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TEACHING TIP

INTRODUCING FRENCH NASAL VOWELS AT THE BEGINNER LEVEL: A DEMYSTIFICATION

[Viviane Ruellot](#), Western Michigan University

Although they make for only a fraction of the French phonological repertoire, nasal vowels represent a notorious challenge in the acquisition of French pronunciation by second language (L2) learners (Dansereau, 1990; Harlow and Muyskens, 1994). As nasal vowels are in phonemic contrast both with oral vowels (*bain/baie, banc/bas, bon/beau*)¹⁰ and with one another (*bain/banc/bon*), their inaccurate perception and production can significantly impact intelligibility. Therefore, an introduction to – and the practice of – these sounds in French pronunciation is warranted. The results of the informal polls I have conducted as an instructor of French over the years seem to indicate that one initial obstacle to feeling comfortable with French nasal vowels is linked to the notion held by some learners that these sounds represent an entirely foreign concept, that they simply do not exist in the native English sound repertoire. Consequently, these learners are unable to relate French nasal vowels to familiar sounds and find it very difficult to process them. The present teaching tip focuses on the *introduction* of French nasal vowels, i.e., the stage preceding any practice with the perception and production of these sounds. Its goals are to “demystify” French nasal vowels by demonstrating to students that vowel nasality exists in English (Ruhlen, 1973) and by guiding learners to pair unfamiliar French sounds with familiar English sounds (Levac, 1991), so that they can resort to these referents when processing French nasal vowels during perception and production practice.

The first step of this approach concerns the existence of vowel nasality in English. It is based on pronunciation information featured in two French textbooks co-authored by Valdman (*Chez Nous*, 2010, and *Points de Départ*, 2013): “Both English and French have nasal vowels. In English, any vowel followed by a nasal consonant is automatically nasalized, as in *man, pen, song*.” While this concept – repeated *verbatim* in both texts – is mentioned, it is not further developed. Nor is it followed by activities for practice. The second step of this approach is informed by Levac (1991), who recommends pairing unfamiliar sounds (here, French nasal vowels) with familiar ones (i.e., English nasalized vowels), so as to provide learners with “starting points for ‘anchoring’ a French vowel phoneme” (p. 216).

Background

The French phonological repertoire consists of 21 consonants and semi-consonants, 12 oral vowels, and 3 nasal vowels.¹¹ While they represent a small portion of the French sound system,

¹⁰ *Bain* /bɛ̃/, ‘bath’ vs. *baie* /bɛ/, ‘bay’; *banc* /bɑ̃/, ‘bench’ vs. *bas* /ba/, ‘low’; *bon*, /bɔ̃/, ‘good’ vs. *beau* /bo/, ‘beautiful.’

¹¹ The fourth nasal vowel /œ̃/ was excluded from this list because research shows that it is gradually disappearing from French speech, with more and more native speakers substituting /ɛ̃/ for /œ̃/ (Hansen, 1998).

L2 learners typically find it difficult to discriminate between /ɛ̃/ (as in *bain*), /ɑ̃/ (as in *banc*), and /ɔ̃/ (as in *bon*). This difficulty may well be linked to the fact that the three sounds are acoustically closer to each other than are their oral counterparts (Lindblom, 1975) and, consequently, they are not as readily distinguishable from one another. Possibly added to this difficulty is unawareness – in some learners – of the existence of vowel nasality in English. Indeed, when an English vowel is adjacent to a nasal consonant (as in ‘fan’), it is automatically nasalized. Because it is due to physiological constraints linked to the anticipated pronunciation of the nasal consonant, vowel nasality is not phonemic in English. For instance, the word ‘fan’ is phonemically /fæn/ but it can be pronounced [fæ̃n], with no impact on its meaning. For this reason – and also because a smaller quantity of air passes through the nose during nasalization – vowel nasality is only partial in English (Ruhlen, 1973). On the contrary, in French, it is full and intrinsic (i.e., not as a consequence of the phonetic environment) and phonemic (e.g., *banc* /bɑ̃/, ‘bench’ vs. *bas* /ba/, ‘low’).

Exercise 1 – English Nasalized Vowels

While the preceding explanation is probably considered wholly pertinent by most phonologists and phoneticians, a different – less technical – approach is preferable as the first step of this teaching tip. Indeed, the demystification of vowel nasality and students’ awareness of its existence in English can simply begin with an exercise that focuses on the vibration caused by the air passing through the nose during the production of a partially nasalized English vowel. Students are invited to place their thumb and index around their nose and repeatedly pronounce the pairs of English words below, the first one containing an oral vowel, and the second one a partially nasalized one. Alternating between lack of vibration and presence thereof will help students realize that English does have nasalized vowels, so that the notion that vowel nasality is a foreign concept can begin to fade from the students’ mind.

Exercise 1: Place your thumb and index around your nose and pronounce the following pairs of words. Feel the vibration as you pronounce the second word.

‘bad’ – ‘band’
 ‘log’ – ‘long’
 ‘thick’ – ‘think’

The concept of vowel nasality should be regularly re-visited for reinforcement through practice of additional word pairs:

‘cap’ - ‘camp’ / ‘cat’ - ‘can’t’ / ‘dap’ - ‘damp’ / ‘lad’ - ‘land’ / ‘lap’ - ‘lamp’ / ‘tack’ - ‘tank’
 ‘bod’ - ‘bond’ / ‘chop’ - ‘chomp’ / ‘cop’ - ‘comp’ / ‘pod’ - ‘pond’
 ‘chip’ - ‘chimp’ / ‘pig’ - ‘ping’ / ‘sick’ - ‘sink’
 ‘bet’ - ‘bent’ / ‘fed’ - ‘fend’ / ‘led’ - ‘lend’ / ‘let’ - ‘lent’ / ‘med’ - ‘mend’
 ‘truck’ - ‘trunk’

Exercise 2 – French and English Nasal Vowels

The second step of this teaching tip consists of comparing French nasal vowels and partially nasalized English vowels, both in terms of perception and articulation. This step, designed to further ease students into the concept of vowel nasality, will allow them to relate unfamiliar sounds (i.e., French nasal vowels) to familiar ones (i.e., English partially nasalized vowels). Each of the three French nasal vowels is associated to a partially nasalized English vowel through French–English word pairs. These words were selected for their imperfect but sufficiently close visual and acoustic resemblance.

A. /ɛ̃/: French *fin* and English ‘fan’

The sound /ɛ̃/ is presented with the French-English word pair *fin* (‘end’) and ‘fan.’¹² Students are informed that the vowels in *fin* and ‘fan’ are very close in terms of perception and articulation, although for the beginning of [æ̃] in ‘fan,’ the back of the tongue may be slightly higher and more forward than it is for [ɛ̃] in *fin*. However, this difference seems to be too imperceptible to significantly affect how useful it is for students to liken the vowel in *fin* to the vowel in ‘fan.’ Students are invited to first pronounce the word ‘fan’ without the /n/ and the French word *fin* repeatedly, paying attention to how closely both vowels sound and how similar the configuration of their articulators is as they pronounce both vowels.

Exercise 2A: First pronounce the English word ‘fan’ without the final ‘n’ sound and then, the French word *fin*. Repeat the word pair several times. Note how similar both vowels sound, and try to visualize the shape of your tongue (its back is high and its tip is low) as you pronounce both vowels.

B. /ɑ̃/: French *langue* and English ‘long’

For a reference to the sound /ɑ̃/, English ‘long’¹³ is likened to French *langue* (‘tongue’). Again, the back of the tongue at the beginning of the articulation of the partially nasalized vowel in ‘long’ starts in a slightly higher position than it does for the /ɑ̃/ in *langue*. However, this difference does not significantly affect the usefulness for students of likening the two vowels and creating a reference to anchor unfamiliar French [ɑ̃]. As in A., students pronounce ‘long’ and *langue* repeatedly, focusing on the similarity between the two vowels in terms of perception and articulation.

Exercise 2B: Pronounce the English word ‘long’ and the French word *langue* repeatedly. Note how similar both vowels sound, and try to visualize the position of your tongue (its back is lower than for *fin*) as you pronounce both vowels.

C. /ɔ̃/: French *on* and ‘honhonhon!’

Finally, the sound /ɔ̃/ as in *on* (indefinite subject pronoun, singular) is referred to the repeated sound used to parody French laughter ‘honhonhon,’ when articulated like French /ɔ̃/, i.e., with a

¹² The pronunciation of the word ‘fan’ can be heard on the MacMillan Dictionary website at <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/pronunciation/american/fan>.

¹³ To hear the pronunciation of the word ‘long’ as referred above, go to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/dictionary/long_1, and click the button to the right of the phonetic transcription [lɑːŋ].

very closed mouth and the back of the tongue raised high. Although this comparison is likely to reinforce stereotypes, it has the virtue of including an expression that is familiar and amusing, both qualities that are likely to ease students' processing of this French nasal vowel.

Exercise 2C: Pronounce the French word *on* as you pronounce the vowel in the stereotypical French laugh 'honhonhon.' Make sure your mouth is very closed and the back of your tongue so high that it almost touches the roof of your throat.

CONCLUSION

Some learners, especially those who do not have a natural ear for sounds, need strategies to help them process the unfamiliar sounds of a foreign language before they can start practicing their perception and production of those sounds. This teaching tip provides such learners with strategies for tackling French nasal vowels, by familiarizing them with the concept of vowel nasality and by guiding them to use familiar sounds from their native language as referents for unfamiliar foreign sounds until the latter have become familiar. The central idea beyond this approach may not be readily applicable to all of the unfamiliar sounds of a second language, but for those sounds where some semblance of an equivalent exists, this strategy will be effective for L2 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. She serves as French section head, coordinator of beginning and intermediate French courses, and liaison between Western Michigan University and Kalamazoo high schools. 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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