

¹The ILR is made up of members of the Foreign Service Institute and the Defense Language Institute.

²Rivers is the exception. See her chapter on the teaching of the French sound system (chapter 5).

³French holds a special place among the most commonly taught foreign languages with regard to pronunciation. Americans speaking French have earned a reputation among native speakers of the language for bad pronunciation and many of the offenders seem to accept the inevitability of the situation. Witness the American tourist in France: "Please excuse my pronunciation, I've only had two years of French."

⁴It is important to note, however, that teachers at this level should have a thorough understanding of these aspects of phonetics, in order to anticipate and understand student problems and to provide added explanations when they appear useful. Teachers with an intimate knowledge of phonetics can explain, for example: the difference in articulation between [y] and [u]; how [r] is formed; why there is liaison in one place and not in another; why the ending in "fille" is pronounced differently from the ending in "ville," and so on. They can also come up with practice exercises quickly, on the spur of the moment, when they are needed. Good reference books providing the phonetic information an elementary or intermediate French teacher should know include Carduner and Hagiwara 1982, Dansereau 1990, Grundstrom 1983, and Léon 1964 ("Exercices systématiques")

⁵Prosodic features are suprasegmental features, involving whole segments of speech (words or phrases). They include items such as stress accent, word-linking, and intonation.

⁶Note the exclusion of semi-vowels, which, in most cases, if mispronounced as their corresponding vowels disturb neither intelligibility nor "Frenchness" of pronunciation. Example: "lower" can be pronounced either [lwe] or [lu e] (the second in slow speech). Exception: if "ville" is mispronounced [vi], "vie" is understood.

⁷Valdman's 1982 discussion of "cyclic" learning of grammar pertains also to phonetics. Valdman says that new material should be represented in several "passes" throughout the year, the first time for passive recognition, the second for active practice, the third for active use in highly structured contexts, and further passes for fully integrative use in relation to other related features (41-42). Specifically for phonetics, Nachtmann (3) insists that after the introduction of a phonetic point, it be applied in all subsequent class work. Delattre (2) agrees: "Ces habitudes [articulatoires durables] ne s'obtiennent pas seulement par des séries de répétitions identiques, mais aussi par les intervalles de repos qui les suivent. Il faut donner aux cellules le temps de se faire aux formes que notre volonté leur impose par l'exercice. Ainsi les résultats durables n'apparaissent souvent que plusieurs mois après le travail de correction. Persistez donc dans l'application de la théorie, même si vous ne voyez aucun résultat immédiat."

⁸Three of the most important exceptions are 1) the letters "eu," which are pronounced [ø] or [œ] except for in the past tense forms of the verb "avoir"—"il a eu" [i la y]; 2) the sound [a], which is represented by the letter "a" except in the combinations "emm" and "enn"—"femme" [fam], "solennel" [sɔ̃ la nɛl], "fréquemment" [fre ka mɑ̃]; and 3) the sound [ɔ̃], which is represented by the letter "e" except in "Monsieur" [mɔ̃ sjø] and in two-syllable forms of the verb "faire": "faisons" [fɛ zɔ̃]. For more examples of important exceptions to the regular sound-symbol rules, see Dansereau 1990, the individual sounds.

⁹Exceptions are syllables with a syllabic consonant (or continuant) and onomatopœic words such as "shh!"

¹⁰The closeness of "ô" may be mentioned (but see note 11), but the posteriority of "â" (a sound which has all but disappeared) should not be explained at this level of study.

¹¹Both [o] and [ɔ̃] can be represented by the spelling "o" and the rules for the distribution of mid-vowels are too complicated for this level of study. In addition, very few pairs of words are differentiated by these two vowels (e.g. "votre," "vôtre": see Dansereau 1990:103 for a complete list) and most of these (unlike this example) do not appear in beginning or intermediate level vocabulary. So the mispronunciation of [ɔ̃] as [o] is in most cases sub-phonemic. Likewise, any discussion of the distribution of the midvowels [e]—[ɛ]; and [ø]—[œ] should be left

to the Advanced phonetics course. The exception is the teaching of the sound-symbol relationship between [e] and é and [ɛ] and è, ê.

¹²It is amusing but not essential to explain *how* nasal vowels are produced (with the air passing through the nose as well as the mouth). Simple imitation of the instructor is sufficient at this level of study.

¹³The only other exception is the town "Lille" [lil].

¹⁴In English the consonants [p], [t] and [k] are accompanied by a puff of air (aspiration) at the beginning of a word; the corresponding French consonants are not aspirated. Compare French "papa" and English "papa."

¹⁵The four consonants in the word *careful* are usually pronounced in word-final position in short French words: "chic," "car," "chef," "il."

¹⁶Stress accent in French falls *only* on the last syllable of a word in isolation or on the last syllable of a rhythmic group.

¹⁷The main difference between the intonation patterns of the two languages occurs at the end of each rhythmic group within a sentence. Intonation always rises here in French but can rise or fall in English.

¹⁸Since the rules of liaison are too advanced for this level of study, example is the best teacher here.

¹⁹One must bear in mind, however, Rivers's (155) warning that sounds practiced only in isolation or in contrived exercises such as tongue twisters will not necessarily be mastered by students. Opportunities to practice the sound in normal utterances must also be provided.

²¹This is one of the best arguments in favor of a first-year textbook whose grammatical explanations are in English. If students can learn the grammar at home, virtually all of the class time can be devoted to communication.

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