

Teaching French as a Foreign Language to Iranian Adult Learners: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract This article is a general overview on the problems that stand in the way of Iranian adult learners of French. The article introduces the linguistic background of learners as one of the factors causing problems for them. English, the language they learnt during school years, and Persian, their mother tongue, are introduced as the main sources of these problems and this is because of the differences they have with French. The problems are categorized into three categories of discriminating phonemes and segmenting words, pronouncing and writing adjectives and finally pronouncing and writing verbs. Attempt has been made to offer some solutions for the existing problems as well. Teaching phonemes meticulously from the very outset of training can be one of the solutions to this problem. As the next step, after acquiring some preliminary skills by learners, teachers should focus on some other aspects including self correction and self monitoring exercises. They should also ask learners to record their voice and listen to it and to guess the meaning from context.

Keywords: teaching French, discrimination, segmentation, comprehension, pronunciation

1. Introduction

The issue of teaching French as a foreign language has preoccupied the minds of many scholars of the field for many years. Linguists and French teachers have paid attention to this point that the comprehension and production of oral materials are the two skills that should be focused on as the basis of the class program, especially during the first sessions of training (Tabrizi, 2010; Azimi Meibodi, 1995).

Iranian French learners who serve as the subjects of this study have difficulty in discrimination and segmentation of letters, especially vowels such as /u/, /o/, /ə/, /y/. Intonation in affirmative, imperative and interrogative sentences is also problem-inducing for them. What has urged us to conduct the present study is the reason why problems of that ilk have occurred for Iranian adult elementary learners of French. It is also our aim to offer some suggestions for solving the existing problems.

A point worthy of attention is that the adult learners who are the subjects of this study learnt a second language – mainly English- during their school years. In this study it is believed that this is one of the factors causing delayed acquiring of the required skills in French. A question raised here is that should we start the task of teaching language with writing or speaking? Whatever the answer, the point is that in learning a second language writing most often takes precedence to speech. If the teacher follows teaching in a traditional way and if the learners live in a country other than the place where the language is spoken, the point raised above will be more evident.

The present study tries to shed light on three main problems in learning French with which Iranian adult learners are faced. The problems are categories under three areas of discrimination of phonemes and segmentation of words, problems in pronouncing and writing adjectives and finally problems in writing and pronouncing verbs. The study tries also to offer some suggestions for handling the existing problems.

2. Problems in discrimination of phonemes and segmentation of words

Those who want to learn French should be especially trained in the discrimination of phonemes (Grevisse, 1986). Thus, on the one hand, it is necessary for them to get familiar with the phonemes and letters of this language, and, on the other

hand, it is imperative to discriminate these phonemes from the similar ones in their own mother tongue as well as the second language they learnt before (English, in this case). A point worthy of attention is that although all Persian speakers are to some extent familiar with Arabic, Arabic does not interfere with learning French.

Along with teaching the first phonemes to the learners, discriminatory skills should be developed in learners. For learners to be able to pronounce French vowels and consonants properly, it is not enough to limit their activities to listening comprehension related ones; repetition and conversational tasks are also needed. If the correct pronunciation of French words is not taught, the learners will not be able to pronounce the words the way they are pronounced by native speakers in their daily use.

Discriminating and comparing phonemes intralingually as well as interlingually (between the mother tongue and the language being taught) is a very important issue, since there might be some phonemes in a language which are nonexistent in the mother tongue. As an example, Iranian learners of French frequently make mistakes in pronouncing the French phonemes /y/ and /ə/. They assimilate them into the Persian phonemes /u/ and /o/.

As a solution, the teacher can make use of minimal pairs (Richard, 1994). The pairs should be chosen from among French words. The learner should learn to recognize and repeat them (oral repetition), without any need for knowing their meaning. Then, it is possible to substitute the words of the pair with their phonemic equivalent in Persian, if such an equivalent exists. That way, the learner can make a relationship between her/his mother tongue and the new language. As a result, the mother tongue can have a facilitating role in pronouncing, learning and memorizing the French words. To illuminate the point an example is given below:

tu [ty] ----- tout [tu] ----- تو [to] ----- tout [tu]
 tout [tu] ----- tot [to] ----- تو [to]

The above example shows the effectiveness of using mother tongue in elementary classes. It occasionally happens that a learner discriminates a phoneme properly, but due to overcorrection s/he pronounces some phonemes interchangeably. A case in point is the phoneme /u/ and /y/ which might be mistakenly pronounced as /y/ and /u/, respectively. Mispronouncing /o/ and /ə/ is another example.

If phoneme discrimination is taught successfully, the teacher can expand it to word discrimination in the continuum of speech, i.e., segmentation of words will be facilitated. The requirement for the two skills of discrimination and segmentation is the high speed of mental processes. It is also important to comprehend spontaneously. However, variations in syllables and changes in rhythm and intonation might impede learners from comprehending (Guimbretière, 1992). Rhythm and intonation can be regarded as secondary for beginners. The reason lies behind the fact that there is no sharp difference between intonation and rhythmic patterns of English and Persian. At more advanced stages such points can be focused on.

Native French speakers do not separate words while speaking. That is why chain of speech can easily mislead learners. As a result, learners should get familiar with liaison. The intervention of syllables might cause difficulties in proper segmentation of words in a sentence and the result will be miscomprehension of speech. The negative consequences of this problem are not only limited to comprehension of the speech to which the learners are exposed. It can also induce problems in dictation.

The factors which cause improper segmentation of word on the part of the learners can be summarized as follow:

2.1. Phonemic variations

2.1.1. omission of /ə/ in speech

Example:

je la revoie [ʒəlarvwa]

The omission of /ə/ will lead to assimilation (Peytard, 1983; Grevisse, 1986). In such cases French learners cannot recognize the word, although they might know the word and its meaning while seeing it in print.

Example:

tu reviens [tyrvjɛ̃] ----- tu viens [tyvjɛ̃]

je l'ai jeté [ʒle,ʃte] ----- je l'ai acheté [ʒlea,ʃte]

In the first example the omission of /ə/ leads to an unclear pronunciation of /r/. As a result, the listener cannot distinguish it properly. As for the second example, the omission of /ə/ causes the listener to bring the closest phoneme in her/his mind and this causes miscomprehension.

However, it seems that learners have less difficulty comprehending words consisting of more syllables in comparison with the ones having only one syllable. The reason is that words having more than one syllable are longer and the listener has more time to react.

2.1.2. Liaison

Liaison leads to improper segmentation:

il l'a apprend [illapṛā] ----- il la prend [illapṛā]
 tout à l'heure [tutalør] ----- toute à l'heure [tutalør]

The process of liaison here changes the word *tout* to *toute*, and cause miscomprehension on the part of the listener.

2.2. Morphophonological variations: pronouncing the last consonant

Considering the learners' language background, one can easily find out that all consonants, even those which are in the final position in the words, are pronounced in Persian. The second worthy of attention point about the learners' linguistic background is the fact that in Persian making plural nouns out of singular ones is not possible by adding «s» to the end of the noun. And the third point is that the second language they learnt in school, just as their mother tongue, has a tendency to pronounce all final position consonants, except for some rare cases such as the /b/ sound as in *comb*, and *climb*.

Error analysis of learners' productions, both oral and written, in French has revealed that Iranian learners of French, even after spending a long time on learning French, tend to pronounce the final position consonants, even though at the start of training the mute «e» might have been fully explained to them (Haghshenas, 2004). Pronouncing the acoustic image of [vert] for words such as *vert* and *vert* and [ətād] *attend* and *attendant* can be regarded as two examples. The fact is that adding «e» to the end of the word

The learner should compare English and Persian with French and make some phonological rules for her/himself. Pronouncing the last consonant mistakenly causes a masculine word to be taken as feminine or a singular word to be taken as plural. Therefore, mispronouncing the words leads to semantic changes.

What are the possible suggestions for both teachers and learners? This problem can be partially solved by paying a closer attention to morphophonological changes and the pronunciation of words, i.e. the issues related to the changes in gender, number and tenses of verbs. Besides, analysis of learners' errors has revealed that plural «s» in French is pronounced by learners and the reason is the interference of English rules (Tabrizi, 2010; Dayhim, 2009). Such interference not only induces some problems in speaking and reading, but also poses some problems in writing and dictation related activities.

At universities, since the learners are adult, it is a good idea to work on phonetic transcriptions along with the regular repetition and listening comprehension activities. The use of phonetic transcriptions help learners find a logical relation between the signified and the signifier. It should be continued so that learners enter into the stage of conversation when they can read and write properly even without resorting to phonetic transcriptions. That is why in the available textbooks, the transcriptions are offered in the first lessons, but for the rest they are not included. That way, the learner can understand the difference between French phonemes and Persian phonemes. Besides, it will be easier for the learner to learn new phonemes. With regard to the consonants, except for the vibrant «r», no striking differences can be found between French and Persian. The problems are mainly in learning some vowels.

3. Problems in pronouncing and writing adjectives

As it was mentioned before, the existence of «e» at the end of a French word is a pronunciation clue which shows that the consonant before it should be pronounced (Coste, 1993). It can be very helpful for pronouncing adjectives since feminine adjectives generally end with «e». Because of the language background of Iranian learners in which there is a tendency to pronounce the final consonants (Shariat, 2011), it is wise to first teach feminine adjectives in which the final consonants are pronounced. Then, the masculine forms should be presented.

It is also a good idea to ask learners to write all four forms of an adjective they have learnt in tables. That way, the process of learning, memorizing and recognizing will be facilitated. Table 1 shows an example of an adjective ending with a vowel:

Table 1: adjectives ending with vowels

joli [ʒoli]	singulier	pluriel
feminin	jolie	jolies [ʒoli]
masculin	joli	jolis [ʒoli]

Table 2 shows an example of an adjective ending with a consonant:

Table 2: adjectives ending with consonants

petit [pəti]	singulier	pluriel
feminin	petite [pətit]	petites [pətit]
masculin	petit [pəti]	petits [pəti]

The above adjectives shown in tables can be regarded as representatives of all usual adjectives. After working with tables as such and learning few adjectives with the help of these tables, learners will notice that all four forms of adjectives belonging to Table 1 should be pronounced alike. With regard to the second table, they will find out that the singular and plural forms of feminine adjectives are pronounced alike, but different from the singular and plural forms of masculine adjectives. The familiarity of the learners with phonetic transcriptions has proved to be helpful.

There are also some exceptional cases such as cruel/cruelle and public/publique. Table 3 shows the change of «-e» to «-elle»:

Table 3: «-e» changing into «-elle»

cruel [kryel]	singulier	pluriel
feminin	cruelle [kryel]	cruelles [kryel]
masculin	cruel [kryel]	cruels [kryel]

Table 4 shows the change of «-c» into «-que»:

Table 4: «-c» changing into «-que»

public [pyblik]	singulier	pluriel
feminin	publique [pyblik]	publiques [pyblik]
masculin	public [pyblik]	publics [pyblik]

Table 5 shows one example of the cases where adding plural «s» causes the last consonant not to be pronounced:

Table 5

os [os]	oral	écrit
singulier	[os]	os
pluriel	[o]	os

Table 6 is another example:

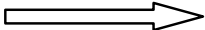
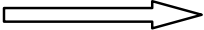
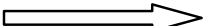
Table 6

œuf [œf]	oral	écrit
singulier	[œf]	œuf
pluriel	[œ]	œufs

As it was mentioned, Iranian learners, because of the influence of their mother tongue and the role of English language with which they are familiar, tend to pronounce the final consonants. In order to facilitate their learning process this study suggests that French teachers start teaching adjectives with the feminine ones. That way, the language background of the learners does not play a debilitating role. However, the common practice of teaching French adjectives in Iran is starting with the singular masculine ones, a practice which might be challenged.

4. Problems in pronouncing and writing verbs

The pronunciation of last consonants of verbs in French depends on the singularity and plurality of them (Arrivé et al., 1986; Génouvrier & Peytard, 1986). Learners should understand that the rules for the pronunciation of the written form «ent» in verbs are the same as the rules at work for the pronunciation of the written form «e», i.e., these written forms are not pronounced, but adding them to the end of the word causes the final consonant to be pronounced. The addition of the «ent» to the end of the verbs of the third category also causes a kind of denasalization (Vanoye et al., 1991). As a result, the nasal vowel turns into a laryngeal vowel and a nasal consonant. The following examples might help illuminate the point:

il attend [ilatã]		ils attendant [ilzatãd]
il vient [ilvjẽ]		ils viennent [ilvien]
un [ẽ]		une [yn]

5. Some suggestions

To fully understand the variation of verbs, learners need lots of practice. Following points might be helpful with this regard:

- Learners should be made sensitive to variations in pronunciation. To become sensitive, they should be given listening related practices in language laboratories. It is a good idea to provide the learners with the transcription of the text to which they are listening. The focused points of pronunciation can be anywhere in the sentence:

la fille arrive / les filles arrivent
 il append sa leçon / il apprend ses leçons
 prends-le / prends-la
 il met la table / ils mettent la table

- Learners should practice repeating the material after they listen to it;
- Self correction and self monitoring exercises could be useful;
- Learners should listen to their recorded voices. Comparing their own voice with that of the native speakers help them notice the differences and eliminate the possible problems. Besides, that way, learners may overcome some psychological barriers they might encounter while listening to their own voice in real conversations; and
- Learners could be asked to guess meaning without direct help of their teacher.

6. Conclusion

Speaking and writing could be postponed until passing 306 hours of learning. After this period the learners will get familiar with morphophonological patterns. Such familiarity helps the learner listen to and understand the exercises, conjugate words and recognize syntactic markers. In countries where a language is not considered socially prestigious, like French in Iran, the traces of that language cannot be seen in mass media, billboards and etc. As a result, learners will not expose to that language at all and learning a language as such will be more difficult than a socially prestigious language such as English. Iranian English learners see signs of English in their everyday life and out of their language class. However, it is

not the case with French. The only occasion Iranian French learners are exposed to French is their language class. The consequences of such limited exposure are evident in their low ability to engage in writing and speaking related activities. It should be mentioned finally that this article does not claim to offer the final solution of all problems in the way of French learners. Rather, considering some of the problems of Iranian adult learners, the researchers offer some guidelines to help teachers and learners gain more out of their teaching and learning.

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