Phonological Problem Areas in English for Native French Speakers

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Because every language has its own phonology, there is always some level of transfer into the L2. Some phonological errors in English will be predictable based on a learner’s L1. French L1s face specific phonological problems when they learn English due to the phonology of French. Various researchers have approached handling and discussing these issues in different ways. However, it is important that these issues are addressed with ELLs, because as Péchou and Stenton (2001) mention in their article, there is a certain threshold for pronunciation that must be obtained for them to be understood. Otherwise, if a learner has not surpassed this threshold, a good control of grammar and a large vocabulary will not keep them from having problems with oral communication. The issues that French L1s have with English pronunciation as well as some of the pedagogical techniques presented by the researchers are presented and discussed in this paper.

Lacharité and Prévost (1999) emphasize the influence of the native language in learning English phonology. In their study, they tested the theory that aspects of sounds (place and manner of articulation) not found in the L1 will be difficult for an ELL to acquire. For this study, they investigated /h, /θ/, and /ŋ/ three sounds in English that do not exist in French. Between these three sounds, they predict that native French speakers from Quebec will not have problems producing /ŋ/, because French has both velar sounds, /k/ and /g/, and nasal sounds, /m/, /n/, and /ɲ/, but it does not use combine place and manner of articulation into one phoneme. This capacity for producing /ŋ/ is apparent in French today, because while it is historically absent from the phonemic inventory, it has entered into French through borrowings, especially from English, such as the word *parking* pronounced /paʁkiŋ/. However, francophone ELLs will have a harder time learning to say /θ/. According to Lacharité and Prévost, this is due to the fact that French does not have any interdental consonants. However, it does use the coronal section of the
tongue as an articulator. It also uses the teeth as a place of articulation. In fact, ‘t’ and ‘d’ in French are dental stops, so they are pronounced /t/ and /d/. Because they use their teeth while speaking French, francophone ELLs are able to acquire /θ/ with some focus on phonology and pronunciation in a language classroom as seen in Lacharité and Prévost’s (1999) results. Finally, because French has no consonant with a glottal place of articulation, this trait is not necessary to segmental distinction in this language (Lacharité & Prévost, 1999). According to their hypothesis, sounds at this place of articulation, such as /h/, will be the hardest of the three to learn to pronounce and to distinguish while listening, because the glottal trait is not used by any of the phonemes in French.

Lacharité and Prévost’s (1999) results supported their hypothesis. In minimal pair listening activities, French Canadian ELLs had the most success distinguishing /ŋ/ from /n/ in pairs like pin and ping. They had a bit more difficulty hearing the difference between /θ/ from /t/ in pairs like ‘meth’ and ‘met,’ a sound correlation specific to French Canadians who consistently replace /θ/ with /t/, unlike European French speakers who replace it with /s/ (Lacharité and Prévost, 1999). Within this set of minimal pairs, students had the most difficulty hearing the difference between words when /θ/ or /t/ was followed by /r/ in words such as three or tree. The next most difficult was /θ/ or /t/ at the beginning of the word followed by a vowel, such as thin or tin. The easiest pairs of words for French Canadians to distinguish were words with /θ/ or /t/ in the coda, such as bath and bat (Lacharité and Prévost, 1999). It was much harder for their subjects to distinguish between minimal pairs starting with /h/ or a vowel, such as ‘hit’ and ‘it.’ In fact, there were statistically significantly fewer correct responses on the /h/-vowel pairs than on other sound pairs. These results supported their hypothesis that sounds whose place and manner of articulation occur in the language will be easier for students to be
able to acquire and distinguish than sounds whose place or manner of articulation is not used by any of the phonemes in the language. Using this knowledge, English language teachers in Francophone countries know to spend more time working on /h/ and /θ/ than /ŋ/.

Capliez (2011) also briefly touches on these three phonemes of English, but also discusses other pronunciation errors that francophone ELLs make in English. First of all, in his discussion of /h/, he mentions that while francophones do often delete the /h/, they also have a habit of inserting it somewhere else. They know they need /h/ in their utterance, but they pronounce it in the wrong place. To use his example, “‘I’m happy’ will be pronounced /hajm api/” (Capliez, 2011, p. 46). They also have problems with the tense-lax vowel distinction, specifically /æ/ - /a/, /i/ - /i/, and /ʊ/ - /u/ (Capliez, 2011). When French ELLs do not make the distinction between these sounds when they speak English, ‘cat’ and ‘cot’ can both become [kat], ‘fit’ and ‘feet’ can both become [fit], and ‘wood’ and ‘wooed’ can both become [wud], because the French sound inventory does not have these sounds. On a phonetic level, voiceless stops are never aspirated in French, so when native French speakers say words such as ‘pie,’ ‘tot,’ or ‘Kate,’ a native English speaker may hear ‘bye,’ ‘dot,’ or ‘gate’ respectively, because of the missing aspiration that they are expecting (Capliez, 2011).

In addition to the phonological errors pointed out in Lacharité and Prévost (1999) and Capliez (2011), Voise (2010) talks about phonological errors observed specifically in future French elementary school teachers. In France, students start learning English as early as the equivalent of first grade. However, the state no longer requires oral language exams for future elementary school teachers. As teachers, for most students, will be their first exposure to English pronunciation, Voise (2010) asserts it is important that they have some training in English phonology in order to teach children good pronunciation from the beginning. Some consonant
errors that were observed before training the teachers included, not pronouncing –s plural marker as it is unpronounced in French, and difficulties with pronouncing –ed in past tense verbs, which was most often pronounced as [œd]. They also confused or pronounced similarly ‘of’ and ‘off’ as [af], because they focus on the spelling of the words. They pronounced ‘qu’ as [k] instead of [kw] in ‘qu’ words such as ‘question,’ because that is how this letter combination is pronounced in French (Voise, 2010). Voise (2010) also points out that the number ‘three’ represented one of the most difficult words to pronounce, because, as Lacharité and Prévost (1999) also found, /θ/ next to an /r/ is an incredibly difficult sound combination, since neither sound is present in the French phonological system. As already briefly examined in the pronunciation error of the past tense morpheme, /ʌ/ is pronounced as [œ] in most instances, such as the words ‘word’ or ‘cup,’ due to the fact that it is the most phonologically similar sound present in the French vowel system. Francophone ELLs may have more problems with the English vowel system than with the consonant system, because they are so different. French contains sixteen vowels, four of which are nasal vowels; while British English (the dialect of English most commonly taught in France, where the study was conducted) has twelve vowels (none of which are phonemically nasal) and eight diphthongs (Voise, 2010). Voise (2010) also chose to adopt the position of some phoneticians that British English has five triphthongs, being [eiə], [aiə], [ɔiə], [əʊə], and [aʊə]. The differences within these two vowel distributions can also cause problems, because English has fewer rounded vowels than French, and French does not have the tense/lax distinction found in English. These differences can cause francophone ELLs to pronounce English words using French vowels, especially if these words come historically from French or resemble other French words. Furthermore when dealing with pronouncing vowels, these future teachers, like most francophone ELLs, are not aware of the effect word stress has on them,
especially on unstressed vowels. Voise’s (2010) examples include ‘banana’ being pronounced [banana] instead of /bənænə/ and ‘chocolate’ as [tʃɒkələt] instead of /tʃaɪklət/. This pronunciation changes can be explained because French is a syllable-timed language, and English is a stress-timed language.

Mauroux (2010) presents several tools for teaching pronunciation to francophone ELLs. In addition to advocating minimal pair training, especially when teaching the tense-lax vowel distinction, she suggests pairing vowel sounds with numbers that contain the same vowel sound. For example, ‘2’ is used to remind students to say /u/, ‘8’ for /e/, ‘9’ for the diphthong /aj/, and ‘6’ for /ɪ/. She suggests it as a way to avoid eventual errors caused by spelling differences between French and English (Mauroux, 2010). Once students learn to associate the numbers with the sound they correspond to, these numbers can be used to teach the English pronunciation of words that look like French words. They can learn that ‘mine’ is pronounced /mæjn/ in English and not /mən/ as it is in French by being told that ‘mine’s’ vowel is ‘9’ and not ‘3.’

However, francophone ELLs do not struggle only with segmentals, they also have problems with suprasegmentals. As Capliez (2011) says:

It is not rare that Anglophones have problems understanding a French speaker [speaking English], not because of bad pronunciation of individual sounds and the segmental errors catalogued above, but because of equal stress put on all the syllables, or an incorrect placement of the tonic stress” (p. 49).

This incorrect stress is due to the fact that French is a syllable-timed language and English is a stress-timed language. This also has an effect on the French intonation in English. Capliez (2011) claims intonation is composed of three parts: tonality (cutting utterances into intonation units), tonicity (placing the tonic stress), and tone. Tonality and tone in French and English are
generally similar. However, native French speakers still struggle with English intonation and the placing pauses in the same place that a native speaker would when those pauses do not correspond to a punctuation mark. Yet, their biggest struggle is with tonicity.

According to Frost (2010), production of a stressed syllable depends on four acoustic indications: frequency, pitch, length and the phonemic structure, specifically the vowel. In English, the most important element for determining stress is the pitch. Traditionally, phoneticians and phonologists distinguish three different categories of stress: contrastive stress, word stress, and sentence stress (Frost, 2010). In English, word stress and sentence stress are both important in pronunciation. When they are placed incorrectly, non-native speaker are easily misunderstood.

French has at most three levels of stress: tonic stress, secondary stress and unstressed (Frost, 2010; Violin-Wigent, Miller & Grim (2013). French marks tonic stress with the length of the syllable (Violin-Wigent, Miller & Grim, 2013). In French, stress always comes at the end of a word and when words are put into sentences, it is on the last syllable of an intonation unit. For example, in the sentence, *Quand j’arriverai en Guadeloupe, je prendrai un taxi pour aller à l’hôtel*, there are at least two intonation units, *quand j’arriverai en Guadeloupe* and *je prendrai un taxi*. Therefore, the tonic stress would be marked on the last syllable of each of these units, ‘loupe’ and ‘xi.’

English, however, has four levels of stress according to Frost’s (2010) analysis: primary, secondary, tertiary and unstressed. In addition, each word has its own stress pattern. In the majority of English words, the stress falls on the first syllable (Frost, 2010). However, unlike French, when words are put into sentences, they retain their original stress pattern. The stressed syllables are longer and louder than the other syllables in the sentence. For example, in the
sentence, *When I get to Guadeloupe, I will take a taxi to go to the hotel*, the words *when, get, Guadeloupe, take, taxi, go* and *hotel* each carry stress in the sentence. The newest, most important information in the sentence has the tonic stress, but this syllable can change depending on the context and which information is the newest. For example, if a speaker is talking to someone who does not know where the speaker is going, the speaker would put the tonic stress on *Guadeloupe*. If the listener did not know how the speaker would get to the hotel, they would put the tonic stress on *taxi*.

Both languages can use contrastive stress to modify which information in a sentence is emphasized (Frost, 2010). However French speakers often change the syntax of a sentence, instead of using the contrastive stress (Capliez, 2010). For example, to stress what one is doing in French, “C’est la vaisselle que je fais” (literally ‘It’s the dishes that I’m doing). In English, however, the tonic stress gets put on the dishes, “I’m doing the **DISHES**” (Capliez, 2011). This difference in emphasis created by syntax versus emphasis created by stress can cause problems for francophone ELLs. While listening, they may miss the information implied by the change in stress, and while speaking, they may not know how to emphasize the information they find the most important. Teaching French students to hear and produce stress patterns of English, especially those used to emphasize specific words in a sentence, can help them to be better understood when they speak and to pick up on meanings implied by the stress placement alone.

Frost (2010) takes the difficulties that francophone ELLs have with English prosody and explores it further. He discusses the notion of stress deafness and designs an experiment to see if native English and native French speakers perceive word stress in the same way in their L1 and L2. In Frost’s (2010) experiment, he manipulated the length or pitch of words both in French and in English. In English, he used pairs of words where the placement of the stress determines
if a word is a noun or a verb, such as *permit* and *per‘mit*. In French, he chose to use an accent where the *e caduc* is pronounced and words with /ø/ as the final sound. In words where the *e caduc* is pronounced, the first syllable receives more stress, such as in the word *boîte*. In words that end with /ø/, the last syllable is stressed, as in the word *boiteux* (Frost, 2010). After manipulating the length or pitch of the syllables in both languages, native speakers of French and native speakers of English listened to the words that had been modified as well as the original sets of words. For the English speakers, the more the length of the vowel had been modified, the greater the effect it had on the English speaking subjects’ choice. Their choice was also influenced more by a change in pitch than French speakers (Frost, 2010). Like the English speakers, the greater the change in syllable length, the greater the effect on the French speakers’ choice on the test. There was no regular relationship between the change in pitch and the subjects’ choice for the French speakers. Finally, the English speakers were able to identify the correct unmodified word more often than the French speakers. Frost (2010) claims this implies that English speakers depend more on suprasegmental cues than French speakers. This experiment also shows that French speakers and English speakers do not perceive stress in the same way (Frost, 2010). This differing perception explains why francophone ELLs struggle with English stress patterns. Not only is stress not placed in the same way in French, but they do not perceive it in the same way as English speakers. To be able to start to make this distinction, French speakers need to train their ears to listen for the changes in pitch and length that mark stress in English and then to produce these changes while speaking. Part of this training should include building awareness of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables at the word as well as the sentential level.
To help improve francophone ELLs’ awareness of vowel reductions in unstressed syllables, Mauroux (2010) suggests comparing similar orthographic sequences in stressed and unstressed syllables. Several examples of this include contrasting *able* /ebəl/ with *capable* /kepəbəl/ and ‘land’ /lænd/ with ‘Scotland’ /skətland/ (Mauroux, 2010). This way, students can see stress’s effect on vowel pronunciation. For this to work, however, students need first to be taught how to say these pairs of words individually. Mauroux (2010) emphasizes the importance of introducing the idea of the schwa to students so they can better understand what is happening in these unstressed syllables. However, when a learner does not know a particular word’s stress pattern, they cannot correctly reduce the vowels in the unstressed syllables at both the word and the sentence level (Mauroux, 2010). Because knowledge of word and sentence stress is so important to an ELL’s ability to understand and to being understood, it is very important not to overlook the suprasegmental aspects and prosody of English while teaching francophone ELLs. The complaint that English speakers speak too fast may be due less to the speed at which they speak and more due to the fact that they do not pronounce all the words as expected (Mauroux, 2010).

This collection of research presents the majority of pronunciation errors made by Francophone ELLs. They address errors on the segmental level as well as the suprasegmental level. Some of them even also discuss techniques for dealing with these errors and encouraging better pronunciation in French speakers learning English. By being aware of the kinds of errors students are going to make, teachers can be better prepared to specifically address these errors. As the L2 of students plays a major part in the kinds of issues they are going to have, in a single language classroom, the errors while occur in most of the students pronunciation. Otherwise, it becomes important to listen to the ELLs speech and address the common errors that most affect
the students’ ability to be understood. As already discussed, these errors are usually connected to word and sentence stress in English.
References


