

Can a year abroad really improve our students' French pronunciation at the advanced level?

1. Introduction

While everyone agrees that students returning from a year abroad are more fluent in the language of study, little is known about the exact nature of this improvement. Indeed, in her overview of research in this area, Barbara Freed notes that "no study has yet described a range of linguistic variables (phonologic, syntactic and/or semantic), sociolinguistic and discourse features, that may be influenced as a result of a study abroad experience" (1995:16).

In an attempt to partially fill this gap for the French language, we have undertaken a large-scale quantitative and qualitative study of the progress made in second-language proficiency over one academic year by university students specializing in French. Two subgroups have been identified: an experimental group of students spending their third year in France, and a control group of those who opt to stay in Canada instead. The students' progress in French is assessed on the basis of a 52-minute test which is administered twice, once towards the beginning of the academic year (pre-test) and once towards the end (post-test). The test, which was developed at the Universities of Guelph and Ottawa, focuses on oral skills and comprises a self-assessment questionnaire, a dictation, a cloze component, a reading passage and a speaking sub-test. Now in its second year, the study has so far involved 71 students from 7 Southern Ontario universities. The two main questions addressed in this research are the following:

- * What are the actual linguistic benefits of studying abroad: improved accent, accuracy, idiomatic speech, fluency, syntactic complexity, oral expression, listening comprehension? Better discourse strategies, broader sociolinguistic variety?

- * How do students who have been abroad compare to those whose instruction is limited to the formal second-language classroom in terms of French-language proficiency? Broadly speaking, this study falls under the wider area of second-language acquisition and should help us evaluate the validity of the study-abroad formula, by comparison with the more familiar and less onerous models of «immersion» and «core», regardless of the language being taught.

The research reported on in this paper is limited to the phonetic aspect of the students' production and is based on a reading of two authentic French documents totaling 441 words¹. Read twice (pre-test and post-test) by 71 students, these texts amount to a corpus of 62 622 words, which is sufficient to observe pronunciation patterns. We have analyzed the following French phonetic or phonological features, which often present problems for our students:

- * Phonetic: /R/, aspiration of voiceless stops

- * Phonological: nasals, /y/ and /i/, /h/, /l/, palatalization, and compulsory "liaison".

An overview of pronunciation difficulties encountered in 3rd-year university French classes will be given first, before we examine the relative progress made by the experimental and control groups.

¹Results from the analysis of the semi-directed speaking test are not available at the time of writing. However, they will be included in my spoken presentation in Santiago next January.

2.Results and interpretation

2.1. Phonetic analysis

Only 5 out of 71 subjects were found to have any difficulty with /R/, which they often realized

[], and 13 showed various degrees (usually slight) of aspiration in their pronunciation of initial voiceless stops. It is worth noting that those who anglicize /R/ aspirate initial /p/, /t/ and /k/ as well. Therefore, it is clear that, apart from a small number of students who are still experiencing interference from English, the vast majority of 3rd-year university students have no difficulty with the pronunciation of these phonemes. Moreover, for those who do, aspiration and faulty /R/ never affect meaning and therefore do not constitute a real concern.

2.2 Phonological analysis

* Nasals were found to present no problem at all for our advanced students. This is in sharp contrast with earlier stages of French-language acquisition, where they are known to be difficult..

* /y/ was realized as [œ] 30 times (notably in "hurle" and "culture") and [u] 15 times, for a total of 45 deviant pronunciations out of 3692 occurrences of /y/ in the corpus (1.2%).

* / /, heavily featured in our second text, was pronounced [u], [w] or [y] 43 times out of 1420 occurrences (3%), but only in difficult words like "druide", "majestueux" or "immuable". Common words like "lui", "aujourd'hui" and "construit" were always pronounced correctly.

* /h/, as we know, has long ago disappeared from standard French. It is occasionally revived by a few students excessively influenced by English (82 times out of 994 occurrences, i.e. 8.2%). The four words which yield the largest number of epenthetic [h] ("compréhensive", "surhumaine", "hurle", "le héros") are all English cognates. It would seem that, upon encountering these familiar words, certain students have a first-language reaction which is detrimental to the quality of their French pronunciation. It will be interesting to see, in future research, if the same can be said of their spontaneous spoken production, which is not influenced by spelling.

* / / was strongly featured in our text on wine and led to faulty realizations (/n/) in 113 cases out of 568 occurrences (19.9%), especially in "témoignage", "vigne", "vignoble" and "vigneron". Luckily, / / is rather rare in speech and the substitution of /n/ has little impact on comprehension, which suggests that this fairly high level of error is not as detrimental as it seems.

* The palatalization of /s/ into [] and of /t/ into [] was studied in the pronunciation of several words in "-tion" and "-ture". Out of 710 occurrences of these variables, 74 (10.4%) were palatalized. Once again, it should be noted that most of the words under study had identical English equivalents ("culture", "potion", etc.) where /t/ is palatalized.

* French liaison occurs when the final written consonant of a word is pronounced before the initial vowel of the following word, under certain conditions. Its rules are complex, but it can be said that "compulsory" liaison is usually found between a short grammatical word and the head of a phrase ("les_amis"). It is an extremely frequent phenomenon in French and errors can lead to confusions of number ("leur ami" vs "leurs_amis"; "il arrive" vs "ils_arrivent") and to occasional howlers, as in the Canadian national anthem ("ton front_est ceint" = "your brow, your breasts..."). 26 such compulsory liaisons were identified in our texts, using a combination of the classifications proposed by Delattre (1951), Ågren (1973) and Malécot (1975). Of the 3692 occurrences of compulsory liaisons thus defined, 799 (21.6%) were not realized or featured an inappropriate consonant. If we add to this number the 44 "forbidden" liaisons which were nevertheless realized by our students, we find that liaison alone accounts

for 24.3% of all the pronunciation errors made in the reading test. This should be cause for concern for university FSL instructors.

3. Year abroad vs year at home

Apart from providing an overview of pronunciation difficulties still found among advanced students in French (see 2. above), this research was undertaken to compare the progress made in French-language skills by students who spend a year in France (the experimental group, which currently includes 32 subjects) and those who choose to study at home during the same period (the control group, 39 subjects). For each student, phonetic progress was defined as the percentage of pre-test phonological errors eliminated in the post-test. For instance, someone making 20 errors in the pre-test and 18 in the post-test would be deemed to have progressed by 10%.

Average progress for all subjects tested was 20.1%, which confirms, as expected, that substantial exposure to French for a full academic year leads to phonetic progress. There is also an expected statistically significant discrepancy (as per Student t calculations) between the experimental group (24.9%) and the control group (16.1%), which reflects the advantage of studying in the context of full linguistic immersion.

Both groups were also compared in their handling of liaison, the single greatest source of errors for our students, as mentioned above. Interestingly enough, the overall rate of progress in this area (14.1%) is much lower than for all other pronunciation errors (23.8%), and no significant difference emerges between the two groups (14.5% vs 13.9%). One possible explanation for this finding would be that liaison essentially escapes the students' consciousness because it was never taught, unlike the question of interference from English, for instance, and the numerous correct liaisons heard during the year abroad are not really noted, for lack of a frame of reference. But this is only a hypothesis which will have to be explored further during the analysis of our spontaneous speech corpus.

4. Conclusion

The above data, based on a substantial corpus of read speech, reveals that our advanced students

- most of them anglophones learning French - have little difficulty with the pronunciation obstacles traditionally associated with that language: nasals are no problem at all, /R/ is generally well pronounced, /y/ and // yield less than 3% of errors and the more substantial rate of error for // is mitigated by the fact that this phoneme occurs rarely in French. The real problems are found first in the handling of liaison, which seems to be responsible for a lot of student errors in this corpus. Because this is a complex phenomenon, it is often neglected by French instructors who hope that it will be learned through sheer practice. Yet it is quite feasible to alert students to its main tendencies and to accelerate progress accordingly (see Thomas, in press).

An overview of the above findings points to a second area of difficulty for our students, namely English cognates. Rates of error for /y/, /h/ and palatalization may be low, but they are mostly caused by the interference of English in the reading of French-English cognates. Because this problem transcends individual phonetic categories, it should be a priority for our pronunciation classes. Perhaps teachers could begin with a lesson devoted to cognates, based upon the fact that, although they may look alike, they don't sound the same.

Finally, our analysis of the students' reading also suggests that a year abroad does have a favorable impact on their French pronunciation, except for liaison. But research on the students' spontaneous speech production must now be undertaken to verify this still tentative finding.

Bibliographical references

- ÅGREN, J. 1973. *Etude sur quelques liaisons facultatives dans le français de conversation radiophonique*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- DELATTRE, P. 1951. *Principes de phonétique française à l'usage des étudiants anglo-américains*. Middlebury: College Press.
- FREED, B. (ed.) 1995. *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- MALÉCOT, A. 1975. "French liaison as a function of grammatical, phonetic and paralinguistic variables." *Phonetica*, 32, 161-179.
- THOMAS, A. in press. "La liaison et son enchaînement: des modèles orthoépiques à la réalité linguistique." *Canadian Modern Language Review*.