

Didactic Treatment of Assimilation, a Prosodic Phenomenon Relevant to Aural Comprehension in English as a Foreign Language

KOUASSI Jérôme

Département d'anglais, Université de Cocody-Abidjan, Côte-d'Ivoire

Cel : 07982366

40096955

E-mail : jeromekouassi2009@yahoo.fr

Abstract

My preoccupation in this paper was to reflect on the didactic procedures which can allow teachers to help their learners overcome the obstacle caused by the different manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation so that they can achieve comprehension. This reflection provides two main explanations to the way this phenomenon impedes aural comprehension in English as a foreign language. The first explanation is mental confusion which prevents the learner from acquiring an idealized mental image of the sounds s/he hears. The second is related to the fact that the manifestation of the phenomenon of assimilation does not allow the mobilization of the energy needed for learners' involvement in the activity of the construction of meaning. In order to compensate for this deficiency I propose a training experience the different stages of which should allow learners to be aware of the different manifestations of assimilation.

Key words: phenomenon of assimilation, prosody, English, foreign language, aural comprehension, obstacle, training experience.

Résumé

Notre préoccupation dans ce travail était de réfléchir sur les procédures didactiques permettant aux enseignants d'aider leurs apprenants à surmonter l'obstacle causé par les différentes manifestations du phénomène de l'assimilation de sorte qu'ils parviennent à la compréhension. Cette réflexion fournit deux explications essentielles à la façon dont ce phénomène empêche la compréhension aurale en anglais, langue étrangère. La première explication tient à la confusion mentale qui ne permet pas à l'apprenant d'acquérir une image mentale idéalisée des sons qu'il entend. La deuxième est liée au fait que la manifestation du phénomène de l'assimilation empêche la mobilisation de l'énergie nécessaire à l'implication des apprenants dans l'activité de construction du sens. Pour remédier à cette situation, nous proposons une expérience formatrice dont les différentes étapes peuvent aider les apprenants à prendre conscience des différentes manifestations de l'assimilation.

Mots clés: phénomène de l'assimilation, prosodie, anglais, langue étrangère, compréhension aurale, obstacle, expérience formatrice.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of aural comprehension in English as a foreign language often confronts learners with difficulties relating to the presence of prosodic phenomena, intonation, accentuation and assimilation among others. Assimilation, a prosodic phenomenon which occurs in contexts where English is used at a natural speed, deserves particular attention. The fact that a sound 'A' influences a neighboring sound 'B' causing the assimilation of the latter to the former often impedes comprehension and the task of both teachers and learners in the context of foreign language classes. Such a complication is generally caused by the features which result from the manifestation of assimilation. This explains my current interest in the issue in order to reflect on the didactic practices that can help teachers and their learners to overcome the difficulties deriving from the phenomenon of assimilation. For, as Nadine Herry-Bénil (2010:17) indicates,

... prosody must be at the basis of second language teaching, since it is at the basis of verbal language. (...) its functioning and poor functioning at the level of learners must be studied in order to define a methodology even though the task is hard and questionable.

The relevance of such a view is dependent on the fact that '... the status of prosody and the rhythmical approaches in general is not well defined, the didactic means and supports do still not exist, and finally teachers are not trained'¹. Given this situation my main concern is as follows: *Considering the specificities of aural comprehension in English as a foreign language and taking account of the prosodic dimension of verbal language and the worry caused by the presence of assimilation phenomenon during classroom activities, I wonder about the didactic procedures that teachers can use to help their learners to overcome this obstacle so that they can achieve comprehension.* I will first identify and discuss the difficulties relating to the phenomenon of assimilation before trying to show how the implementation of a training experience can help learners to **overcome** the existing obstacle in order to construct meaning.

My paper stands in three main parts. The first concerns a reflection on the prosodic dimension of the phenomenon of assimilation. The second shows interest in the influence of this

¹ Herry-Bénil, Op.cit. P.17

phenomenon on learners' performances during aural comprehension classes. In the third and last part I will suggest a training experience which can help learners to overcome the obstacle it causes.

1. A Look at Assimilation from a Prosodic Perspective

1.1. What the Term Prosody Stands for

Generally, the term Prosody refers to a set of physioacoustic suprasegmental phenomena which encodes information that is not, or cannot be, encoded by the segmental patterns of words, phrases or sentences. It consists of phenomena such as the stress, accent, rhythm, tone and intonation. Physically and cognitively, the prosodic 'reality' is based on a number of changes in intensity, length, and pitch variation. Prosody focuses essentially on the musical impression provided by the spoken language.

Prosodic feature therefore goes beyond a mere segmentation of the spoken language into **meaningful** discrete units (morphemes) that are at their turn segmented into **distinctive meaningless** constituents units (phonemes). The term prosody stands for non segmental elements in the oral code. Contrary to former research in phonetics that did not go beyond the segmental features of the spoken language, prosody is quite a prolific field of study these recent years. With this gleam of hope the necessity to carry out more instructive research in the field clearly stands out.

1.2. The Prosodic Aspects of Assimilation

Generally, the term Assimilation refers to a regular sound change process by which a sound unit changes to match an adjacent sound in a word, a phrase or a sentence. If the sound unit changes to match the preceding one, it is *progressive assimilation*. If it changes to match the

following sound unit, it is *regressive assimilation*. If there is a mutual influence between the two phonemes, it is *reciprocal assimilation*. In the latter case the two phonemes can fuse completely and give birth to a different one. This is a case of *coalescence*.

The view that assimilation is a prosodic phenomenon is often at the core of some debates in the field. One therefore needs to be enlightened on the way it occurs so that one can have a clear cut idea of its manifestation. Two main facts relates to this manifestation: the prosodic correlates of segmental assimilation and the assimilation of neighboring prosodic units. In fact, during assimilation, the contact between a given phenomenon and a neighboring phenomenon causes a change in one of them. The two units come to share some features at the level of articulation though initially they have distinctive features. Such a change occurring at the segmental level, one can hardly admit it as a prosodic phenomenon. However, advocates of an alternative view sustain that the realization of the assimilation phenomenon being essentially dependent on the notion of duration, its prosodic dimension clearly stands out. In fact, assimilation might be caused by an unconscious tendency to save effort or the mere tendency to euphony. It is therefore a prosodic phenomenon that deserves attention.

This paper aims at reflecting on the extent to which aural comprehension in English as a foreign language can be taught with a focus on the prosodic fact of assimilation. Such a reflection is a real challenge for the relative shortage of theoretical and methodological concepts for the development of prosody in the context of the teaching of foreign languages leaves researchers with no strong development in the field. Moreover, as Herry-Bénil² suggests, talking about didactic studies, ‘... they often study productions from a segmental point of view and rarely from a prosodic point of view.’ This obvious weakness justifies my interest in the field which I feel my contribution to the reorientation of research towards the study of productions from a prosodic point of view can help improve.

2. The Place of the Phenomenon of Assimilation in Teaching Aural Comprehension to Learners of English as a Foreign Language

² Op.cit. P.17.

2.1. The Specificities of the Aural Comprehension Class

Anne Anderson and Tony Lynch (1988) have reflected on the specificities of the aural comprehension class. Their conclusions suggest two main dimensions. The first dimension presents the listener as a recorder of the message. The aim here is to test his ability to remember the content of the spoken message. It is a relevant approach which raises some worries that Anderson and Lynch express in these terms:

If he can reproduce what has been said to him, one can certainly assert that not only he has heard the message but he had also paid attention to it (...). But does it mean that one can be sure that the listener has understood what has been said? ... (P.9).

There is a difference between the ability to use the information heard and the ability to reproduce the message word by word. For them, this difference derives from the fact that one cannot use the content of a message without having first made an interpretation of what has been said in relation to the non linguistic environment in which it has been produced. Their observation logically leads us to the second dimension which presents the listener as a model active constructor. This dimension suggests that for this activity to be successful one must encourage the construction by the listener of his own coherent interpretation or mental model³ of any message that he hears. Anderson and Lynch⁴ indicate that 'The mental model that we build as a representation of a spoken message is the result of our combining the new information in what we have just heard with previous knowledge and experience.'

One now understands that the activity of aural comprehension is not as simple as one might think it is. As far as foreign language learning is concerned the fact that learners

³ A term borrowed from Johnson-Laird (1980) by Anderson and Lynch, Op.cit. Page 11.

⁴ Op.cit. P.11.

are not constantly exposed to situations in which the language is spoken naturally complicates the task of aural comprehension. What does one do to help them achieve despite the difficulties relating to the learning context? In order to answer this preoccupation I will show particular interest in assimilation, this prosodic fact the manifestation of which impedes comprehension of the message heard.

2.2. Assimilation: an obstacle to aural comprehension in English as a foreign language

2.2.1. A Look at the Notion of Obstacle in Didactics

The notion of epistemological obstacle has been introduced by Gaston Bachelard⁵ in order to show how the building of scientific concepts has been through stages of rectification or even deep changes of background knowledge. In the context of teaching one generally talks about didactic obstacle or objective-obstacle⁶ that the learner must overcome in order to acquire new knowledge.

The notion of obstacle is at the core of learning and thereby justifies the efforts to put in place the mechanisms that allow learners to overcome it in order to acquire new knowledge. It is a cross-disciplinary notion which discourages situations in which learning consists in just adding new knowledge to the existing one. The notion of obstacle deserves encouragement in so far as it involves teachers and their learners in investing themselves in tasks the performance of which requires efforts to construct knowledge. In the context of aural comprehension the phenomenon of assimilation stands as one of the obstacles that learners have to overcome in order to achieve. Most classes in the field focus on general problems of comprehension of the message without showing particular interest in difficulties relating to focal points, assimilation, elision and linkage, to name but a few. I

⁵ Gaston Bachelard (1947) *La formation de l'esprit scientifique*, Paris : Vrin.

⁶ Notion introduced by Jean-Louis Martinand (1996) *Enseignement et apprentissage de la modélisation en sciences*, Paris : Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique.

therefore feel the necessity to study the obstacles caused by prosodic facts and suggest didactic practices that can help to overcome them.

2.2.2. Assimilation as an Obstacle to Aural Comprehension

In order to show how assimilation impedes aural comprehension, I will base on the following corpus for my development which is particularly concerned with assimilation of place. This kind of assimilation appears clearly in situations in which one final consonant with an alveolar articulation comes just before an initial consonant with a non alveolar articulation.

Corpus: Conversation between Mr. Nadu and Mr. Kuma.⁷

Nadu: Kuma, do you know that person sitting outside? [ðæp'pɜ:sən]⁸

Kuma: Which one?

Nadu: The one wearing a light blue hat. [laɪp'blu:]

Kuma: But two of them are wearing light blue hats!

Nadu: I'm talking about the bright colour. [braɪk'kɒlə]

Kuma: Oh yes, I see. He's a friend of mine. He's an actor. He's quite good. [kwaɪk'gʊd]

Nadu: OK, let's meet him!

In this corpus, the phenomenon of assimilation occurs in different places that are presented below.

⁷ Source : Myself

⁸ A quite widespread realization will be [ðæ'pɜ:sən] or [ðæ'pɜ:sɪ], with a slight lengthening of the air stop process before the release. This is called **consonant gemination**.

'That person': the final consonant in **that**, the alveolar **[t]**, becomes **[p]** before the bilabial consonant.

'Light blue': The final consonant in **light**, the alveolar **[t]**, becomes **[p]** before the bilabial consonant **[b]**.

'Bright color': the final consonant in **bright**, the alveolar **[t]**, becomes **[k]** before the velar consonant.

'Quite good': the final consonant in **quite**, the alveolar **[t]**, becomes **[k]** before the consonant **[g]**.

For learners of English as a foreign language this phenomenon of assimilation that occurs with the fast speed of expression (mainly with natives) can cause two main problems: mental confusion and threat to the process of constructing meaning.

2.2.2.1. Assimilation: a catalyst of mental confusion

Language learning supposes that the learner acquires an idealized mental image of the sounds each word consists of. This phonological knowledge allows him to recognize that word through the acoustic information especially when it is used in an isolate way. However, the task of recognition becomes harder when the speed of oral production in the context of natural language causes the manifestation of assimilation and many other prosodic phenomena. The influence of a sound on another neighboring sound can lead to mental confusion on the part of the listener. This mental confusion results essentially from the change caused by this neighborhood. My own experience as a teacher working in aural comprehension classes teaches me that the poor performances of learners during most activities are generally due to the manifestation of this phenomenon which impedes comprehension of the message.

Mental confusion creates a certain strangeness a consequence of which is the inhibition of learners who often remain passive during classroom activities. Moreover, the learner who ignores the manifestation of assimilation is likely to question the phonetic rules studied for what he hears does not correspond to what he has learnt. This particularly striking situation calls for the necessity to take didactic measures that will allow learners to recognize the manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation and to take account of it in the performance of tasks based on the message heard.

2.2.2.2. Assimilation: a threat to the process of the construction of meaning

In order to achieve comprehension of a given spoken message the learner needs to build meaning from the message heard. The manifestation of the phenomenon of assimilation often impedes the mobilization of the energy needed for learners' active involvement in the performance of such a task. Therefore, my intention is to see how learners can be trained to overcome the obstacle caused by the assimilation phenomenon so that they can involve in a process of construction of meaning. However, the divergent opinions on the issue of the relevance of the teaching of assimilation make it necessary to give some precisions indispensable to the pursuit of the reflection.

2.2.3. A Look at the Relevance of the Teaching of Assimilation

Brown⁹, cited in Christiane Dalton and Barbara Seidlhofer (1994:115), expresses his opinion on the teaching of assimilation in the following words:

I have already suggested that I do not approve of teaching students to produce 'assimilated' forms (...). Sophisticated students who have been taught to be aware

⁹ BROWN (1990 :158)

of these forms will introduce them into their own speech in a natural context when they feel they control them.

Roach (1991:130), cited in Dalton and Barbara¹⁰, shares this view when he sustains that teaching all English learners to produce assimilations would not be practical or useful. These words from Brown and Roach seem to discourage any effort to teach assimilation. I think that such a position would frustrate teachers whose task is to help their learners overcome the difficulties that they come across during learning activities. Yet, aren't they just saying that it would be more useful if 'teachers are trained into assimilatory process' such that they become more effective in helping learners through aural comprehension? A close look at their words shows that the objections raised are essentially concerned with production and not perception. Besides, the second part of Brown's¹¹ quotation is an implicit suggestion that learners should be trained to perceive and discriminate accurately the phenomenon of assimilation. In so doing they would be able to introduce these forms into their own spoken production.

The idea of training learners to be aware of assimilation sounds noble. Such training prepares them to recognize the different manifestations of this phenomenon though the objection to the idea of training learners for production seems dogmatic. This idea is in harmony with the philosophy of learning by doing advocated by eminent philosophers and educationists, the most famous of them being the Americans John Dewey and William James. I will therefore encourage a complementary use of the two approaches (production and perception) which are in fact strongly interconnected and interdependent in order to prepare learners to be able to overcome the obstacle caused by the different manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation.

3. How to Train Learners to Overcome the Obstacle Caused by the Phenomenon of Assimilation

¹⁰ Ibid. page 116.

¹¹ Op.cit.

The obstacles mentioned earlier in this paper suggest the urgency of systematic teaching of this prosodic fact. One needs to construct a training experience which will offer the context for learners to develop an awareness of the phenomenon of assimilation and thereby develop some strategies to overcome the obstacle caused by this phenomenon.

3.1. Training Experience to Help Overcome the Obstacle

Preliminary phase

- Stage number 1 : **Adaptation of the choice to the stated goal**
The selected passage must offer the opportunity to learners to clearly perceive the different manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation. Its content should therefore match with the natural native oral expression rhythm.
- Stage number 2 : **Phonetic transcribing of the passage produced at a natural rhythm**
The teacher transcribes the listening passage and targets the different manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation.
- Stage number 3 : **Phonetic transcribing which ignores prosodic facts**
This phonetic transcribing corresponds to the production of the selected passage at a relatively slow rhythm which does not allow the manifestation of prosodic facts.

Implementation phase in the classroom

- Stage number 4 : **Listening to learn and learning to listen**
Learners listen to the passage which contains the manifestations at the natural speed.

During this stage they have to complete a task which will engage them in finding the elements that have been voluntarily omitted in the text available to them. These elements consist of pairs of words in which the phenomenon of assimilation occurs.

After realizing the existing difficulties, the teacher shows them the pairs they have been looking for.

- Stage number 5 : **Discriminatory analysis through juxtaposition**

The two phonetic transcriptions suggested by the teacher are exposed to learners. They analyze them trying to perceive the changes caused by the phenomenon of assimilation.

- Stage number 6 : **Explanation of the phenomenon of assimilation (1)**

Learners are invited to provide their explanation to the changes noticed.

- Stage number 7 : **Explanation of the phenomenon of assimilation (2)**

The teacher intervenes to provide more detailed explanations and the necessary enlightenment.

- Stage number 8 : **Speaking to get knowledge**

Opportunity is given to learners to practice the parts of the passage which contain the manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation.

- Stage number 9 : **Activity of consolidation**

Individual learners are asked to record a passage, spot the different manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation and prepare their explanation so that they can give a presentation during the next class.

- Stage number 10 : **Feedback from the activity of consolidation**

Individual learners present their work to the whole class. This presentation is followed by reactions on the part of the rest of the class which helps compensate for the existing deficiencies.

3.2. The Didactic Foundations of the Suggested Training Experience

The didactic foundations of the suggested training experience are explained by the fact that it exposes the mechanisms that allow learners to acquire the knowledge relating to the manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation. Contrary to the situations in which the teacher strives to provide explanations to these manifestations, the suggested experience exposes learners to a situation-problem (see stage number 4). The problem raised is to recognize the different manifestations of assimilation so that the content of the listening passage can be understood. The solving of this problem makes it necessary to overcome the obstacle relating to the changes caused at the level of the listening passage. Stage number 2 of the suggested experience offers the occasion to learners to involve in the construction of meaning. This investment consists essentially in carrying out a discriminatory analysis through juxtaposition that offers them the opportunity to provide their own explanations to the manifestations of assimilation.

This approach is an alternative to the dogmatic practice which encourages the teacher to just provide an explanation to the phenomenon in study. This dogmatism discourages learners' involvement in their own training and impedes the development of meta-cognitive strategies. When one considers the different stages of the suggested training experience, one notices that not only there is an interest in knowledge but there is also a concern with the process of learning. As a result, learners are more likely to voluntarily mobilize their knowledge and competences in future situations.

CONCLUSION

My preoccupation in this paper was to reflect on the didactic procedures which can allow teachers to help their learners to overcome the obstacle caused by the different manifestations of the phenomenon of assimilation so that they can achieve comprehension. This reflection has made it possible to establish two main explanations to the way this phenomenon impedes aural comprehension in English as a foreign language. The first explanation is mental confusion which prevents the learner from acquiring an idealized

mental image of the sounds that he hears. The second is related to the fact that the manifestation of the phenomenon of assimilation does not allow the mobilization of the **energy** needed for learners' involvement in the activity of the construction of meaning. In order to help learners overcome the obstacle caused by the different manifestations of assimilation I proposed a training experience which allows learners to invest themselves to the different stages which lead to an awareness of the different manifestations of assimilation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

ANDERSON, Anne and LYNCH, Tony *Listening*, Oxford: OUP, 1988.

BROWN, Adam (Ed.) *Approaches to Pronunciation Teaching*, Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1992.

CHRISTOPHERSEN, Paul *An English Phonetics Course*, London: Longman Press Limited, 1956.

DALTON, Christiane and SEIDLHOFER, Barbara *Pronunciation*, Oxford: OUP, 1994.

MACCARTHY, Michael *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*, Cambridge: CUP, 1991.

MEIRIEU, Philippe *Le choix d'éduquer: éthique et pédagogie*, Paris: ESF éditeur, 1991.

PERRENOUD, Philippe *Développer la pratique réflexive dans le métier d'enseignant*, Paris : ESF éditeur, 2001.

ROACH, Peter *English Phonetics and Phonology: a practical course (Third Edition)*, Cambridge: CUP, 1983.

THORNBURY, Scott *About Language: tasks for teachers of English*, Cambridge: CUP, 1997.

VECCHI, Gérard De et CARMONA-MAGNALDI, Nicole *Faire construire des savoirs*, Paris : Hachette Livre, 1996.