



Teaching an Undergraduate Course on French Phonetics in the Era of Globalization : Complex Concerns

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Abstract

This paper takes up some of the challenges involved in teaching an undergraduate course on French phonetics in the era of globalization. The challenges or concerns that are mentioned here fall into two categories—those external to the classroom, such as the role and place of phonetics in the French curriculum today; and those internal to the classroom, pertaining more directly to what is being taught and learned in the phonetics course.

The paper also looks at student views and opinions on the French phonetics course. These were taken from three sources: (1) comments written by the students on their ‘first-day-of-courses’ survey forms, (2) their end-of-term phonetics projects and (3) their anonymously written student course evaluations, filed at the end of the semester. Overwhelmingly, students viewed the phonetics course as a tool to help them improve their own pronunciation and accent; and expressed little interest in learning general phonetic principles.

Key words: Teaching French phonetics, applied phonetics.

1. Introduction

Globalization (understood here in its most recent sense, i.e., the widening, intensifying and accelerating of the interconnectedness of the world) has brought about a greater need for communication amongst peoples who do not speak the same language. In consequence, the need for a common language has led to the emergence of English as a global language. Now the most widely used language in the world (both functionally and geographically), English has become a universal lingua franca.

The effect of the global dominance of English on the study of other languages has not been positive. In the US, for example, where foreign language study has never occupied a

privileged place amongst academic disciplines, the number of students who now study any foreign language is appalling low. Students in the US are likely to ask, “Why bother studying a foreign language when everyone in the world speaks English!” Students in other parts of the world (whose L1 is not English) are likely to choose English of their own volition, if given the chance; or they may simply be required to study English (often at the expense of some other language). In many instances students who have achieved proficiency in English will be required (or given the option) to take a large number of their university subjects in English (considered by some institutions as a means of enhancing the quality of the students’ education and making them more competitive—more ‘global’).

2. External concerns

While phonetic instruction has been a part of the French curriculum at universities in the US for nearly as long as French has been taught as an academic discipline – that is to say, for well over a century—the steady decline in the number of Americans studying French at most American universities in this era of globalization gives cause for concern about the place and role of phonetics in the curriculum. When there are fewer students interested in studying French, for example, there are likely to be fewer French courses taught; and fewer French courses could mean that the phonetics course will be offered infrequently; or that it will be required to merge with some other French or francophone course; or will simply disappear altogether from the curriculum.

In parallel with this phenomenon, new disciplines and sub-disciplines (including degree programs in film studies, women studies, sexuality and gender studies, francophone studies, courses on immigration, on global studies, etc.), not widely available in the pre-global era, are now widespread and exceedingly

popular amongst American students (even those who select French as their major). It is thus not impossible to imagine a case where students interested in French (maybe even French phonetics), will actually not enroll in a French course but will choose instead some new area of inquiry. A comment made by a French major a few years ago is a case in point: the student informed me (in reference to her French major) that she was “tired of taking courses about France;” she wanted to “study something new!”

Higher education in the US today is “student-driven”, that is to say, the body of information to be taught no longer comes down to the students from ‘on high’; rather the students are the paying clientele and they get to choose. Their demands and desires are taken seriously by the university. Similarly, classrooms are student-driven: whereas in the pre-global era the instructor might have stood behind a lectern and delivered a body of knowledge which students would have copied and then learned, classrooms are now places where students are encouraged to work together in small groups.

Paradoxically as it may seem, many more Americans are now able to go abroad to study than was the case in the pre-global era: year-long programs, semester programs, summer programs, J-term programs and May-term programs abound. The convenience of studying abroad and the very positive experience for the student-participants may of course have some bearing on enrollment numbers in the applied French phonetics course—either because the students who go to France decide to study French phonetics there (thus reducing the number of potential registrants in the course at the home institution), or because they presume (usually erroneously) that a semester in France is enough time to devote to pronunciation training and see no need for further study of phonetics when they return. On the other hand, there is the real possibility that upon their return to the home university, the students will decide to enroll in a French phonetics course (determined to learn, for instance, why their pronunciation is still unsatisfactory, even after an extended stay in France). And should this be the case, i.e., that they do enroll in the course, they might distinguish themselves from their classmates by displaying more fluency or fluidity in their

spoken French, but not necessarily demonstrate more accurate pronunciation or more knowledge of phonetic principles than their classmates. In either scenario, the phonetics instructor will be faced with the challenge of how best to teach the phonetics course so that all enrolled students will be adequately served.

The internationalization of the American student body (resulting from the efforts made by institutions to broaden their reach across the globe and take in more students) may present a challenge to those who design and teach the French phonetics course, as well, in the sense that students who enroll in the phonetics course today are likely to be more linguistically diverse than in years past.

A case in point might be the exchange students from abroad (for whom English is not a first language) who began the study of French in their home country and wish to keep up their French skills while studying in the US, by enrolling in a French course [taught in French]. Another example might be students who grew up outside the US, perhaps were youngsters in a francophone country where they were exposed to some variety of French, before immigrating to the US. Now in the US they decide to pursue a course of study in French. The reasons these students choose to enroll in a French phonetics course may be as varied as their backgrounds (and may range from not really reading the French phonetics course description, to thinking that the course will perhaps be easy for them; to expecting the course to improve their French accent). Hence the international students with non-English L1 are likely to sit in the French phonetics classroom (where the instruction is given in French) alongside US-born English-speaking students whose French may be strictly academic (learned in school) and who may be in the course because of their serious interest in French and linguistic studies.

While the teaching of articulatory phonetic principles is unlikely to pose much of a problem for the instructor in this context, the practical or applied aspects of the course, whether ear-training exercises, pronunciation training and correction, or transcription exercises, may indeed require some additional thinking or planning in order both to accommodate the diverse linguistic (L2) backgrounds of the

enrolled students and their very different levels of competence in the French language.

An interesting example to consider is the one of the international student who speaks colloquially, as a second or third language, a variety of French in which the open-mid back vowel [ɔ] never occurs in unaccented open syllables (as it does in standard French). Thus words like *apologie* [a-pɔ-lɔ-zi] ('apology'), *monotone* [mɔ-nɔ-tɔn] ('monotonous'), *offense* [ɔ-fã:s] ('offense'), etc., when pronounced in an ear-training exercise or transcription exercise by a speaker who has the expected [ɔ] in this context (in accordance with the general rule for [o]/[ɔ] in the standard variety of French), will likely be perceived by the student in question as [o], the close-mid back vowel (found in words like *faucon* [fo-kɔ̃] ('falcon'), *rose* [ʁoz] ('rose'), etc. Hence this student will hear [mo-no-tɔn], [o-fã:s], [a-po-lo-zi], etc., with an [o] instead of [ɔ]. Similarly, American students who have never been taught the correct articulation of French nasal vowels will likely perceive a nasal consonant [m] in the pronunciation of words written with an 'm', as in *lampe* [lã:p], ('lamp'), *ample* [ã:pl] ('ample'), *tomber* [tɔ̃-be] ('to fall down'), etc., (where no 'm' is pronounced) until the students have been trained to hear the difference between the completely nasalized French vowel ([ã] or [ɔ̃], in the examples just mentioned), and the partially nasalized English vowel (lightly or moderately nasalized by the natural process of assimilation to the adjacent nasal consonant [m]), as in English [læmp], etc.

3. Internal concerns

In this era of globalization, as mentioned above, students are quite likely to have been exposed to many French varieties and accents before enrolling in a phonetics course. Specialists who design and teach the applied French phonetics course will need to keep this factor in mind when deciding whether to present (and expect students to learn) the pronunciation of the standard French variety (also called *le français de référence*), that is to say, the pronunciation used as a model for most French dictionaries, grammar books, phonetics textbooks, online pronunciation guides, and the like; or whether to

use their own personal variety of French (even if their own variety diverges considerably from the standard model), or some other variety. The decision matters, especially in the phonetics course. When practical exercises are accompanied by an audio track, one expects the audio recordings to reflect the variety of French presented in the textbook and taught by the instructor. If the audio track is recorded by native speakers whose variety of French does not correspond to the one taught in the classroom (and used as a model in the textbook descriptions), and if students are asked to listen closely to the recorded exercises and imitate the model, or transcribe from the audio recordings, students may be confused or unsure of what they are actually supposed to be learning. Audio recordings intended expressly for listening comprehension (e.g. news reports) obviously are not at issue here; but with phonetic training, students need to hear, for instance, the dorso-uvular [ʁ] (and not some other variant), or the nasal vowel [ɛ̃] (and not [ã]) if these are the sounds they are studying and are to imitate, transcribe, or describe.

The question of which variety of French to choose as a classroom model is rightly a matter of concern, and while discussions on the matter range from the 'politically correct' to the "*fais ce que voudras*" ('do whatever you want'), most phonetics instructors, particularly those with lots of experience teaching French phonetics, are likely to follow the standard variety of pronunciation, with or without minor adjustments (see introductory comments in the online French phonology project *PFC* [1] and the online French dictionary *TLF* [2]).

The oversimplification (and omission) of phonetic descriptions in phonetics textbooks and in online programs constitutes another internal concern worth mentioning. Authors of applied French phonetics manuals and textbooks are notorious for oversimplifying the materials they include, possibly because they believe that anything technical will not appeal to the instructors and students buying the books, possibly because they are following current pedagogical norms. One need only consider the typical treatment of the high front rounded French vowel [y], as in *cure* [ky:ʁ] ('cure'), and the high back rounded vowel [u], as in *cours*

[ku:ʁ] ('course'), to understand the point. Phonetic textbook writers seem to be oblivious to the actual pronunciation of the English back vowel [u], by the majority of Americans today: the vowel has a more fronted articulation than its French counterpart. This movement of /u/-fronting in American English appears to have accelerated with the era of globalization. In my own teaching experience I can remember when students pronounced the /u/ in the English word 'pool' and the /u/ of the French word *poule* ('hen') with more similar tongue positions. Today, when students pronounce the /u/ of 'poule' [pul], it is hard to determine if they are mispronouncing the back vowel /u/ or if they are actually attempting to pronounce the French word 'pull' [pyl] ('sweater') and are mispronouncing the front vowel [y]: what one perceives is a vowel timbre that appears to be located somewhere between the French [u] and [y]. Thus it can be very difficult for the hearer to know which vowel the student is actually attempting to articulate. Most phonetics textbooks (published in the US and in France) still seem to think that it is the vowel [y] that needs all of the attention in their descriptive comments. Yet this is not the case (for American learners of French). The accurate pronunciation of the French back vowel [u] by American students presents difficulties and merits a lot more attention.

Because the students think of the French /u/ and their L1 /u/ as being basically the same (and many of them will add the front /y/ to this group of phonetic misperceptions), when they speak French, they instinctively emit their English version of the phoneme. Students are not aware of this phenomenon until the phonetics instructor calls it to their attention. While the students, in time, will master the correct pronunciation of the front rounded [y]—the new vowel with no equivalent in English—many of them never master completely the French [u], with a similar English phone. Flege [3] as well as others have discussed this phenomenon and offer interesting experimental data.

Textbook writers (whether native speakers of French or native speakers of English with L2 French) seem to ignore the research, or not know how to deal with it in their manuals. To say, for example, that the F2 formant is higher (hence

more frontward) for English /u/ than for the corresponding French /u/ will perhaps not be very helpful to many pronunciation instructors. However images of Americans articulating the sound, alongside images of French speakers articulating the French /u/ will be a good place to start. The current realization of English /u/ for every American-born student whom I now teach is with a tongue position much more fronted than was the case of students whom I taught in the pre-global era. American students are in the habit of fronting their tongue, unwittingly. No phonetic textbook actually explains the fronting phenomenon to the learners, as far as I have been able to determine. Students in the phonetics course whose L1 is not English do not have this problem. Perhaps it is for this reason that textbooks published in France (with a different audience in mind) do not devote attention to this particularity.

4. Student concerns

Because I teach at an institution where the undergraduate enrollment numbers in French are still quite robust, especially in comparison to those of many other US institutions of higher learning (even if considerably smaller than in the pre-global era), and where the French phonetics course still attracts students, I thought it would be useful and instructive in this paper to look at the phonetics course from the perspective of the student.

In the fall of 2015, I carried out a simple experiment involving the participation of thirty-five students, enrolled in two sections of a semester-long French phonetics course. Three research questions were formulated: (1) how do students in the phonetics course perceive their own needs with regards to speaking French, or putting it differently, what are their main concerns; (2) how well does the French phonetics course that I teach regularly meet their expectations or needs; and (3) do their candid opinions of the phonetic instruction they receive suggest any new or potentially useful ideas or paths to consider for course improvement and/or performance enhancement?

The French phonetics course, it should be noted, is an elective, not a requirement for the students, and while it may count for major credit

in French, Linguistics and Cognitive Sciences, students are not obliged to take it; they may very well select some competing course. Also, the students enrolled in the course were themselves from varied backgrounds; had different majors (ten different ones were represented, along with French, Linguistics and Cognitive Sciences); and had chosen to take the phonetics course for many different reasons.

To obtain answers to the above research questions I studied data obtained from three sources: the 'First-day-of-courses' survey form (filled out by the students at the very beginning of the semester); the second part of their final course project (in which they were asked to assess the course materials); and the French Departmental Course Evaluation Forms (filled out anonymously by the enrolled students at the end of the semester and which may not be seen by the instructor until the final grades are turned in to the registrar).

Results for the question, "why are you taking a course in French phonetics?" show that the majority of the participants (67%) were in the phonetics course because they wanted to "improve their French pronunciation" or their "accent in French." The remaining reasons given varied from "I love languages", to "I am studying abroad next year". Some respondents gave several reasons (e.g., "to improve my pronunciation"; "I love French"; "I am more interested in the linguistic side of French pronunciation"; and "I really need to work on pronunciation"); others gave only one. In sum, it is fairly easy to see that students joined the phonetics course primarily for practical (applied) reasons – they wanted to improve their pronunciation, their accent, and enhance their ability to speak well. Not surprisingly, these are also the reasons their former language instructors encourage them to take the phonetics course in the first place (the phonetics course is thus viewed by some as a remedial clinic, where students with pronunciation problems are sent to be cured!)

The question about students' concerns and their perceived needs (which appeared on the 'First-day-of-courses' survey) was answered by only twenty-four of the thirty-five students. The others left the question blank, suggesting that they did not know what their concerns were,

could not verbalize them, or were not sure what the question was asking. The responses given were quite varied. However, three groupings could be discerned: the first concerns specific problems with pronunciations at the segmental level, the ones noted most often being the French "r"; "nasal sounds"; "specifically French sounds" (I presume the reference here is to the French front-rounded vowel series [œ], [ø], [y]); "confusion of English and French sounds" (no examples were given). As this question appeared on the 'First-day-of-classes' survey, the students are rather limited in their use of phonetic metalanguage and in their overall knowledge of phonetics.

The second grouping that I was able to discern includes students' concerns about prosodic phenomena, especially 'accent'. For example, they expressed their desire to improve their French accent; to get rid of their American accent; their dislike of the Americanness of their accent, or their feeling of embarrassment by their accent when they speak French. Speaking rate was also mentioned by a few, who commented on the "slow speed of their speaking."

In the third grouping I included students' concerns about oral comprehension and listening skills, and their expressed desire to improve these aspects of their linguistic performance in the French phonetics course. One student acknowledged that he has struggled with oral comprehension in French and listening problems for two years and that he hoped the phonetics course would help him with this problem.

My final remarks, before concluding, will focus on some of the students' suggestions for improving the course or their performance (i.e., the third research question mentioned above). The suggestions, written anonymously on their course evaluations at the end of the semester, appear to be addressed to me (all are direct quotes) : (1) "change the methodology"; (2) "provide more time for pronunciation ; "speak less about phonetics" (3) "maybe more speaking activities with normal conversations"; (4) "more reading phonetic writing"; (5) "present materials in a more multi-faceted way"; (6) "make phonetics a daily course"; (7) "writing phonetically was my favorite part"; (8) "new found interest in pronunciation"; (9) "too much

material to teach properly in one semester”; (10) “more practice through recordings”.

It would be interesting to know what the student had in mind when he said “change the methodology”. This is a path worthy of further exploration. Regrettably, however, the student offered neither a comment about what he disliked about the current methodology nor what he should like to see in its place. All students welcomed the IPA and found it useful. The comments from the students who suggested making phonetics a daily course, or extending it over two semesters offer food for thought; while the one suggesting “less phonetics” (in a course designed for this purpose!) is disheartening. Finally, one wonders if the student who wrote “more time for practice in class” is one of the ones who indicated that they practice little outside of class.

The phonetics course is one of a kind in the French curriculum. Taught in French, the course emphasizes basic concepts in articulatory phonetics and phonological theory, and offers students techniques for improving their own pronunciation. It is designed to serve students who are interested both in French and in Linguistics. A certain amount of phonetic information must be covered in the course. As there are not enough students to create a special ‘French phonetics for Linguistics and Cognitive Sciences students’, for example, the challenge in finding an appropriate way to reconcile both groups’ needs and interests remains.

5. Conclusions

French phonetics as an academic discipline has a long history. To the extent that students remain interested in learning French and instructors continue to believe that mastery of the spoken language is an essential part of language learning, there will be a need for some type of training in French phonetics.

Before students set foot in the phonetics course, they have no clue what phonetics is about. Despite the course title, “Phonetics: the sounds of French,” they believe the course to be some sort of conversation course which will benefit their oral proficiency in French [doesn’t matter that the course is titled ‘French phonetics’ and that the official description states explicitly

that it is not a conversation course!]. The idea of phonetics as a science, as something that one should spend time studying is to some students a foreign idea. Patricia Ashby [4] has recently reminded us of the vital importance of general phonetics and the sound foundation that it offers to applied fields (and this includes the application of general phonetic principles to the teaching and learning of French pronunciation). All of us would do well to get her message across to our students.

This paper has identified a number of concerns facing those who design and teach the undergraduate course on French phonetics in the era of globalization, such as: (1) the consequences resulting from a decline in the number of Americans studying French; (2) the effects of new areas of academic inquiry and the students’ penchant for studying new disciplines; (3) overgeneralized phonetic or phonological analyses found in textbooks; (4) the internationalization of the student-body; and (5) increased possibilities for Americans to participate in study abroad programs.

When students were asked to express their concerns about a French phonetics course in which they were enrolled, they admitted to being most interested in improving their pronunciation and accent, and in enhancing their ability to speak well. They thought the IPA was a useful tool and enjoyed transcribing phonetically. Most students showed little interest in articulatory phonetics and phonetic principles. It is perhaps for this latter reason (trepidation that scientific terminology will repel language learners) that some instructors camouflage the term ‘phonetics’ in their course descriptions and refrain from using specialized vocabulary.

6. References

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