de Moras, N. (2016). Learning L2 pronunciation while studying vocabulary. In J. Levis, H. Le., I. Lucic, E. Simpson, & S. Vo (Eds). *Proceedings of the 7th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, ISSN 2380-9566, Dallas, TX, October 2015 (pp. 211-219). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

TEACHING TIP

LEARNING L2 PRONUNCIATION WHILE STUDYING VOCABULARY

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching practices can be more efficient if they are similar to the way the brain functions. Findings in L1 acquisition research give us important insights into successful L2 language learning, as in the normal course of events, children succeed in being proficient in their L1. According to the Usage Based Model (Ellis, 2002), frequency of items is a major contributor to the acquisition of items and structures. Once speakers have acquired a sufficient number of items with all their lexical and phonetic properties, word sequences, chunks and formulaic language in their database, they can naturally create abstract categories which enable them to apply a rule systematically, and produce novel sequences which they had never heard before.

Using this model, de Moras (2011) compared the different types of instructions (repetitions, explanations and feedback) for L2 learners; the group with repetitions had greater progress than the other groups. This study also showed that even a short period of training (30 minutes) can have a statistically significant impact on the student's learning of pronunciation.

In order to successfully register information in an internal database and be capable of using this database proficiently, learners need to have heard and practiced numerous sequences, so that the data base is complete enough for the brain to extract and extrapolate the information. Therefore, an efficient way to teach pronunciation is to concentrate on one structure, give minimal explanations with maximal practice (numerous items and sequences) until learners can use the new structure automatically.

The most frequent *obligatory liaison* is between a determiner and a noun starting with a vowel. The instructor can teach some nouns, and choose ones which are similar to the students' L1: *un_ogre, des_ogres; un_aigle, des_aigles*. This way, the student learns new words in different contexts (*l'aigle, un aigle, les aigles, des aigles*), and also intuitively extrapolates that each time *un* is followed by a vowel, an /n/ affix is attached to the initial consonant of word2, and each time *les* and *des* are followed by a vowel, a /z/ affix is attached to the initial consonant of word2. The student learns new words, affixes attached to the nouns in the singular and plural form, and the correct pronunciation, all at the same time. This is one aspect of teaching (repetition and automation) which Gatbonton & Segalowitz (2005) advocate with the ACCESS method, a Task-Based Language Teaching methodology.

For the first step of automation to be achieved, the learners need to hear word sequences (vocabulary) until they have an auditory memory of the sequences. Then, they need to practice these items and receive feedback, to counterbalance the potential influence, or interference of

their L1. Finally, after hearing and practicing a certain number of items, learners can apply a rule to novel items in communicative contexts.

If learners are asked to talk and practice a given structure without having heard it enough times, they will not have enough examples of the structure to construct an auditory memory of it, and will rely on other cues to fill in the gap, mainly their L1, which can cause transfer and eventually fossilization if the practice goes on without enough L2 input. Thus, practice without enough L2 input and repetition will not help them learn the second language accurately.

In order to learn a phonetic rule, one first needs to hear, practice and entrench in memory multiple items for each rule, along with their phonetic properties. One also needs to recognize that which constitutes a given structure, and to identify its components (Schmidt 1990, 2001); hence, there is a need to provide to the learner a brief and simple explanation on what to focus on during the lesson. It is important to limit the complexity of the sequence, and the rule to be learned, by eliminating as many other sources of difficulty as possible. I am going to illustrate these concepts by giving the example of French *liaisons*.

Background

French encourages open syllabification, and favours consonant-vowel contexts (Delattre, 1947) . Lambert-Drache (1997, pp. 12-13) states that in French there are 76 % open syllables, whereas in English there are 40 %. French also avoids hiatus (vowel-vowel contexts) which is called the "anti-hiatus constraint". This explains phenomena like elisions (*l'avion instead of le avion*,) and *liaisons (les (z)avions)*.

Liaison occurs when a latent consonant is pronounced and attached to the following word, if it begins with a vowel or a mute *h*.

Example: *les* (word1)_(z)*amis* (word2) [le.za.mi].

Francophones never pronounce an *obligatory liaison* consonant without attaching it to the following words. The cases of *unchained liaison* are very rare, only occur within an optional context, and are pronounced in this unusual manner mainly by people in the public sphere to produce a special effect (Encrevé, 1988). Either the liaison consonants are pronounced and linked to Word2 or they are not pronounced at all. In the case of obligatory liaisons, Majority Francophones (Majority Francophones are Francophones who live in a Francophone country or province such as Francophones living in France, Belgium, Quebec… as opposed to Minority Francophones who are Francophones who live in a non-Francophone environment such as in Ontario) typically produce over 95% of obligatory liaisons, the remaining 1-5% being caused mainly by hesitations (Ågren, 1973; Malécot, 1975).

L2 learners do not seem to acquire *liaisons* naturally. They tend to separate words and produce fewer *liaisons* than Francophones (Lauret, 2007, p. 59). Syllabic equality, syllabification, resyllabification of French, and *liaisons* are difficult to master for all L2 learners of French (Charliac & Motron, 1998, pp. 7-9), and are particularly challenging for Anglophones because of differences between the two phonetic systems.

When nonnative speakers of French pronounce differently from Francophones, they tend either not to pronounce the liaison consonant, or to pronounce it with word1, instead of pronouncing it with word2 (this is usually the most frequent error), or, to pronounce the liaison consonant improperly. There are complicated rules relative to obligatory, optional and forbidden liaisons, as well as exceptions which I will not discuss here.

Liaisons are important for several reasons. First, they often carry meaning. For example only the pronunciation of /z/ in *ils arrivent* /il.**z**a.ʁiv/ (they are arriving) distinguishes the plural from the singular /i.**la**.ʁiv/ (*he is arriving*). The pronunciation or non-pronunciation of a *liaison* can also distinguish between two homonyms: *les zéros* (*the zeros*) pronounced /le.**z**e.ʁo/ vs *les héros* (*the heroes*) pronounced /le.**é**.ʁo/.

Second, learners who do not pronounce phonemes or sequences correctly often do not recognize them when they are pronounced by native speakers (Sauders, 2007). Given that *liaisons* are present in virtually every sentence, they are essential for comprehension and comprehensibility.

Third, each mispronounced phonetic feature added to other errors may impede comprehensibility. Moreover, *liaison* errors may be caused by other initial errors or may cause errors to the neighboring phonemes or syllables. Isolated pronunciation errors often have repercussions to other items which are important for communication. For example, mispronouncing the nasal vowel of the indefinite masculine singular article *un* in *un effort* (*an effort*) does not necessarily hinder communication (this could still be problematic for comprehensibility, as the pronunciation of the /n/ makes it a feminine article instead of a masculine one). The pronunciation of the final *n*, pronounced as in English, can lead to stressing the wrong syllable in French (the first syllable of the Word2), having a pause inside a syntactic group, not producing the liaison, changing the intonation pattern and/or breaking the rhythm of the sentence. The combination of five mistakes triggered by one original mistake definitely is likely to affect comprehensibility. Now, if we add to this, the pronunciation of the mute *t* in *effort*, the five mistakes combined with this latter error almost guarantee, in my experience, that a native speaker will not understand these two words. This is why, in the end, everything becomes important, because each item influences the production of neighbouring ones, and adds to other (grammatical, lexical and phonetic) errors which hinder communication.

Teaching Tip: Teaching French *Liaisons*

Because *liaisons* partly depend on other features, they should be taught after basic intonation, stress, phonemes and link between graphemes and morphemes are introduced (ideally the first week of an introductory course). To teach *liaisons*, the instructor can begin by teaching the context consisting of the definite plural determiner + plural noun, because it is relatively easy to learn and is also very frequent.

Pronunciation can be integrated to the rest of the language lesson by teaching a feature which corresponds to the vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. For example, the preceding *liaison* context can be taught while teaching articles. The only thing then needed in the language lesson is a sufficiently large number of examples, in order to ensure that there is enough repetition.

While starting to teach obligatory *liaisons*, the rule is simplified. The singular French definite article is *l + apostrophe* when the noun starts with a vowel (*l'avocat – the avocado*). This explanation momentarily avoids the problematic question of the gender of French inanimate nouns (*le* or *la*). The corresponding plural definite article is *les* (*les avocats – the avocadoes or the lawyers*). For example, *les avocats* is pronounced **/le. za.vo.ka/**. The *s* of the plural article is attached to word2 and pronounced /z/ at the initial of the next word.

I tried to find words which are similar to English (*l'olive - the olive, l'aigle - the eagle*), or/and words which are short (*l'auto – the car*) to facilitate recognition and retention. Also, the most unfamiliar and difficult French phonemes (nasal vowels, /y/, /ʁ/ etc.) were avoided as much as possible, even though it is nearly impossible to avoid difficult French phonemes in cognates.

The examples were chosen according to their closeness to the L1, and according to the complexity of the concept expressed by the word. It is easier to find pictures which correspond to concrete words than to more abstract ones (*abomination, accusation, accumulation*), and it also seems easier to pronounce and remember those words which are relatively simple and short.

The words, all of which are nouns, are first presented in a list in the singular and the plural forms; then a translation, followed by a phonetic transcription. The elements on which the learners concentrate are in red and in bold in the phonetic transcription, in order to draw attention to the important feature. After reading about 10 words, along with their phonetic transcriptions, the learners quickly see the rule. Another advantage of doing this exercise is that of the opportunity to show learners that they already know more words than they thought they knew.

Something else to take into consideration is the fact that learners need numerous repetitions; on the other hand it is also true that the activities should be interesting, intriguing and/or fun, without giving the impression that they are mechanical. Thus the instructor will strive to present the same information in different ways and from different points of view, so that the learners do not perceive activities as boring, or overly repetitive.

An 8-Minute Lesson

The following presents what can be done during an 8 minute lesson (and what, in fact, was done in the conference workshop). After welcoming the participants and briefly introducing myself, the workshop and the participants, I gave everyone a list of 9 words with their phonetic transcriptions and translations. The participants read the list in about 1 minute.

What follows is a list of French words with translations and phonetic transcriptions. The participants' reading of the elements enables them to familiarize themselves with the words, to see them a first time, and then to start thinking about the red letters.

avocat	l'avocat	les avocats
/a.vo.ka/	/**l**a.vo.ka/	/le.**z**a.vo.ka/
avocado	the avocado	the avocados
aigle	l'aigle	les aigles
/ɛgl/	/**l**ɛgl/	/le. **z**ɛgl/

eagle	the eagle	the eagles
auto /o.to/ car	l'auto /**l**o.to/ the car	les autos /le. **z**o.to/ the cars
avion /a.vjɔ̃/ plane	l'avion /**l**a.vjɔ̃/ the plane	les avions /le. **z**a.vjɔ̃/ the planes
île /il/ island	l'île /**l**il/ the island	les îles /le. **z**il/ the islands
olive /o.liv/ olive	l'olive /**l**o.liv/ the olive	les olives /le. **z**o.liv/ the olives
autruche /o.tʁyʃ/ ostrich	l'autruche /**l**o.tʁyʃ/ the ostrich	les autruches /le. **z**o.tʁyʃ/ the ostriches
oreille /o.ʁɛj/ ear	l'oreille /**l**o.ʁɛj/ the ear	les oreilles /le. **z**o.ʁɛj/ the ears
orange /o.ʁɑ̃ʒ/ orange	l'orange /**l**o.ʁɑ̃ʒ/ the orange	les oranges /le. **z**o.ʁɑ̃ʒ/ the oranges

Once this introduction was finished, I then explained in one minute what we were doing: working on linking, while at the same time learning vocabulary. I explained that, as seen in the phonetic transcription, the s of *le*s, is pronounced at the beginning of the second word. I gave several examples from the sheet: /le.za.vo.ka/, /le.zo.liv/. I pointed with my finger to the bold red letters, and exaggerated the /z/: /le.**zzzzzz**o.liv/. I emphasized the fact that the syllabification does not correspond to the written words, and made a gesture showing that the *s* goes with Word2.

Each of the word groups was printed on a separate transparency. The transparency was first placed on a page with two pictures. The written words with the phonetic transcription were placed next to the picture, as shown by the next examples.

aigle
/ɛgl/
eagle

l'aigle
/**l**ɛgl/
the eagle

les aigles
/le.**z**ɛgl/
the eagles

I showed the pictures with the written words, with their phonetic transcription and their English translations. I read slowly each word, or word sequence, exaggerating the syllabification*: aigle, l'aigle, les aigles*. Next, I asked the participants to chorally repeat the same words with me (after they had already read the list of words, and had heard the three sequences once; and right after each word was pronounced, they were asked to pronounce it a second time). Pronouncing the words in unison was intended to put at ease participants who may not have remembered some words, or who were shy or hesitant.

I then proceeded to show the same pictures without the transparency. I said the words again, but without any written aid, providing only the auditory stimuli. The participants were asked to repeat the words using only the auditory stimuli. The initial aid was provided to help visual learners, as well as to make sure that they fully understood the concept. It was also reassuring for beginners to have visual support. However, learners also have to habituate themselves not to rely on visual clues, like written words, or phonetic transcriptions. They need to learn to rely also on auditory stimuli, and to be able to listen and repeat without any other help, in order to form an auditory memory. Furthermore, written words can actually be detrimental to learning pronunciation, because L2 learners tend to filter the L2 written words through the grapho-phonemic system of their L1, which often causes interference. For this reason, it is preferable to limit the use of visual cues.

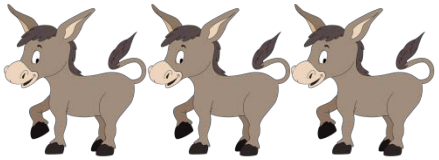
Repeating what the instructor has pronounced is the step taken after one has heard the same utterances several times. If learners cannot repeat right after the instructor, they will not be able to do more complicated tasks. During the group's repetition, the instructor pays attention to all participants' productions (while easier to do in a small group, this is still possible in a larger group).

Next comes the feedback stage. When the individuals in the group repeat, the instructor can notice problems, and make general comments for everyone, or just repeat one or two problematic phonemes. Once everyone was able to repeat together correctly, I asked for volunteers to start describing the pictures (with no visual cue). Right after the volunteers' participation, the other participants were asked to describe what they saw on the pictures. By this time each person had heard the words at least 7 times, and everybody was able to say the words, especially if they were cognates (*olive, aigle*...). If someone was hesitating about how to pronounce a word, participants from the group or the instructor was able to help. In a classroom situation, with more time, the students would be asked to work in pairs instead.

Once students remembered an individual word with its article, and the right linking (*liaison*), they moved on to the next word. If the pictures are funny or intriguing it makes the task more interesting. Even though all of this may seem repetitive, the students do not perceive it as such, in my experience, because they need the repetition to remember the words, and there are different words, and different sequences. Also, as was the case in the workshop, the words are seen in different contexts: for example, first in the workshop, they were read silently, then they were heard and seen with a picture, accompanied by a phonetic transcription and a translation; next, they were heard again with no visual cues, following which they were repeated in groups, and finally they were said individually. After repeating the same procedure for 7-10 words (depending on conversations, remarks, feedback and time spent), the participants were now ready to apply the rule to novel sequences.

They were shown new pictures, with new words. I said the isolated singular word and the participants could see the following pictures and visual cues.

âne	**???**	**???**
/an/	**???**	**???**
donkey	**the donkey**	**the donkeys**



They had to come up with the right article and, most importantly, with the right pronunciation of the liaison: /le zan/; and that is exactly what the participants successfully did. They did the same with *ami* (friend) and *ogre* (*ogre*).They could apply the rule and pronounce the obligatory liaison with the plural determiner + plural noun context.

During this teaching tips workshop, some participants who did not know any French, and others who knew very little French, were presented with word sequences several times. After a total of 8 minutes of practice, the participants learned the singular definite article (*l'*), the plural article (*les*), 7-8 words, and were able to pronounce correctly the obligatory *liaison* after repeating and, most importantly, with novel sequences, using the correct singular and plural articles when being provided with isolated words.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the workshop, I asked the participants their thoughts on the level of difficulty of what they had practiced (from very difficult, to very easy). All participants said that what was taught was easy to learn, and one of them said that she could not believe the difference between the time when she had learned some rudimentary French in school and the learning of French in the workshop. Learners find the learning process easier if they are provided with the necessary tools: sufficient input, repetition, and practice of a limited amount of words, and one structure at a time.

The workshop participants are knowledgeable adults who have a strong phonetic background and who understand and quickly learn phonetic rules. This is not necessarily the case with average learners. Teaching less knowledgeable, dedicated students will certainly take a bit longer than it took the workshop participants. Yet, if we consider that all of the participants mastered the elements studied after 7-8 minutes, and thought that the presentation was easy to understand and remember, we can conclude that teaching pronunciation can be effective, even after a short time of instruction, as long as it is done in an efficient way.

Also, pronunciation can frequently be learned quickly by learners by virtue of the fact that it is new to them, and the novelty is attractive. Regrettably, when an incorrect pronunciation learned and practiced for over 10 years becomes fossilized, it may take much longer to unlearn and undo the wrong pronunciation, in order to learn - really learn - the right one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nadine de Moras taught ESL to Francophones in France for 10 years before teaching French to Anglophones in Canadian universities for the past 20 years. She has been teaching advanced French language and Applied Linguistics at Brescia University College (Western University affiliate) for 10 years. Her research interests include L2 pronunciation acquisition and teaching, as well as all areas of French teaching, pedagogy and material design.

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