Chapter 4
Teaching French Phonetics in a Digital Language Lab

Evan Bibbee
Minnesota State University Mankato, USA

Esther Smidt
West Chester University, USA

Vladimir Lazar
Minnesota State University Mankato, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter evaluates the pedagogical significance of a digital language lab as part of a university course in French phonetics. Based on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, it argues that a computer-assisted context can have positive effects on students’ mastery of phonetic structures, as well as their overall engagement with the instructional process. Using empirical data from a set of controlled readings, the authors demonstrate that measurable progress was made by participants in their use of two targeted phenomena; unstable e and resyllabification. Furthermore, these conclusions are reinforced by feedback from a focus group that explored students’ perceptions about how the learning environment contributed to their mastery of course content and classroom technology. While the intrinsic case study format used does not allow for general conclusions regarding correlations between instructional technologies and learning outcomes, it is hoped that the investigation will serve as a productive framework for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Since its creation in 1635, the French Academy (Académie française) has stood as the official arbiter on all matters related to the French language (Robertson, 1910). Today, it is best known—particularly outside France—for its efforts to stave off Anglicization in the popular lexicon, a daunting task given the omnipresence of English language content on the Internet and in other media outlets. Nonetheless, the Academy endeavors to strengthen the linguistic foundations of French, publishing regular updates to an official dictionary (now in its ninth edition) and, in 1990, issuing an extensive new set of spelling rules aimed at simplifying both written and oral expression (Hargrove,
Teaching French Phonetics in a Digital Language Lab

1990; Nadeau & Barlow, 2008). Yet, even such continuous long-term linguistic refinement has not eliminated all ambiguity. This is particularly true of the complex and occasionally vague rules that govern French pronunciation and phonology. For second language learners, two of the most troublesome such features tend to be the unstable e (also known as e caduc or silent e) and phonological resyllabification involving the two similar yet distinct linguistic phenomena of liaison and enchaînement. In both cases, there are some rather well-established guidelines, but these are either incomplete or may vary depending on syntax, register, or rate of speech. As a result, it is not sufficient to merely recognize that a given word or passage may contain one of these particular components: A speaker must also determine whether or not its use is possible and appropriate given all relevant constraints. For this reason, most French Phonetics textbooks devote a considerable number of pages to each of these topics, and courses such as the one referenced in the present article usually review their practical application several times during a given semester.

While Birdsong (1999) has suggested that mastery of specific structures is not a reliable indicator of global oral proficiency, incorrect or inconsistent use of a distinct attribute such as liaison is often the telltale sign of a non-native speaker (Morin, 2005). Since data from previous studies (Levy & Stockwell, 2006) suggest that computer-assisted language learning (CALL) may help to improve overall proficiency, it would seem that a closer look at its impact on learners’ proficiency in these two pedagogically prominent areas of French phonetics and phonology would be a useful and needed addition to the scholarly corpus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Language Lab

The language lab (or lab), a term introduced by Waltz in 1930 (as cited by Hocking, 1967), with its inflexible audio speed (Harvey, 1978), inauthentic audio texts (Jones, 2008), and inferior sound quality (Balizet, Treder, & Parshall, 1999), looks very different from its descendant today, the digital language lab, which was ably described by Toner, Barr, Carvalho Martins, and Wright (2008) as:

... a classroom management system that enables a teacher to monitor and control student computers in the classroom or even at remote locations. ... Each student in a multimedia language lab has his/her own networked PC that opens up a suite of possibilities including use of dedicated CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) packages and access to online sites in the target language .... They can play audio and video clips sent to them from the teacher’s PC, answer quizzes, complete exercises set by the teacher, and return answers to the teacher for marking or comment. Teachers can monitor student progress from a central workstation and intervene where necessary. They can talk to students over a headset and take control of their keyboard and screen to demonstrate how to do something. They can broadcast their own screen to students, or pick out a student’s screen and broadcast that to the whole class in order to show examples of good practice or initiate a discussion. (p. 4)

The above excerpt demonstrates best practices and what the digital language lab is capable of providing. In particular, the elements of an exemplary course conducted in a digital language lab include the activation of prior knowledge (Jones, 2008); promotion of interaction between students and text, students and teacher, and among students (Jones, 2008; Quinn, 2001); individualization and personalization of learning (Alexander, 2007;
Related Content

Qualitative Research In Online Language Learning: What Can It Do?
www.igi-global.com/article/qualitative-research-in-online-language-learning-what-can-it-do/233915?camid=4v1a

New Languages, New Literacies and the School Curriculum
www.igi-global.com/chapter/new-languages-new-literacies-school/36009?camid=4v1a

Using Mobile Technologies with Young Language Learners to Support and Promote Oral Language Production
www.igi-global.com/article/using-mobile-technologies-with-young-language-learners-to-support-and-promote-oral-language-production/122839?camid=4v1a

e-Assessment for Learning: Gaining Insight in Language Learning with Online Assessment Environments
www.igi-global.com/chapter/assessment-learning-gaining-insight-language/73268?camid=4v1a