

Teaching in France: Why is it so difficult?

Csilla Jaray-Benn seeks to provide a touch of logic to some of our more commonly held beliefs of the French as learners of English.

Phonetic Gap

Several years ago I accompanied a child with hearing difficulties to the University Hospital in Grenoble, where I learned the eye-, or rather ear-opening fact that 'the French are deaf to languages'. The general belief that '*Nous, les français sommes nuls en langues*' was suddenly framed in an obvious predetermined destiny. Proven by physicists, physicians and linguists, the French are physiologically challenged when they embark on the adventure of learning a foreign language and in particular, when the language happens to be English. Francophone speakers' hearing is tuned to a very low and limited frequency range compared to other Indo-European languages (see Fig 1). The French hearing span is squeezed between 1,000 and 2,000 Hz, while Anglophone ears are able to hear sounds from 2,000 Hz (1,500 Hz for US English) up to 8,000 Hz. What makes things even worse is the 'hearing gap' between the two phonetic systems; basically where Anglophones start, the French stop hearing.

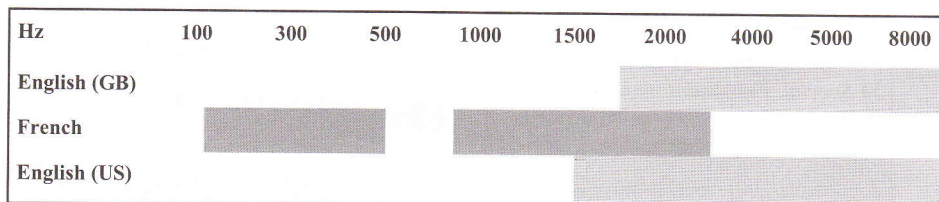


Fig 1: Comparison of Sound Frequency (excerpt), adapted from www.tomatis-toulouse.com

Not hearing the difference between 'eat' and 'heat', 'he' and 'she', the diphthongs in 'house', 'mouse' and 'brown' are conditioned by the above mentioned physiological facts and result in a hopeless sigh of '*je n'ai rien compris*' when listening to English.

To lessen language anxiety triggered by this physiological reality, I aim to reassure my learners with special emphasis on *how* to listen. Methods that work: audio-skimming and scanning; pre-listening visual supports, giving them full control over the audio playing device; letting them listen as many times as they wish. Most importantly however, before exposing them to the unarticulated noise they might hear from a BBC radio show, it is crucial to help them accept the fact that they will most probably not understand everything.

They need to realize that their goal is to retain some relevant information.

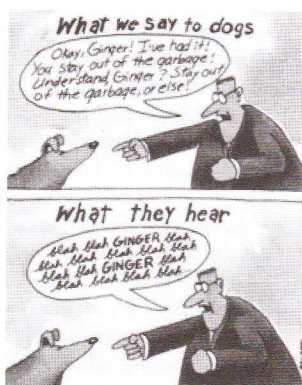
Encouragement and positive feedback are crucial to boosting their feeling of success. When a low level learner picks up a few words from a live radio show or podcast, he/she has to experience it as a personal learning success.

As for pronunciation, I always attempt to downplay the need to be perfect and rather make learners feel comfortable with the way they speak. Empowering them with recording their voice and self-correction has a very positive effect on their performance. Guiding French learners to become more focused listeners and more relaxed speakers, will allow them to boost their self-esteem as a foreign language user and to construct their 'L2 self', a term

introduced by Zoltán Dörnyei (2009).

Discourse Divide

It is commonly observed that French learners will not open their mouths in English because they are anxious about making a mistake. This perfectionism is deeply rooted in their Cartesian culture, conditioned by long years in an education system showing very little tolerance for errors, and is also due to difficulties in learning their mother tongue as far as its grammar and spelling are concerned. French schoolchildren struggle for over six years with conjugation, genders, concordance, plurals, a long list of so-called 'grammatical homophones'; in brief, with morphological aspects of the language. Overall, French is primarily based on an



Idea adapted from James E. Zull, IATEFL Conference, 2012

elaborate morphology while English is generated by rules of syntax and shows no major difficulties in its morphology.

Therefore, one would think that English should be 'easy' since it lacks everything that makes French difficult. However, my experiences show quite the opposite. For a French learner, details of conjugation, gender and concordance are often regarded as safe guidelines from their perspective. Leaving the security of this realm of rules, they become confused. As an example, one of my adult students admitted to me that the only way he was able to memorize English 'conjugation' in the present tense was to see it written as a table; a table which would remind him of the *Bescherelle* grammar book of his school days. Even if this table showed no difference in the verb forms, apart from the 3rd person singular 's', it reassured him that he was not making mistakes.

The same logic applies with the use of simple past forms. The French call it *prétérit*, probably just to avoid confusion between the *passé simple* and the past simple, used differently in the two languages. The past simple tense, for some reason, seems to be not simple at all for French learners. They prefer using the present perfect for past actions. The reasoning for this is that the latter form corresponds more to the French *passé composé* (have + past participle) and their automatism is biased towards this composed verb tense. This may appear as a learner making things more complicated than necessary, but in fact their difficulty in mastering a simple language phenomenon is conditioned by their mother tongue. Drawing on the French learners' analytical skills and their love for their own language by explaining the reasons for their difficulties, will help them overcome their incomprehension of 'why is it so difficult?' and lead to a more positive attitude towards learning.

The other facet of this interference between French and English is the challenge of understanding and producing English on a syntax level. How many times have I heard from my learners that despite the fact that they understand the meaning of each word, the sequence of words in a

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sentence makes no sense. Not having the guiding force of the separate morphemes, they are not tuned to see the meaning generated by word order. Even advanced level learners tend to get lost in the maze of English word order to such an extent that their randomly sequenced utterances become incomprehensible. Not being understood despite their efforts just adds to the disbelief in their L2 aptitudes.

We must keep in mind that the French set high standards towards language performance in general, therefore towards practising a foreign language as well, so the best way to improve their confidence in English is by building their own self-confidence as *correct* language users.

Motivational Deficit

The mainstream belief underlying the phrase of '*je suis nul en langues*' can be explained by differences in sound pitch, language structure, and by numerous other dissimilarities, but in the end, we must agree with Zoltán Dörnyei's statement that '*in the vast majority of cases learners with sufficient motivation can achieve a working knowledge of an L2, regardless of their language aptitude or other cognitive characteristics*' (2001:5). Building a teaching method with specific weak points in mind and raising learner's awareness of the need for effort in order to succeed, will help avoid the generalisation that Sarah Mercer defines as a 'fixed language learning mindset'. As Mercer explains, people with a '*fixed mindset*' believe that '*if you don't have the "gift" for languages, then it is hopeless to try and make any real efforts to improve*'. (2012) Another data point arising from the Eurobarometer survey proves the relevance of this idea in the French case. Second place with 43% after Portugal's 50%, the French are considered '*not willing to devote any time to language learning*' (Eurobarometer 2009). Their negative beliefs in regard to their language aptitudes generate anxiety, fear of failure, unwillingness to take risks involved in language learning and they wish for an 'effortless' and 'painless' language learning experience. From a motivational point of view, Dörnyei's suggestion seems to be particularly relevant in the instance of the French learners. Dörnyei considers that '*we ought to play down the importance of ability*' and as he further develops the idea, '*Highlighting the role of effort, on the other hand, is safe: it facilitates future achievement*' (2001:120).

Identifying and raising awareness of the concrete linguistic reasons underlying the

difficulties that French learners have in learning English is very much in line with the French way of thinking, being driven by reasoning. A gap-bridging approach will help downplay the importance of ability and will lead to small personal learning successes. We all know that success generates success and as Dörnyei puts it '*If we can make students believe that higher level of effort in general offers a possibility for success, they will persist in spite of the inevitable failures that accompany learning*' (2001:120).

~ Csilla Jaray-Benn
TESOL France member

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With two MA degrees in English and French Language and Literature as well as a DEA in Theatre Arts, Csilla teaches

Communication Skills at IEA Grenoble, Business English and English for Teenagers. She also owns Business English Services, www.bes-grenoble.com and can be contacted at: csilla.benn@bes-grenoble.com