CeLTA Fellowship 2017-2018 Report
Liaisons in French: What are students truly learning in class?
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1. Project completion

My goal for this project is to quantify how much learning takes place during the semester in terms of students producing French liaisons accurately. To do this, it is necessary to extract all the examples of liaisons from recordings made by the students enrolled in FRN 330 (French phonetics and pronunciation) and to transcribe whether each liaison is produced accurately or not.

Thanks to the fellowship, I have hired two RAs who have done the extraction and transcription of these liaisons. They worked on 3 groups of students: FRN 330 taught in Fall 2016, FRN 330 taught in Spring 2017 and FRN 320 taught in Fall 2017, which is used as the control group because they have not taken FRN 330 yet.

2. Outcomes

The project seeks to ask two main research questions:
- Do students in FRN 330 (= the treatment group) actually produce French liaisons more accurately after they are given the list of explicit rules than before? And if there's an improvement with the lesson, does it last?
- How do they compare to the control group?

Preliminary results, presented on March 15, 2018, suggest that both the control group and the treatment group improved over the course of the semester. However, teaching explicit rules seems to help because the difference between the two groups becomes significant on the recording associated with the lesson on liaisons and remains significant after the lesson. But it doesn't seem to lasting effect as the difference narrows at the end of the semester.

3. Impact

The next step in the study is going to give results that will have an impact on teaching. Rather than stopping at the 'surface' level of comparing the treatment and the control group, I will look at the detail of each of the many contexts or rules of liaisons (such as between an article and a noun or a pronoun and a verb). In particular, I will compare both groups to see which contexts improve with treatment and which ones don't. I will also look at which contexts may have been acquired naturally before liaisons are even discussed. In other words, what contexts are pronounced correctly by students in the treatment group before treatment and in the control group?

These results will influence how I teach liaisons in the future by enabling me to spend less time on contexts that are acquired implicitly and more on those where explicit instructions made a difference. The results will also inform what is included in the 2nd edition of my French pronunciation textbook, which is currently underway.

Preliminary results with a smaller treatment group and without the control group have been presented at PSLLT in 2017. New results will be submitted for presentation at the AFLS conference in 2019 and shortly followed by submission for publication in PSLLT journal or JFLS in 2020.