

Phonological objectives within language objectives at the A2 level in French: An example of didactic sequences from the *Mon alter ego* textbook

Objectifs phonologiques dans le cadre des objectifs linguistiques au niveau A2 en français : un exemple de sequences didactiques du manuel Mon alter ego

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Abstract

Theme progression in a textbook cannot exist without emphasizing the importance of teaching phonology and including phonological exercises within the didactic material. Using the *Mon alter ego* French as a Foreign Language textbook corpus (2023) as an example, this paper will explore the phonological elements addressed at the A2 level according to the CEFR and how these are taught through the action-oriented approach. Although phonology is often not a primary focus, as textbooks typically prioritize lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic objectives, mastering phonology is a crucial component, especially in a language like French, where there is a significant disparity between phonology and orthography. This paper will demonstrate how phonological objectives are presented in the selected corpus, within the thematic progression, and the structure of the didactic sequences.

Keywords : CEFR - didactic sequences - phonology - *Mon alter ego* A2 - theme progression.

Résumé

La progression thématique dans un manuel ne peut exister sans souligner l'importance de l'enseignement de la phonologie et sans inclure des exercices phonologiques dans le matériel didactique. En utilisant le corpus du manuel de français langue étrangère *Mon alter ego* (2023) comme exemple, cet article explorera les éléments phonologiques abordés au niveau A2 selon le CEFR et la manière dont ils sont enseignés à travers l'approche actionnelle. Bien que la phonologie ne soit souvent pas l'objectif principal, car les manuels privilégient généralement les objectifs lexicaux, grammaticaux et pragmatiques, la maîtrise de la phonologie constitue un élément crucial, notamment dans une langue comme le français, où il existe un écart significatif entre la phonologie et l'orthographe. Cet article démontrera comment les objectifs phonologiques sont présentés dans le corpus sélectionné dans le cadre de la progression thématique, et la structure des séquences didactiques.

Mots clés : CEFR - phonologie - séquences didactiques - *Mon alter ego* A2 - progression thématique.

Introduction

Teaching phonetics, inherently interdisciplinary, is closely interconnected with processes of second language acquisition, speech sciences, and second language pedagogy (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2016). Consequently, recent research in the domain of second language learning and teaching, particularly from the perspective of lingua franca, has sparked significant interest in the study of second language pronunciation. This growing interest has led to the publication of dedicated journal issues focused on pronunciation (e.g., Cardoso & Trofimovich, 2014). As Fredet & Nikou (2020: 1) highlight, mastering proper pronunciation (“phonetic competence”) requires both specific instruction and systematic practice, which will help the learner (better) perceive and produce the sound units of the language in given contexts. Lojacono (2008: 125) argues that a learner of FLE (French as a Foreign Language) will initially recognize only the phonemes that are part of their own language. This highlights the importance of phonology in language teaching and learning, as we only hear what we can recognize. It is also important not to overlook the effect of production—articulatory habits—on perception. Troubetzkoy (1976: 54) already discussed the concept of the *phonological filter*, which “codes” auditory information according to the

phonological system of the speaker's first language, leading to a phonetically inaccurate interpretation of the sounds of the foreign language. Thinking and working in terms of phonological oppositions, rather than relying on the traditional alphabet, helps refocus the debate: it is no longer a question of correcting defective pronunciation, but rather educating the ear.

Despite the “hesitant” return of phonetics instruction in foreign language classrooms in recent years, “general” methods of (FLE) continue to allocate little space to phonetic activities, which, moreover, are either insufficient or presented in a random order, failing to meet the actual needs of learners (Dufeu, 2008). Phonology continues to be taught implicitly in many cases, as many teachers lack confidence, fearing they may not present the 'correct' model, often due to limited or no specific training. Guimbretière (1994: 5) considers phonetics to be the fundamental discipline for the study of spoken language, particularly in the teaching/learning of a language. However, phonetics is rarely taught in FLE classes, especially abroad, as evidenced by the phonetic distortions that specialists have repeatedly highlighted: inappropriate pronunciation of certain sounds by English speakers, German speakers, Arabic speakers, etc. The 2001 CEFR made some strides in addressing this issue by offering a detailed description of phonological aspects in its main text. However, the 2001 CEFR phonology scale gave the impression that proficiency progression was primarily about becoming more like a native speaker, while research has shown that intelligibility is far more critical for communication than accent. The new CEFR Phonology scale introduces three subscales: Overall phonological control, for those seeking a simple update of the 2001 holistic scale, as well as Sound articulation and Prosody. This updated scale expands the scope of phonological competence compared to the 2001 version and removes the native-speaker ideal, with the overall aim of providing clearer, more explicit guidance for teachers (CEFR, 2001, 2018).

Regarding the teaching of phonological aspects, several elements must be considered, such as: i) the characteristics related to the system of sounds and their pronunciation, and ii) prosodic features, i.e., intonation, rhythm, and stress. In this regard, the aim of this study is to examine the following hypotheses:

1. Phonology is taught in the textbook in every lesson.
2. Phonology instruction should include both an explicit focus on pronunciation-focused activities (segregated) and the inclusion of pronunciation in the teaching of new vocabulary and grammar (integrated).
3. The lessons consider suprasegmental phonological characteristics, namely prosody, including intonation, rhythm, and stress.

1. CEFR and the place of phonology

As is well established, since its introduction in 2001, the CEFR, alongside its accompanying tool for learners, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), has become a cornerstone of the Council of Europe's intergovernmental educational programmes. These initiatives aim to promote the right to quality education for all. Language education is a key component of the Council of Europe's core mission, which is 'to achieve a greater unity between its members.' It is fundamental to the effective realization of the right to education, as well as other individual human rights and minority rights, and contributes broadly to the development and preservation of a democratic culture. The CEFR is designed to foster high-quality plurilingual education, enhance social mobility, and encourage reflection and collaboration among language professionals in curriculum development and teacher education. Additionally, the CEFR provides a metalanguage for discussing the complexities of language proficiency in a multilingual and intercultural Europe, helping education policymakers reflect on coherent and transparent learning objectives and outcomes (CEFR, 2018: 11). It is important to highlight the various communicative language competences described by the CEFR, including: Linguistic competence, General linguistic range, Vocabulary range, Grammatical accuracy, Vocabulary control, Phonological control, and Orthographic control (CEFR, 2018: 129).

According to CEFR (2018: 133), in language teaching, the phonological control of an idealized native speaker has traditionally been regarded as the target, with accent being perceived as a marker of poor phonological control. The emphasis on accent and accuracy, rather than intelligibility, has hindered the development of pronunciation teaching. Idealized models that disregard

the retention of accent fail to account for context, sociolinguistic factors, and learners' needs. The 2001 CEFR scale seemed to reinforce such perspectives, which led to the decision to redevelop the scale from scratch. A process report on this sub-project is available on the CEFR website. Referring to the content of the CEFR, Moraz & Prikhodkine (2011: 101-102) list a comprehensive range of elements that comprise phonological competence:

1. The sound units of the language (phonemes) and their realization in particular contexts (allophones),
2. The phonetic features that distinguish phonemes (distinctive features such as, for example, sonority, nasality, occlusion, labiality),
3. The phonetic composition of words (syllabic structure, phoneme sequence, word stress, tones, assimilation, elongation),
4. Prosody or sentence phonetics:
 - Sentence stress and rhythm
 - Intonation
 - Phonetic reduction
 - Vowel reduction
 - Strong and weak forms
 - Assimilation
 - Elision.

Based on an extensive review of the literature and consultation with experts, the following core areas were identified to inform the production of new descriptors:

1. Articulation, including pronunciation of sounds/phonemes,
2. Prosody, encompassing intonation, rhythm, stress (both word stress and sentence stress), and speech rate/chunking,
3. Accentedness, accent, and deviation from a "norm"
4. Intelligibility, focusing on how accessible the meaning is to interlocutors, as well as their perceived difficulty in understanding (often referred to as "comprehensibility").

However, due to some overlap between subcategories, the scale operationalizes these concepts into three main categories such as overall phonological control (replacing the previous scale), sound articulation and prosodic features (intonation, stress, and rhythm). However, intelligibility has become a key factor in distinguishing between levels. The focus is on how much effort is required from the interlocutor to decode the speaker's

message. Descriptors from the two more detailed scales are summarized in broader statements, with explicit mention of accent across all levels. The focus is on familiarity with and confidence in using the target language's sounds, including the range of sounds a speaker can articulate and the precision with which they do so. A key concept operationalized in the scale is the clarity and precision of sound articulation. Furthermore, the focus extends to the ability to effectively use prosodic features to convey meaning more precisely. Key concepts operationalized in this regard include: control of stress, intonation, and rhythm and the ability to exploit and/or vary stress and intonation to emphasize particular aspects of the message.

When it comes to phonological control, Piccardo (2016) analyzes its significance in his *Phonological Scale Revision Process Report*. The author (2016: 7) emphasizes in the first phase that the CEFR highlights the description of the communicative language process, particularly the section on execution and especially production. It is important to emphasize that the production process involves two components: i) the formulation component takes the output from the planning component and assembles it into linguistic form. This involves lexical, grammatical, phonological (and, in the case of writing, orthographic) processes, which are distinguishable and, in some cases (e.g., dysphasia), appear to have a degree of independence, although their exact interrelation is not fully understood; ii) articulation component organizes the motor innervation of the vocal apparatus to convert the output of the phonological processes into coordinated movements of the speech organs, producing a sequence of speech waves constituting the spoken utterance, or alternatively, the motor innervation of the hand to produce handwritten or typewritten text (ibid: 7). Many learners, particularly mature students, will find their ability to pronounce new languages facilitated by:

1. An ability to distinguish and produce unfamiliar sounds and prosodic patterns,
2. An ability to perceive and concatenate unfamiliar sound sequences,
3. An ability, as a listener, to resolve (i.e. divide into distinct and significant parts) a continuous stream of sound into a meaningful, structured string of phonological elements,
4. An understanding/mastery of the processes of sound perception and production applicable to new language learning. These general

phonetic skills are distinct from the ability to pronounce a particular language.

1.1. Description of phonological characteristics according to the A2 level of the CEFR

As is well known, the illustrative descriptors are presented within descriptor scales. Each descriptor scale provides examples of typical language use in a particular area, calibrated at different levels. Each individual descriptor has been developed and calibrated separately from the other descriptors on the scale, ensuring that each one provides an independent criterion statement that can be used on its own, without needing to reference the context of the scale. In fact, the descriptors are primarily used in this way: independently of the scale that presents them. The aim of the descriptors is to provide input for curriculum development (CEFR, 2018: 41). When it comes to phonological control, as defined by the CEFR (2018), pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood, though conversational partners may occasionally need to ask for repetition. A strong influence from the other language(s) spoken by the individual may affect stress, rhythm, and intonation, which may, in turn, impact intelligibility and require collaboration from interlocutors. Nevertheless, the pronunciation of familiar words remains clear.

Considering sound articulation, the CEFR (2018: 135) states that pronunciation is generally intelligible in simple everyday situations, if the interlocutor tries to understand specific sounds. Systematic mispronunciation of phonemes does not hinder intelligibility, provided that the interlocutor is willing to recognize and adjust to the influence of the speaker's language background on pronunciation. Piccardo (2016: 22) emphasizes that at the A2 level, accent is generally influenced by other language(s) the learner speaks, and this may sometimes affect intelligibility. The learner can use the prosodic features of everyday words and phrases intelligibly, despite a strong influence on stress, intonation, and/or rhythm from other languages they speak. Prosodic features (e.g., word stress) are adequate for familiar, everyday words and simple utterances.

When discussing prosodic features, the CEFR (ibid) explains that learners can use the prosodic features of everyday words and phrases intelligibly,

despite a strong influence on stress, intonation, and/or rhythm from the other language(s) spoken. Prosodic features (e.g., word stress) are adequate for familiar everyday words and simple utterances.

2. *Mon alter ego* – A textbook corpus for research

The legitimate question that arises is to what extent this FLE textbook, as a didactic tool, is effective in teaching phonology with its repertoire of exercises. Beyond the issue of the reproducibility of audio excerpts in the classroom, the central objective of the methods is to enable the learner to reproduce the memorized elements in ordinary conversational situations, in an appropriate manner. As Diraison (2020: 5) states, perception is fundamentally a complex psychological operation by which the mind, by organizing sensory data, forms a representation of external objects and becomes aware of reality. While hearing is the physical ability to detect sounds, oral perception is the process that interprets a sound flow into phonemes and then words, measuring the ability to segment the acoustic stream into phonological units. It constitutes the first link in the comprehension chain.

For the purposes of this research, we have chosen the French as a Foreign Language (FLE) textbook *Mon alter ego* A2, the new version published in 2023. The textbook consists of 8 units, each containing 3 lessons. In each unit, the following elements are clearly highlighted: needs (*besoins*), target tasks (*tâches-cibles*), as well as pragmatic and linguistic objectives. The linguistic objectives are divided into morphosyntactic, lexical, and phonetic objectives. At the end of each unit, the following elements are included: *contenus socioculturels (fenêtres sur)* and *stratégies et outils pour*. This version of the textbook also includes a digital section for learners (*Parcour digital*, the digital student book, and the self-correcting activity book), as well as a smartphone application. Additionally, supplementary didactic materials are provided for teachers and institutions.

2.1. Corpus analysis and results

In the following table, we present an overview of all the units, lessons, and phonological elements for each lesson.

Units	Lessons	Phonology
Dossier 1: Être en relation	Leçon 1: Entretenir des relations amicales Leçon 2: Utiliser des moyens de communication Leçon 3: Faire le point sur ses relations	- L'élision du <i>e</i> avec les pronoms COD - Phonie-graphie: l'élision <i>le</i> ou <i>l'</i> - Phonie-graphie: les terminaisons de l'imparfait - Les sons [e] / [ɛ], la différenciation passé composé / imparfait
Dossier 2: Agir en consommateur	Leçon 1: S'approvisionner en produits de consommation courante Leçon 2: Faire des choix de consommation Leçon 3: S'habiller	- La liaison avec le pronom <i>en</i> - Les sons [b] et [v] - Phonie-graphie: les consonnes muettes en fin de mot et le <i>e</i> muet - Le son [j] - Phonie-graphie: les graphies du son [j] et la prononciation de la lettre <i>y</i>
	Leçon 1: Se loger Leçon 2: Choisir un	- La prononciation de <i>plus</i>

Dossier 3: Choisir son cadre de vie	lieu de vie Leçon 3: Comprendre et respecter des règles de vie citoyenne/de savoir-vivre	Phonie-graphie: les deux prononciation de <i>e</i> sans accent - La prononciation de <i>tous</i> - La distinction [u], [o] et [ɔ]
Dossier 4: S'insérer dans la vie active	Leçon 1: Acquérir un expérience professionnelle Leçon 2: Trouver un emploi Leçon 3: Se former	- Les sons [R] et [l] - Phonie-graphie: le <i>e</i> caduc dans les verbes au futur simple - Le rythme de la phrase et l'intonation
Dossier 5: Se distraire	Leçon 1: Sortir au restaurant Leçon 2: Choisir un programme de divertissement Leçon 3: Participer à des manifestations culturelles	- L'intonation expressive et l'appréciation - Phonie-graphie: <i>qui / qu'il / à qui il</i> - Le son [ɲ] - Phonie-graphie: les graphies du son [ɲ]
Dossier 6: Découvrir de nouveaux horizons	Leçon 1: Se dépayser, déconnecter Leçon 2: Voyager, découvrir des traditions Leçon 3: Vivre une nouvelle expérience /	- Les liaisons obligatoires et interdites entre l'adjectif et le nom - Les consonnes tendues et relâchées - Phonie-graphie: [k] /

	Relever un défi	[g]; [ʃ] / [ʒ]; [s] / [z] (synthèse)
Dossier 7: S'informer, se cultiver	Leçon 1: Suivre l'actualité Leçon 2: Suivre l'actualité sportive Leçon 3: Choisir un livre	- Les adverbes en <i>-ment</i> - Phonie-graphie: les adverbes en <i>-ment</i> - La prononciation de la lettre x - Phonie-graphie: les graphies de [ks] et [gz]
Dossier 8: Se souvenir, transmettre	Leçon 1: Partager l'histoire familiale Leçon 2: Témoigner d'une époque Leçon 3: Transmettre des expériences et des valeurs	- L'enchaînement vocalique - Phonie-graphie: la prononciation des mots avec tréma - Les sons [w] et [ɥ]

Table I. Units, lessons and phonological elements

Let's remind ourselves once again of the research hypotheses we formulated for this study. The first hypothesis (H1) is that phonology is integrated and taught in every lesson of the textbook. This hypothesis can be confirmed, and we conclude that it receives sufficient attention, with phonological goals being balanced with the other objectives and adequately represented. The second hypothesis (H2) is that phonology instruction should encompass both an explicit focus on pronunciation-oriented activities (segregated) and the integration of pronunciation into the teaching of new vocabulary and grammar (integrated). This hypothesis can be confirmed, as we observe that, in addition to the phonological goals, all other objectives (lexical, morphosyntactic, pragmatic) advocated by the CEFR and the *approche*

actionnelle, which serves as the methodology for the textbook, are also represented. Phonological elements include pronunciation exercises such as pronunciation of adverbs *plus* and *tous*, particularly specific because the final sound –s is sometimes audible and sometimes not, the distinction between open and closed vowels /E/, /O/, using the method of phonological opposition. We also find the pronunciation of the phoneme –x in combinations like [ks] and [gz], as well as the pronunciation of semi-vowels of a similar phonological feature, such as [w] and [ɥ]. On the other hand, pronunciation is also integrated into morphosyntactic structures, such as the obligatory and prohibited liaisons between nouns and adjectives, the liaison with the pronoun *en*, the silent –e in the *futur simple*, and the pronunciation of endings in the imperfect tense, which involves mastering the open vowel [ɛ]. It is important to note that, as supplementary material alongside the textbook, all listening exercises that accompany the lessons, as well as videos specifically related to phonology exercises, are available via a web link. We believe that this method enhances and improves instruction, as the teacher combines audio recordings with videos. For example, in short video clips, the pronunciations of sounds such as [u], [o], [ɔ], the semi-vowel [j], and the consonants [b], [v], [R], [l], as well as other sounds, are explained, allowing students to both hear and see these sounds in action. It is also worth noting that this type of exercise is present in the *Parcour digital* section, and this digital format is primarily intended for students who can independently navigate through the exercises and review the material. However, we note that in the phonological exercises at the A2 level of the textbook, there are no exercises for the repetition of nasal sounds, which are also specific to the early levels of the CEFR. However, such exercises are included in the A1 level textbook. The third hypothesis (H3) in this study concerns the consideration of suprasegmental phonological characteristics, namely prosody, including intonation, rhythm, and stress. We confirm this hypothesis as well, since the textbook suggests exercises on sentence rhythm and intonation, although to a lesser extent compared to other types of phonological exercises. It is important to emphasize that due to the noticeable discrepancy between the writing and pronunciation of the French language, this section is included in each unit, specifically illustrating the reflection of pronunciation in writing and vice versa, as seen in examples such as: elision *le* or *l'*, the silent consonants at the end of words, as well as *qui* / *qu'il* / *à qui*

il, etc. Given the significant discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation in French, this type of exercise is essential, as it addresses all the parameters related to both writing and speaking in a single exercise. It is also important to consider the spelling of verb endings in the imperfect tense and the specific pronunciation of their graphemes, particularly in the third person (–ait, –aient), as well as the mute /e/ in the future tense.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have provided a brief overview of the importance of phonology in language teaching, using the example of the French as a Foreign Language (FLE) textbook *Mon alter ego* for the A2 level according to the CEFR. We did not aim for exhaustiveness but rather sought to examine the types and frequency of exercises related to phonology in the French language, specifically those elements concerning pronunciation: open and closed vowels, consonant pronunciation and their combinations, or the absence of pronunciation of certain consonants at the end of words. We also paid attention to the representation of prosody in the textbook, i.e., exercises related to melody and intonation, as well as the phenomena of elision and liaison. We confirmed all three hypotheses that we set out at the beginning of the paper. Although phonology is often marginalized in teaching, we demonstrated that phonological exercises are present in every lesson of our corpus. These exercises are presented both segregatively, i.e., separate from the content of the lesson itself, and integratively, as part of grammatical units, such as the pronunciation of the mute /e/ in the future tense, the alternation of open and closed /E/ in the *passé composé* and imperfect tenses, etc. We believe that prosodic elements are sufficiently represented, keeping in mind that this is an A2 level, a relatively advanced stage of language learning, which assumes that prosodic elements were also given attention at the A1 level.

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