

CHAPTER 23

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION IN FRENCH LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Like any other area of language teaching, pronunciation is also an important aspect which should be given adequate attention. Whether one is teaching conversation or grammar, pronunciation will always come into play in a language class. This chapter investigates the kind of pronunciation teaching methods that help second/foreign language learners perceive and discriminate sounds accurately.

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this chapter, you are expected to be able to:

1. describe pronunciation;
2. explain aims of pronunciation instruction, and
3. discuss the activities that can help learners improve their pronunciation in French.

PRONUNCIATION

Pronunciation, according to Trask (1996:291), is "the manner in which speech sounds, especially connected sequences, are articulated by individual speakers or speakers generally". In other words, pronunciation is an umbrella word that encompasses the interrelated areas of sounds, phonetic symbols, stress, intonation, and rhythm. Although, these different aspects of pronunciation are treated in isolation, it is important to remember that they all work in combination when we speak, and are therefore best learned as an integral part of spoken language.

IMPORTANCE OF PRONUNCIATION IN A SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

Pronunciation is an essential component not only of learning a language, but also of using that language. Thus, it is another aspect of language learning which should not be neglected. It is however one aspect of language teaching that seems to be taken for granted, because some teachers believe that pronunciation should not be taught separately, as they expect learners to get it right in the process of learning other aspects of the language. That erroneous belief may lead to bad pronunciation on the part of learners, because pronouncing sounds of a language well is important even early in the learning process. Moreover, pronunciation is vital to proper communication because incorrect use of pronunciation inevitably leads to the message being misunderstood by the recipient. Learners with good pronunciation are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners with bad pronunciation will not be understood even if their grammar and choice of words are correct. Such learners may avoid

speaking during the lesson, get bored and be disinterested in the language of study. The task of the teacher is therefore to integrate pronunciation into his teaching in a more informed, and effective manner.

By using various methods to aid our learners, their pronunciation will be more accurate and their attitudes will be more positive. Always remind them that learning a language takes time and acquiring pronunciation is a process. The goal of pronunciation teaching is not to help learners sound like native speakers, but to help them learn the core element of spoken language so that they can be easily understood by others.

CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES

Drilling sounds over and over again (i.e. minimal pair work) often leads to discouraging results, and discouraged learners and teachers often end up wanting to avoid pronunciation all together. However, the frustration, difficulties, and boredom associated with pronunciation can be overcome by focusing attention on the development of pronunciation that is "listener-friendly". Therefore, some sort of pronunciation instruction in class is necessary.

It is imperative for the teacher to first of all identify the elements of the target language phonetics and phonology that are likely to cause problems to the learners. For instance, we can predict that English speakers will have difficulties in pronouncing the sound /y/, in "tu", /ə/ in "le" in French. Arabic speakers will have difficulty distinguishing between /p/ and /b/, and French speakers will have a problem in pronouncing the dental English fricative /ð/ of "the". Thus, what learners are likely to do is to replace them with sounds close to their native language. Hence, the French /y/ will be pronounced like the English /u/ by the English speakers, while the English /ð/ will be pronounced like /d/ by the French speaker, etc. It is then left to the teacher to build this information into meaningful classroom techniques.

1. Listen and repeat: this is the first and most common method of teaching sound specific pronunciation in any language. The teacher say's the target sound, and he/she makes the learners repeat after him/her. This technique can be enhanced by the use of tape recorder, video recorders and language laboratory.

2. Isolation: when working on a specific sound, it may help to isolate that particular sound from any other. The teacher then models the sound and repetition follows until the teacher is reasonably satisfied that there are no major problems. This is especially helpful when many learners are struggling with a specific sound delineation.

3. Target language specific sounds: some pronunciation patterns are found in learners with the same native language. Being aware of these patterns is helpful in addressing the problems learners do not even know they have. The teacher can find practical exercises to target specific pronunciation patterns, or he/she can write his/her own to target the specific needs of the class.

Either way, making learners aware of pronunciation patterns of speakers of their native language can be the biggest help in eliminating the wrong pronunciation.

4. Reading aloud/recitation: passages or scripts for learners to practise and then read aloud, focusing on stress, timing, and intonation. This technique may or may not involve memorisation of the text, and it usually occurs with genres that are intended to be spoken, such as dialogues, poems, and plays.

5. Singing: surprisingly enough, singing can be a good way to practise pronunciation, because it requires a person to maintain vowel sounds more than just a moment. It can give learners a chance to focus on the target sound.

6. Using a mirror: gives learners a chance to view their own physical movements while they are working on their pronunciation, it can be of great value. One can always encourage them to look at one's mouth and face as one is pronouncing certain sounds, but they can also benefit from seeing what movements they are making as they speak. Sometimes, becoming aware of the physical movements involved in pronunciation is all the learners will need to correct pronunciation issues of which they are unaware.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Learners of a second/foreign language should have a pronunciation element to their language studies. Sometimes, a learner may need more than one strategy for tackling pronunciation. By making use of a variety of techniques in pronunciation lesson, learners will be more successful with the target language pronunciation and gain confidence that comes with it. Furthermore, pronouncing words is often a part of memorising them in second/foreign language learning, so, getting a strong, basic foundation in correct pronunciation early on will equate to more effective learning overall.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe "pronunciation".
2. Explain aims of pronunciation instruction.
3. Explore the techniques that can help learners improve their pronunciation in French.

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