

Tips to improve French pronunciation

- Dr. Terry Nadasdi
- University of Alberta
- Bilingualism, 2nd language acquisition
- www.BonPatron.com

Questions for you

- Is accurate pronunciation important?
- My students certainly think it is
- They feel hoodwinked when they realize how long they've been making the same error
- How do you integrate the teaching of pronunciation into your lessons?

Objectives

- two-fold
- primary goal: quick tips to improve students' pronunciation
- present the *BonPatron Phonetics Guide* (though somewhat advanced)
- Helpful resource

Objectives

- Focus on high frequency pronunciation problems (and provide easy solutions)
- My focus is not on “good French” versus “bad French”
- It’s about how ALL francophones pronounce words
- I’ll keep things simple and ignore some details (but happy to answer any and all questions!)

Overview

- My explanations are based on a free resource we've developed
- The *BonPatron* Phonetics Guide
- Overview of phonetics guide
- www.bonpatron.com/menu/
- English/French interface

Topics

- French R
- S versus Z
- Nasal vowels
- The vowel “u”
- When does “i” indicate “y”
- Unstable E (“samEdi” or “sam’di”?)

French “R”

- Source of a strong “English” accent
- Is it physically difficult to articulate?
- Pas du tout!
- However, it’s very different from English R
- It’s unfortunate we use the same symbol for both when writing

French “R”

- French “R” is much closer to English “G”, than it is to English “R”
- The relationship between “R” and “G” is very similar to the one that holds between “Z” and “D”.

French “R” = fricative G

- In both cases, the **place** of articulation is the same, but the **manner** is different
- “G” and “D” are pronounced by stopping the air completely
- “R” and “Z” imply create friction

“R”, technique #1

- a) pronounce “D”, then slowly soften the contact between your tongue and teeth until you produce a “Z” .
- b) try the same thing with “G” and French “R”
- Pronounce “G” twice, then soften the contact between the tongue and the velum.
- Doing so will lead you to the correct articulation of French “R”.

“R”, technique #1

- Once you can produce French “R”, try the same procedure in an actual word.
- c) start with the French word for "hinge", *gond* [gõ].
- Pronounce this two times, then on the third and fourth time, soften the contact to make a fricative.
- This will lead to the correct pronunciation of *rond* [ʁõ]

“R”, technique #2

- First, pronounce “T” and the word “gaie” separately.
- Next, pronounce “gaie” immediately after “T” (all in one syllable).
- Since the combination “TG” is a difficult one to articulate, the “G” naturally becomes French “R” (as you move toward the vowel).
- The result of this exercise will be the correct pronunciation of the word *très*!

To “z” or not to “z”?

- When does “s” represent /s/ and when does it represent /z/?
- Which sound is found in the word *immersion*?
- /s/, of course
- Which sound is found in the word *prison*?
- /z/, of course
- So, how do we know which one to use?

To “Z” or not to “Z”?

- There's a simple rule to help you know which one it should be:
- if the letter "S" is preceded AND followed by a letter representing a vowel (i,e,o,u,a), then it is pronounced /z/.
- In all other words, it is pronounced /s/. For example: *poser* (“z”) vs. *insister* (“s”)

Application (z/s)

- What does the letter “s” represent in the following words?
- *prison, chanson, immersion, oser, désert, aiguiser, observer, version, poison, poisson*

Nasal Vowels in French

- French has four nasal vowels:
- /œ̃/, /õ/, /ɛ̃/ and /ã/
- all of which can be remembered with the phrase: ***Un bon vin blanc*** [œ̃-bõ-vẽ-blã]

Nasal Vowels in French

- The articulation of nasal vowels isn't particularly difficult
- Here's the challenge though:
- When do I pronounce a **nasal** vowel (in which case the following "N" or "M" is silent), e.g.: *important*, [ɛ̃-pɔ̃R-tɑ̃]
- When do I pronounce an **oral** vowel (in which case the following "N" or "M" is pronounced), e.g.: *image* [i-maʒ]

To be clear

- In French, it's either
- a) Nasal vowel + silent “n” or “m”
- b) Oral vowel + pronounced “n” or “m”
- So how do we know what to pronounce when a vowel letter is followed by “n” or “m”?
- E.g.: does “in” = /ɛ̃/ or /in/?

Nasal Vowels in French

- It is easy to know which words have nasal vowels in French.
- Here are the two main contexts:
- a) a vowel letter + "n" at the very end of a word, e.g.: *bon* [bõ], *fin* [fɛ̃], *un* [oẽ].
- b) a vowel letter + "n" or "m" followed by a **consonant letter**, e.g.: *intérêt* [ɛ̃teʁɛ], *ombre* [õbʁ].
- E.g.: In the first word, the *in-* is followed by "t" (a consonant

Nasal Vowels in French

- It's the third letter that tells you whether the vowel is nasal or not
- Once you know there is a nasal vowel, be sure NOT to insert a nasal consonant.
- This is a bit more of a challenge when the next consonant is similar to a nasal one, e.g.: *impossible* [ɛ̃pɔsibl] where like /m/, /p/ is bilabial.

Nasal Vowels in French

- However, as the transcription indicates, there is no “m” actually pronounced in the word *impossible* = [ɛ̃pɔsibl]
- Check by pronouncing one syllable at a time: [ɛ̃-pɔ-sibl]
- The letter “m” is simply indicating that the vowel is nasal (like an accent mark)

Application

- Do these have a nasal vowel?
- *initial*
- *indépendant*
- *tomber*
- *limiter*
- *national*
- *immédiat*

The French “u” sound

- Like all French vowels, the vowel represented by the letter “u” is **short** and **tense**.
- This vowel shares features with both “i” and “ou”.
- Like “i”, the tongue is high in the front of the mouth
- like “ou”, the tongue is high with rounded lips.
- In a way, “u” is like pronouncing “i” and “ou” simultaneously!

The French “u” sound

- The best way to correctly articulate “u” is to start with “i” and then add the appropriate lip rounding.
- In French, the lips of **round vowels** should be similar to when you **whistle**
- Try pronouncing “i” three times and then on the 4th, continue thinking about “i”, while rounding and advancing your lips:

The French “u” sound

- “i”, “i”, “i” + rounding = “u”
- There is a tendency among English speakers to substitute “ou” for “u”.
- This is not acceptable
- a great many French words are distinguished by the difference between these two vowels, e.g.:
- *Du/doux; vu/vous; lu/loup; tu/tout*

How to pronounce *piano* and why?

- The letter “i” represents to possible sounds “ee” (/i/) or “y” (phonetic symbol is /j/)
- Choosing the correct one is important
- /i/ is a vowel and adds a syllable
- /j/ is referred to as a **glide** and doesn’t add a syllable

How to pronounce *piano* and why?

- There's a simple rule:
- If “i” is followed by a pronounced vowel, then it represents /j/
- In all other cases, it represents /i/ “ee”
- Consider the word *piano*
- Does it have /i/ “ee”?
- No: [pja-no] (“i” is followed by “a”)
- Therefore: only two syllables

Application (/i/ or /j/)

- Do these words have /i/ or /j/?
- *Pierre*
- *Dialecte*
- *Limite*
- *finir*
- *fière*

Unstable “E”

- We know that *-er* and *é* indicate the /e/ vowel and that *è* and *ê* are the /ɛ/.
- We also have /ɛ/ when “e” is followed by a word-final consonant (e.g.: *belle*).
- What about the “E” though in words like *samedi*, *seulement*, *maintenant* and *secret*?
- Here there is no accent and “E” is in the middle of the word

Unstable “E”

- This kind of “E” is called unstable “E” since sometimes you pronounce a vowel; sometimes it’s silent
- When it is pronounced, it resembles the vowel of the word *feu*.
- There’s a fairly simple rule to know when to keep it and when to drop it.

Unstable “E”

- **Rule:** if dropping the "unstable E" creates a sequence of **three consonants** within a word, then it must be pronounced.
- Otherwise, it must be deleted.
- Consider the following words: *samedi* [samdi] , *médecin* [medsɛ̃] , *gouvernement* [guvɛ̃nəmã] , *simplement* [sɛ̃pləmã]

Unstable “E”

- In *samedi* and *médecin*, the dropping of the “E” does not result in three consecutive consonants, only two
- so it must be dropped.
- In other words, *samedi* is actually pronounced as if it were written *samdi* and *médecin* is pronounced as if it were written *médcin*

Unstable “E”

- What happens if we try to drop the “E” *gouvernement* and *simplement*?
- Here, the result would be a sequence of three consonants: “**drd**” and “**plm**”.
- As such, the “E” must be pronounced to break up the string: *gouvernement*, *simplement*.
- In sum, only pronounce this “E” if it allows to avoid three consonants in a row

Unstable “E”

- Remember what I said about “i” + vowel = /j/?
- One detail to know is that /j/ works **like a consonant** for unstable “E”
- For example,
- *Chandelier*
- Here the “i” is really the /j/ sound
- As such, we can’t drop the “E” since it would create *dlj*

Concluding Remarks

- You should now be able to help with:
- “R”
- “z” vs “s” (cf. *l’immersion!*)
- Nasal vowels
- The “u” sound
- When “i” is the “y” sound
- Unstable “E”

Concluding Remarks

- Feel free to use the phonetics guide
- Lots of exercises
- Lots of sounds
- Lots of clear explanations in English or French
- Lots of fun!
- I'm happy to answer any and all pronunciation questions you might have

Test

- 1/ How would you help a student articulate French “R”?
- 2/ How would you help a student articulate the “u” sound?
- 3/ Do these words have “z”?
- *prison, version?*

Test

- 4/ Do these words have a nasal vowel
- *indirect, ananas?*
- Remember, if the vowel is nasal, the consonant is silent
- 5/ Do these words have the “ee” sound?
- *Pierre, pion, viande, imiter, hier*
- 6/ Is the middle “E” pronounced?
- *matelot, secret, petit*

Bonus words

- femme
- /a/ as in “dame”
- Monsieur
- “me” + “s” + “yeux”

Text

- Quand la période de chasse commence, ça devient l'enfer. Les chats et les chiens disparaissent, tués par des idiots énervés de rentrer bredouille. En plus, ils s'en vantent le soir venu, au café du village. Plusieurs fois, alors que je m'amusais dans le jardin, j'ai entendu les plombs tombant en pluie sur les tuiles de la maison.
- Souvent, j'ai vu des chasseurs qui tiraient alors qu'ils étaient juste derrière la maison, à moins de 30 mètres. Essayez de leur faire une remarque: ils vous envoient chier. Le fait d'avoir un fusil dans la main transforme complètement ces gens-là, les mêmes qui vous disent bonjour le dimanche matin à la boulangerie.