

Description of Project

Title: The role of explicit instruction in the acquisition of *liaison* in French: The intersection of syntax and phonology

Description of Project: Despite evidence that explicit grammar instruction plays a limited role in SLA (VanPatten, 1987; Terrell, 1991; *inter alia*), when taught, it is typically grammar in the form of pedagogic rules (e.g. surface level descriptions found in textbooks) that are taught. In teaching *liaison*, this is also true— students are given descriptive lists of when (not) to do it. Because there is a strong relationship between syntactic structure and obligatory *liaison*, this pilot study looks at the role that teaching underlying syntactic structure rather than surface descriptive rules, can play on students being able to correctly produce *liaisons*.

Undergraduates in FRN 430 (French linguistics taught by Anne Violin-Wigent) were given a pre-, post-, and delayed post-test around a lesson on the syntactic environments in which latent consonants emerge as obligatory *liaison*. Testing took the form of students making oral recordings and taking a written questionnaire in which subjects had to alternately produce and mark where *liaison* was either required or blocked. Preliminary analysis indicates an upward trend in accuracy in cases where *liaison* is required. There was a slight downward trend in accuracy where *liaison* is syntactically blocked. This indicates that the training is effective, but is causing students to overgeneralize *liaison* environments. Nevertheless, the average increase in accuracy for obligatory *liaison* environments (19%) is four times the average decrease in accuracy for blocked *liaison* (5%). Given this, the results of the final study will help us to isolate those syntactic environments where students have difficulty in consistently producing *liaison*.

Students were given two pre-tests (one written and one oral) about a week before the in-class training session. I then came in to class (Feb. 24, 2016) to deliver the training. This consisted of a 45 minute long presentation (using PowerPoint) on those syntactic environments where *liaison* is both licensed or blocked. Students were given a chance to ask questions and work on creating syntactic trees to demonstrate understanding of the points being made. In the week following the in-class training, students were given a post test which was then followed by a delayed post test in April.

Outcomes

As of this writing, the results are preliminary largely in part because I haven't yet finished coding and doing data analysis for all students and all tests. Data analysis was projected to take place this summer in the original fellowship proposal. Nevertheless, initial results indicate that as of the immediate written post test, recognition of *liaison* in certain environments has improved. In particular, cases where there is a plural noun modified by a pre-nominal adjective, students improved in their recognition of this

environment where liaison is licensed and obligatory. Students also improved in recognition of environments where liaisons are not licensed, and hence blocked. In particular, there was significant improvement in recognition of interrogative words as being blocked from liaison as the result of a movement operation. Interestingly, although perhaps not surprisingly, students fared much worse when these same words (e.g., *quand*) function as complementizers, which do, in fact, license liaison. One interpretation of this is that they have learned a rule, but are now overgeneralizing and over-applying that rule. This, then, has two implications. Either what we set out to do – explain the underlying syntax to improve recognition of licensed environments—didn't work because they are unable to distinguish between the two different environments (WH movement vs. being the head of a CP) or because there needs to be better (i.e. more) training. At this point, I reject the null hypothesis that explicit instruction (in the way that we did it) has no effect. This is because we saw an improvement from this study and the students have already had traditional explicit instruction (in FN 330), which is of the type that we were testing against.

Impact on language teaching and transferability

This is a hard question to answer. Clearly if the results pan out, this would be a useful or an effective way for someone to teach liaison versus taking the “descriptive rules” approach. On the other hand, it does require someone to have an understanding of syntax beyond a basic level—something not all language teachers may have. For someone who doesn't have this, teaching about syntactic environments as a way of seeing patterns of liaisons would be hard. On the other, other hand, the potential benefits may go beyond one phonological phenomenon in one language. That is, to teach this way, we have attempted, in an overt and explicit way, to tap into underlying knowledge—the same kind of knowledge that input based, communicative classrooms try to tap into, but in an implicit manner. While it may not be feasible for all language teachers to teach this way, by seeing how far we can push students to have an explicit understanding of the deeper structure of language, we may be able to glean from these results better strategies to teach at the implicit level which, in turn, may lead to more robust acquisition.