

Received 30/08/2012

Published 30/12/2012

## **Teaching phonetics: the difficulty to develop the Algerian EFL learners' practical skills in the Algerian context**

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### **1. Introduction**

Since 2003, Algerian higher education has gone through a reform that aimed at increasing the financial and academic autonomy of the university. A shift occurred from a classical system shaped on the French model to a three-tiered pedagogical architecture known as LMD. 'L' stands for licence degree, a culmination of three-year or six-semester educational programs, 'M' stands for master degree requiring two-year or four semester educational programs after the licence degree, 'D' stands for the final degree, Doctorate, calling for at least three years or six semesters. The reform took place at a time when a general dissatisfaction was felt with the classical system. The latter revealed various shortcomings, among them: its failure to answer the socio-economic needs of our society, a rate of success significantly low, a mono-disciplinary approach which led to students' limited general knowledge, teachers and students' lack of motivation. As a result, the LMD reform came in to overcome the limitations of the previous system. It was designed so that learners become active and autonomous participants in their learning. With this regard, learners are encouraged to not confine themselves to the information provided by teachers. Instead, they are required to perform individual work outside the classroom and they are supported by their teachers in this task via tutoring sessions. The contents as well as the methodologies of this system should aim at answering the socioeconomic needs of our society.

In 2009, the LMD system was introduced in the English Department at the university of Algiers in an experimental way in parallel to the classical system that had existed since independence.

### **2. Teaching Phonetics in the Classical System:**

Speaking about phonetics, the content taught within the classical system framework was mainly theoretical and the methodology was teacher-centered. 70% of the time during a session was devoted to teaching theoretical content. In the first year, the latter consisted of the following topics:

1<sup>st</sup> semester:

1-Introduction:

2- Speech Organs:

3- Consonants

2<sup>nd</sup> semester:

4- Vowels:

5- English R.P Vowels:

6- Simple Word Stress:

As far as the methodology is concerned, teachers used either to lecture then dictate or provide handouts. The rest of the session which lasted 30% of the duration time was devoted to practice. This consisted most of the time of transcription exercises. As in the Audio Lingual Method developed in the USA and Situational Language Teaching developed in Britain, accuracy was of high priority (Richards & Rodger 1986). So primary attention was given to phonemes and their contrasts, environmental allophonic variations, and structurally based attention to stress. Teachers tried by all means to develop the practical component of the course by introducing contextualized practice through pronunciation listening-based activities and pronunciation production-based activities but it was in vain. Teachers tried also to adopt a learner- centered-approach by encouraging learners to give presentations and by doing group work in the classroom, but they often failed. This failure was mainly due to large classes and lack of adequate pedagogical materials such as CD players, sockets in the classrooms, a sufficient number of listening labs, unavailability of adequate books in the library, absence of a study skills module which would help learners use different data resources in order to prepare their class presentations.

### **3. Teaching Phonetics in the LMD System:**

After many years of frustration, teachers of phonetics perceived in this university reform the opportunity to adopt a methodology that encompasses a mix of theoretical knowledge such as sufficient general phonetic theory, some comparative phonetics and phonology, and practical phonetics such as transcription skills, ear-training, production-training all within a learner-centered approach. The purpose was to focus on pronunciation within discourse by introducing some reading, listening, speaking and writing activities with special focus on pronunciation. Writers like Kenworthy (1987), Avery & Ehrlich (1992) and Morley (2000) emphasized the integrative and contextualized teaching of pronunciation. A view justified by the fact that when we are speaking we are concerned with how to get our message across and not with what our lips, tongue, and jaws are doing. This is also the case when we are listening, we do not pay conscious attention to the way the speaker is making sounds. Towards that aim, teachers designed a new syllabus meant to develop learners' acquisition of the theoretical concepts of phonetics as well as the practice of pronunciation within discourse. The content of the syllabus for the first and second terms appears in the table below and is expressed in a week-by-week progression:

**First Term:**

<b>Week 1</b>	English Sounds : introducing vowel and consonant sounds + practice
<b>Week 2</b>	English Sounds : minimal pairs, homographs, homophones
<b>Week 3</b>	Description of the organs of speech + practice
<b>Week 4</b>	Description of the organs of speech + practice
<b>Week 5</b>	<b>TEST</b>
<b>Week 6</b>	Consonants: definition, criteria of consonant classification
<b>Week 7</b>	Consonants: place of articulation + practice
<b>Week 8</b>	Consonants: manner of articulation, voicing +practice
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>TEST</b>
<b>Week 10</b>	Vowels: definition , criteria of vowel classification + practice
<b>Week 11</b>	Vowels: cardinal vowel system, long and short vowels + practice
<b>Week 12</b>	Vowels: diphthongs and triphthongs + practice
<b>Week 13</b>	Practice and Revision
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>EXAM</b>

**Second Term:**

<b>Week 1</b>	Introduction to Allophony
<b>Week 2</b>	Phonetic transcription: shortening of vowels, nasalisation, aspiration
<b>Week 3</b>	Phonetic transcription: unexplosion, devoicing, velarisation + practice
<b>Week 4</b>	Phonetic transcription: syllabicity, glottalisation+ practice

<b>Week 5</b>	<b>TEST</b>
<b>Week 6</b>	Word Stress: structure of the syllable and simple word stress 1 + practice
<b>Week 7</b>	Word Stress: simple word stress 2, word class pairs + practice
<b>Week 8</b>	Word Stress: complex word stress 1 + practice
<b>Week 9</b>	Word Stress: complex word stress 2 + practice
<b>Week 10</b>	Word Stress: complex word stress 3 + practice
<b>Week 11</b>	<b>TEST</b>
<b>Week 12</b>	Introducing Sentence Stress: form words and content words + practice
<b>Week 13</b>	Revision and Practice
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>EXAM</b>

The aims of this syllabus are to make students able:

- 1- To identify the stages of human speech production and to describe the production of the different R.P. English sounds.
- 2- To perceive, produce, and spell the R.P English consonant and vowel sounds.
- 3- To identify and produce the different allophones of R.P English.
- 4- To perceive and produce word stress.

With regard to theoretical content, teachers agreed to lecture and to use handouts focusing on the most important concepts that students would need in their future careers as researchers and teachers. Teachers also agreed to develop students' autonomy. For this reason, they decided to ask students to answer some basic questions on a given chapter one week before this is introduced and explained in class. Students would use books of phonetics or internet sites as data resources.

As one major aim of this syllabus is to develop learners perception and production of R.P. sounds on the one hand, and their ability to translate graphemes into phonemes (reading) and phonemes into graphemes (spelling) on the other hand, teachers designed the following types of activities inspired by Kenworthy (1987) and Avery & Ehrlich (1992):

#### **4. Pronunciation listening-based activities:**

##### **Marking Activities:**

Students listen to spoken material and transcribe what they hear using the phonetic symbols. They can indicate some aspects of pronunciation as stress and weak forms.

### **Scripting Activities:**

Students are provided with a transcript of a given dialogue and are asked to transcribe it phonemically. Then, they listen to it

### **Dictation:**

Students are asked to listen to a tape-recorded passage and to write down in normal spelling what they hear.

## **5. Pronunciation production-based Activities:**

### **Reading Aloud:**

Students are asked to stand in groups and to designate a leader of the group. Each leader is given a text and asked to work its pronunciation with students of his group. Then, each leader reads the text aloud and receives feedback from his teacher and classmates

### **Transcript Conversions:**

Students are given a phonemically transcribed text that they have to convert into its spelling form.

### **Oral Homework:**

Students can be given oral assignments that involve oral production instead of reading and writing. Assignments are prepared, rehearsed and then tape recorded at home. Students receive feedback in class.

## **6. Concrete Facts experienced in One Year:**

Speaking about the theoretical content, all the topics of the program were covered by the end of the year but teachers met difficulties to do so. They realised by the end of the year that:

- The program was too ambitious: the first and second year classical system syllabi were combined to produce a first year LMD overloaded program. As a result, theory was covered at the expense of practice.
- But the methodology agreed upon which consists of lecturing and providing handouts in addition to dictation from time to time was followed.

As for practice, things are different since the aims were partly fulfilled and few types of activities were introduced:

- Activities like marking activities and scripting activities were impossible to practice due to the necessity of CD players which were unavailable in the department.
- Dictation was used from time to time. The teacher dictated short passages although the ideal situation would have been to make students listen to a tape-recorded passage pronounced by native speakers. Dictation was also rarely practiced due to time constraints: students benefited from a one hour and a half session per week leaving a short amount of time to both theory and practice.

- Oral homework was impossible to practice due to the unavailability of tape-recording materials that would allow students to record their performance.

Thus, the only practice activities used were transcript conversions and reading aloud in addition to transcription exercises.

## 7. Conclusion

If problems like time constraints, unavailability of pedagogical materials, and overloaded programs are not solved, the teaching of phonetics in the LMD system is at risk of being similar to the teaching of phonetics in the classical system

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