

Exploiting behaviorist and communicative action-based methodologies in CALL applications for the teaching of pronunciation in French as a foreign language

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Abstract. This article describes the use of instructional technology to promote, through a combination of behaviorist/structuralist and communicative/action-based methodologies, correct pronunciation of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) to native Greek-speaking false-beginner-level learners. It is based on the analysis of a teaching programme, complemented by an end-of-semester student evaluation questionnaire. Within the curriculum of the A1/A2 level French courses at Cyprus University of Technology (CUT), learners acquire the spoken language largely through communicative action-based tasks. In addition, teacher-authored preparatory exercises, created using the *Schoolshape* digital language lab system, provide the content of pronunciation exercises. Being cloud-based, *Schoolshape* allows teaching and learning to extend out of the classroom. Students can complete exercises virtually anywhere there is a broadband Internet connection and receive immediate automatic feedback as well as profit from the asynchronous online monitoring of their instructor. Moreover, the pronunciation exercises, whose substance is linked to the action-based tasks, can be meaningfully integrated into the communicative curriculum. An end-of-year survey collects feedback from students concerning the attention paid to their pronunciation in general and their use of *Schoolshape* in particular.

Keywords: phonetic correction, behaviorist methodologies, structuralist methodologies, action-based methodologies, digital language lab.

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1. Introduction

In this article we describe the use of instructional technology to promote, through a combination of behaviorist/structuralist and communicative/task-based methodologies, correct pronunciation of FFL to native Greek-speaking false-beginner-level learners.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has long been valued for its potential to extend teaching out of the classroom (Reinders & Darasawang, 2012), which for oral production is essential given the practical constraints on in-class activities. CALL pronunciation programs designed for this purpose are numerous⁴. However, in attempting to exploit such online resources, teachers of FFL are confronted by two considerable shortcomings. Firstly, the majority of these websites are generic in nature and thus do not take account of L1-specific factors (here Cypriot Greek). Secondly, practice exercises are typically undertaken in isolation from communicative activities. Overcoming these obstacles requires teachers to create materials attuned to the L1 of their learners and integrated into the syllabus. In so doing, the ultimate goal is to foster the acquisition of correct pronunciation, not just in isolated exercises, but in spontaneous speech linked to meaningful discourse (Abou Haidar & Llorca, 2016). The following discussion describes how these challenges were addressed in two FFL courses at CUT.

2. Teaching/learning spoken French in A1/A2 level courses at the CUT

The students involved in our study were enrolled in two courses during the 2016 Spring semester (Level 1 [CEFR A1] and Level 2 [CEFR A2]). They had studied French for four years in secondary school, or more in private institutes. In general, their speech was strongly accented to the point of preventing intelligibility, in particular at Level 1. The two courses adopt an action-based approach and aim to give students the opportunity to express themselves autonomously and authentically in situations as close as possible to those of everyday life. Learners acquire the spoken language largely through the in-class and out-of-class preparation of dialogues they create in making three short video clips which they film using their mobile phones. The work is individual and/or collective (in teams of two or three). The preparation of these clips includes the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary,

4. For a general discussion on CALL resources for pronunciation instruction and on their merits and limitations, see Derwing and Munro (2015).

phraseology, pragmatics and some aspects of pronunciation related to the themes of the role-plays (Level 1: getting to know someone, describing my house, giving directions; Level 2: at the market, at the restaurant, introducing oneself for an internship). From the beginning, students are made aware that pronunciation is taken into account in the evaluation of their video clips and in the midterm and final exams, which motivates them to take it seriously. There being little time for in-depth work on pronunciation in class, the great part of phonetic correction is undertaken out of class with *Schoolshape*.

3. Using the Schoolshape digital language lab system

3.1. Presentation of Schoolshape

Operating entirely from a remote cloud-based server, *Schoolshape* (www.schoolshape.com) is accessible from any broadband Internet connection, which facilitates its use both within and outside the classroom. The pronunciation exercises developed in *Schoolshape* are closely linked to the vocabulary, grammar and content of task-based role-play activities. Since they are audio recorded, the results of these exercises can be monitored by instructors to track student progress and more effectively target follow-up correction. The latter is done during face-to-face debriefing sessions which follow the evaluation of the role-plays.

3.2. Types of exercises

Before starting phonetic training exercises, *Schoolshape* is used to establish a general phonological profile of each class and individual profiles for each student. This is accomplished by audio recording the pronunciation of key words containing known difficulties (e.g. front rounded vowels, nasal vowels, voiced-voiceless plosives)⁵. The purpose of these profiles is to provide more precise, better-targeted and more effective remedial work. Thanks to the flexibility of its management system, *Schoolshape* can be used to assign exercises to a class, as well as to individuals so they can work specifically on their own problems.

Aural discrimination exercises are exploited to make same/different judgements and to identify which particular sounds are heard (Figure 1).

5. These key words are taken from the Interphonologie du Français Contemporain corpus list (<http://cblle.tufs.ac.jp/ipfc/>)

Figure 1. Aural discrimination exercises

As learners gain competence in discriminating between the sounds of the L1 and the L2 as well as between L2 sounds, they also begin to notice the gap (Schmidt, 2010) between their own pronunciation and that of normative models. Listen/repeat exercises are used to provide pronunciation practice with words and short phrases containing targeted phonological features. Written language is exploited to provide visual support for oral output and establish phonological correspondences with the orthographic system (note the underlined consonants in Figure 1).

The reading out loud and recording of model words and phrases provides both pronunciation practice and preparation for task-based role-plays (Figure 2). This is followed up with interactive communicative exercises: virtual simulated dialogues without written support in which students record their responses to oral prompts.

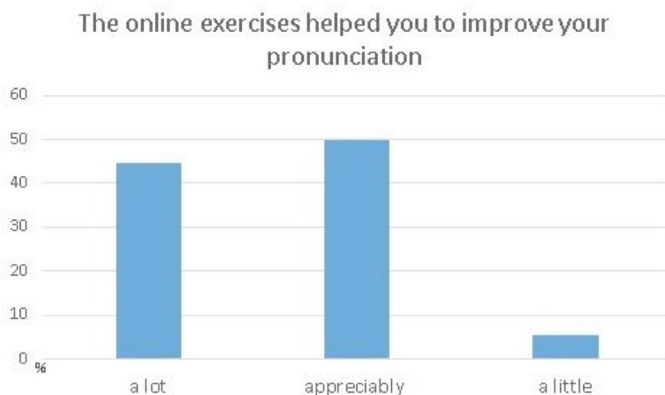
Figure 2. Model words and phrases

Schoolshape exercises are specifically designed to target the pronunciation difficulties of Cypriot learners (e.g. the absence of phonemic distinction between voiceless and voiced plosives – See Figure 1). Cognate French-English vocabulary also receives special attention to redress the strong contaminating effect of the L2 English pronunciation of words with similar or identical spelling in both languages (e.g. *commerce*, *finance*, *Internet*). For all exercises, the recording of students’ productions allows the instructor to asynchronously monitor learners’ progress and is the basis for the face-to-face sessions.

4. Students’ evaluation of the *Schoolshape* program

All students (36) answered an end-of-semester evaluation questionnaire concerning the pronunciation teaching method used in the courses and the improvement of their pronunciation. As is attested in the following results, overall student reaction to the *Schoolshape* program was very positive. Over 93% of students felt that the exercises improved their pronunciation, 50% appreciably and 44.4% a lot (Figure 3).

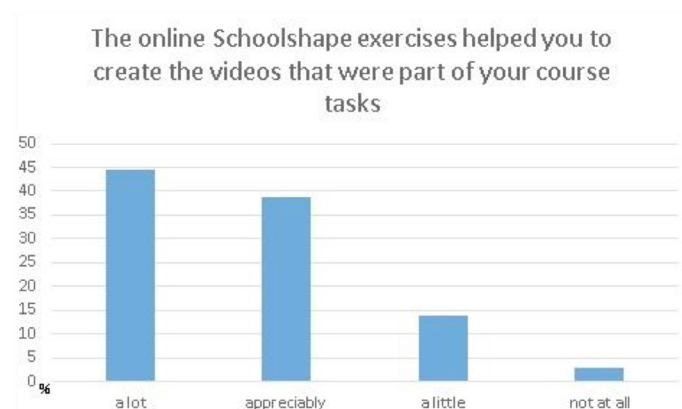
Figure 3. *Schoolshape*: improved pronunciation



Since the purpose of the *Schoolshape* exercises was to improve the students’ phonetic accuracy and speaking skills by focusing on the pronunciation of words or phrases that they would need for the creation of their filmed dialogues/presentations, they were asked about the impact of these exercises on the creation of their videos. Here again, the great majority (83%) indicated that *Schoolshape* had helped a lot (44.4%) or appreciably (38.8%) (Figure 4). The instructors observed that the

Schoolshape simulated dialogues in particular had provided effective training. The set phrases relevant to specific role-play situations that had been practiced with *Schoolshape* were internalized by students and enunciated more confidently, with phonetic features (segmental and suprasegmental) that rendered them intelligible.

Figure 4. *Schoolshape*: video creation



Lastly, when students were asked to indicate in what way(s) *Schoolshape* helped them to improve their pronunciation, the most frequent responses were that the exercises allowed them to listen to and repeat words/sentences (36.1%) and to become aware of what the correct pronunciation was (30.5%). A quantitative analysis of the progress made by students in their production of specific segmental phonetic features was done at the end of the semester for the Level 1 students (22). The features were: the vowels /y/ and /u/, the voiceless plosive /t/ in *étudiant* and the silent final consonant in *étudiant*. The students' productions in the initial profiles were compared to their reading aloud of short sentences during the final oral exam. Correct pronunciations improved from 15% to 54% for /y/; from 25% to 77% for /u/; from 5% to 73% for /t/. 68% of students did not pronounce the final <t> while the majority did at the beginning of the course.

5. Conclusion

Though out of fashion, behaviorist/structuralist focus-on-form exercises (for perception and production) nonetheless remain a methodologically valid approach to L2 pronunciation training. Thanks to the cloud-based instructional technology of the type provided by *Schoolshape*, it is now possible to exploit

structuralist concepts such as contrastive analysis and phonemic opposition in remedial exercises that can be undertaken anywhere a student has access to an Internet connection. Freed from the normal constraints of classroom time, the acquisition of correct pronunciation can be integrated into a communicative/action-based curriculum in a way that is motivating for students. Above all, our experience to date shows that there was substantial progress in the students' pronunciation of the phonetic features targeted during the semester.

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