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Teaching English Sociophonetics through a Tutored Project

THOMAS JAURIBERRY♦

Educational Innovations and the Teaching of Pronunciation

Teaching English pronunciation in English studies usually consists of lectures and practice in phonetics classes. This classic approach has two drawbacks. First, the role of the learner remains very weak, and the role of the teacher is essentially to transmit knowledge. Second, the phonological system taught is generally that of R.P. (Received Pronunciation, see Altendorf, 2004). While this standard variety has its advantages, it nonetheless remains virtually non-existent in the real communication situations that students will face. English departments can supplement the training of students with courses in sociolinguistics and sociophonetics (Foulkes and Docherty, 2006; Foulkes et al., 2013; Hay and Drager, 2007), allowing students to gain insight on the phonetic and phonological variation which exists in the contemporary English-speaking world, but these courses are still taught according to the same classic approach.

Bédard and Raucent (2015) point out that educational innovation is an important issue in higher education, and Bertrand (2014) militates for a change in teaching methods in higher education and invites higher education teachers to innovate. For Bertrand (2014), if we want to promote student success, it is therefore necessary to change teaching practices, which he considers still too unsuited to the training objectives and the student population. Unlike the classic approach consisting of a direct transmission from the teacher to the student, he

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deems necessary a change of orientation, so as to take into account the students and their learning as a priority: breaking with the classic approach and promoting access to information and interactions. Indeed, it seems clear that students entering university today have access to a phenomenal body of knowledge, including quality information and materials. Access to knowledge is therefore no longer necessarily guaranteed only by the teacher, and the latter must be able to change roles in order to better train the students.

Project-Based Pedagogy

Bertrand (2014) specifies that today's world is about developing skills and fostering interdisciplinarity, rather than disciplinary knowledge. By placing the focus on the student and the acquisition of skills, the learner becomes an active and autonomous actor in their learning and the teacher is no longer just a simple instructor: they now support the student in their journey (Bertrand, 2014). Likewise, Poumay (2014) summarizes the 'six levers' for improving the learning of higher education students. This includes making students more active, and giving them more control and autonomy over the tasks they have to perform and their learning. This approach is not new, since, as Poumay (2014) recalls, Biggs (1987) already stressed the need for deep learning and active students, while several educators, such as Decroly and Dewey (Charest, 2008) have highlighted the importance of placing the student in an active situation, in real and practical applications where one learns by doing.

Charest (2008: 82) defines project-based pedagogy (see also Béchard, 2001; Bell, 2010; Paccoud, 2014) as "an innovative teaching strategy that aims to motivate students by making them work in a functional and interdisciplinary team, in order to promote the acquisition of skills while carrying out a concrete project".

The role of the teacher in a project-based pedagogy is obviously no longer the same as in a traditional pedagogy of transmission. It is now a question of monitoring the groups, guiding them if necessary but without leading them, in order to promote the quality of the projects and to overcome dead ends (Charest 2008). Project-based pedagogy, which is relatively common in scientific and technical fields (Rouvrais et al. 2005), seems to be quite rare in language studies. This article presents the case of a tutored project set up at the University of Upper Alsace, in Mulhouse, with third-year undergraduate students of English studies. The students work autonomously, but are guided and advised by the teacher throughout the project, for which they must produce research work on the variation or change of spoken English.

Objectives of the Project

The tutored project which was carried out with third year students of the undergraduate degree in English (*LLCER licence d'anglais*) aims to apply the principles of pedagogical innovation and project-based pedagogy. It is part of a sociolinguistics course with classic content on phonetic and phonological variation (both social and geographic) and change in contemporary English.

This tutored project has three main objectives for learners. First, to reactivate knowledge about the social and geographical variation of spoken phenomena in English, such as T-GLOTTALING, R-VOCALISATION, FOOT-STRUT SPLIT, CREAKY VOICE, etc. (Wells, 1982), and to apply it to a specific corpus of contemporary English, according to a research focus chosen by the students themselves. Listening, transcription, linguistic and extra-linguistic parameters can be acquired in connection with productions from the English-speaking world, in all its variety, rather than in an artificial context. Secondly, it is about acquiring a set of transversal skills and learning strategies. Finally, it involves developing essential skills in sociophonetic research. These skills include collecting and creating a corpus of oral English, analyzing this corpus, analyzing data with statistics and graphs, managing citations and bibliography, writing a research paper, but also transversal skills such as group work, information retrieval, task planning. Eventually the tutored project is assessed on the final realization of the project, which takes the form of a research article, in which the students present their research.

Sociophonetics

Linguistic variation is at the centre of sociolinguistic research (Hay and Drager, 2007: 90; Laks, 1992). It is not random and it is structured by a number of factors (Foulkes and Docherty, 2006: 409). Sociophonetics is defined by Hay and Drager (2007: 90) as the study of socially conditioned phonetic variation. This discipline lies at the intersection of sociolinguistics and phonetics (Foulkes, 2005: 495). It involves the integration of the principles, techniques, and theoretical foundations of phonetics with those of sociolinguistics (Foulkes et al., 2013: 703). It is a question of jointly considering social variation and the phonetic and phonological production of speakers (Foulkes, 2005: 495; Hay and Drager, 2007: 90). Sociophonetic variation thus corresponds to the variation which is linked to a certain number of linguistic factors but also to social factors, in particular the age, the gender, and the social class of the speakers, as well as the style or the geographical origin (Foulkes, 2005: 495; Foulkes and Docherty, 2006: 409-410; Hay and Drager, 2007: 90). Finally, sociophonetic variation is generally manifested by statistical differences in the distribution of variants between different groups, rather than by the categorical presence or absence of a variant (Foulkes and Docherty, 2006: 410; Foulkes et al., 2013: 704).

Organisation of the Project

The tutored project was carried out within an English linguistics course, part of the 3rd year undergraduate degree in English. Unlike tutored projects which are often carried out in other academic fields such as law, marketing, or engineering, and which can be spread over several years, this is not the case for this type of project. Its duration is limited by the structure of the degree, as well as by the content of the lessons. The project itself lasts one semester, or twelve weeks of teaching, excluding evaluation. The project involved around 50 students. These are divided into around ten groups of four to six people, generally by affinity. The teacher did not intervene in the constitution of the groups, as this freedom of choice is at the heart of project-based learning. The teacher monitored, guided, and advised the different groups throughout the semester, discussing any problems of organization, method, or analysis with each group on an individual level. With the Covid situation, these interviews, initially in class, were replaced, along with distance learning, by videoconference interviews.

Choice of the Subject

During the first session, the rules and principles of the project and of the semester were presented to the students. They then formed groups. Each group had to determine a research theme for the tutored project, and define a research problem or hypothesis (Table 1). Only two parameters had to be absolutely respected. First of all, the work had to focus on the English language. Although it was not prohibited to compare this language with another, all the groups chose to focus only on English. The other parameter was the obligation to carry out research in sociophonetics. Students could refer to the studies and concepts seen during the first semester's course (such as Labov 1972, Wolfram 1969, Trudgill 1974, Harrington et al. 2000, etc.) to define the aims of their research, the methods to be used, and the varieties of English. These notions can be categorized into three broad concepts: linguistic change, social variation, and geographical variation. Of course, these three notions could intersect, and a group could, for example, study the evolution of a linguistic innovation over time, for different social categories of speakers.

For practical reasons, it was impossible for students to construct their own corpora. Indeed, this is a project carried out in Mulhouse, in Eastern France, and it was not possible, for reasons of time, resources, health and political constraints, to do so. Thus, the projects focused on corpora available either online or digitally. For example, the recordings of the IDEA (International Dialect of English Archive) site constitute a quality corpus, available free of charge online, and which brings together numerous standardized recordings of English-speaking speakers of different ages, genders, and geographical origins.

Many groups chose to analyse television series, generally recent ones. While some clips are available on platforms like Youtube, most of the series chosen are available on major streaming platforms, in particular Netflix. Some students chose, for example, to work on *The Crown* or *Outlander*. One group studied several phonetic and phonological features of Queen Elizabeth II, to compare her accent with that of the actresses who interpreted her role, for example in *The Crown*. Others opted for music analysis, using recordings of songs on the one hand, and public videos on YouTube on the other. One group, for example, looked to see if the accent of Matt Bellamy, singer and guitarist of the band Muse, had changed during their career, and if his accent was different live and on studio recordings. Finally, some groups chose to focus on the public discourse, usually in interviews, of various celebrities. For example, one group studied T-GLOTTALING (the realization of the phoneme /t/, in particular in the intervocalic position, as a glottal stop), for several groups of actresses and actors. In this study, three regions of the UK were analysed: London, Scotland, and Wales. In each of these geographic groups, three actresses and three actors were chosen. The research objective of this project was to show how the non-standard innovation that is T-GLOTTALING manifested itself for actors, taking into account the social factors of gender and geographical origin.

Varieties of English	Project title
American	The quality of an imitated American accent by British actors
Scottish	Sam Heughan's Scottish accent in Outlander and interviews
American	Vocal fry among popular and influential female celebrities
RP and American	Non-RP features of English in French singers' songs
British	Non-standard features in British politics
English	Matt Bellamy's accent through time and popularity
RP	Clare Foy acting in The Crown: Vocal lookalike of Elizabeth II?
British	Accents & Identity: The Evolution of One Direction
Australian	Linguistic Accommodation: Chris Hemsworth's Accent
British	Age, gender and glottalization in different regions of the UK

Table 1: Examples of sociophonetic studies conducted by students and the main varieties of the study

Division and Planning of Tasks

In a project-based pedagogy, the groups are autonomous. All the tasks that are to be carried out to complete the project must therefore be listed and defined by the members of the group. If possible, these tasks should be quantified in order to establish a schedule as quickly as possible. The groups thus had to define these tasks, but also to distribute them among the different members. The role of the teacher is minimal here, as each group must be able to determine how it works.

The tasks were distributed relatively evenly, depending on individual skills, but also on thematic or methodological interest. Some opted for statistical analyses and graphs because they already had good computer skills, especially with spreadsheets like Excel, or even with R (R Core Team, 2020). Others preferred to carry out documentary research in libraries or online. When the study included several social variables, or several linguistic variables, the students distributed these variables. It should also be noted that, during lockdown, some students did not have computer equipment at their disposal, which also influenced the choice of tasks to be performed. To help with the organization, the teacher presented Gantt charts in class, and several groups used such charts to plan tasks throughout the semester. Group work, collaboration, but also planning and distribution of tasks are transversal skills that are not specific to linguistics or even university studies. This type of project-based pedagogy thus makes it possible to combine disciplinary skills, in this case linguistics, with various management skills, valued both in the world of work and in that of university research. Although Gantt charts, discussion and peer negotiation are often new ways of doing things for students, most adapted well and quickly.

Corpus Collection

To carry out their project, the groups had to create their corpora. Since it was not possible for them to record English speakers directly, several other methods were chosen. In the case of corpora that were already established, such as IDEA recordings, it was a matter of selecting the speakers, then recording the conversations as audio files in .wav format. Usually, free software like Audacity were used. Students then had to search the documentation online and learn how to use it. In addition to the simple recording function, Audacity allows cleaning and editing of an audio file. This type of software could also be used to record only audio from series or movies, as several groups chose to analyse sociophonetic phenomena in popular series.

Data Analysis

Once the corpus was built, usually in the form of a set of .wav or .mp4 files, it was up to the group to analyse it. When distributing tasks, several strategies were chosen. Some groups preferred to delegate the analysis to just one or two people, who then analysed the entire corpus. Others divided up the analysis tasks, according to speakers or phonetic variables, if the study included several linguistic variables. Student were free to use the methodology they wanted, but were encouraged to draw inspiration from the studies and methods seen in class during the first semester. Thus, an essentially quantitative approach, in line with variationist sociolinguistic studies, was generally adopted. The students thus

determined one or more phonetic or phonological variables. The independent variables (age, sex, gender, social class, origin, etc.) were determined beforehand once the subject had been chosen and before the corpus was collected. Taking into account the material possibilities, the analyses were either auditory or acoustic, but not articulatory. During auditory analyses, for a given sociophonetic variable, the students' task was to determine the phonetic or phonological realization of a variable in a given word and context. For example, students who studied the frequency of T-GLOTTALING in the Muse group, for words where the phoneme /t/ appears in intervocalic position after a stressed vowel (for example in *better*), determined whether this phoneme was realized phonetically as an alveolar plosive [t] or glottal stop [ʔ]. Sometimes the variants were phonological, with the presence or absence of a phoneme, such as /h/. The case of rhoticity, with the presence or absence of /r/ in non-prevocalic position, is more complex, and was more difficult for students. Some groups opted for an acoustic rather than aural approach. In this case, the analysis was carried out using software such as Audacity, but mainly with Praat (Boersma & Weenik, 2014), a software recognized as effective in the acoustic analysis of speech. For example, one group acoustically quantified the presence of vocal fry in American female speakers. For their analyses, the students used their first semester course (sound change and variation through social and spatial space), as well as a set of research resources in linguistics and sociophonetics. The articles and books thus helped these groups to properly determine the phonetic phenomena (glottal stop, rhoticity, vocal fry, etc.) in order to identify them during analyses. Finally, the quantitative analysis of sociophonetic data involves the use of statistics and visualizations in the form of graphs from dataframes, approaches that are still too little known to language students. While the majority of groups chose to use Excel features, some opted for R, a more demanding choice but also more powerful in terms of statistics. Finally, in writing the research article, the students needed to present the results and the graphs obtained, with clarity and consistency.

Project Evaluation

The evaluation of the project takes place at the end of the semester. It is for the teacher to assess the acquisition of a set of skills targeted by this type of project, using a detailed evaluation grid (Table 2). These skills can be grouped into three categories. First of all, disciplinary skills, which relate to knowledge of the English-speaking world, the English language and its sociophonetic peculiarities. It is also about understanding, remobilizing, and applying linguistic studies and theories to a specific case, chosen by the group. The second category of skills centres around disciplinary know-how, not knowledge. Rather, it is about mastering analysis techniques in linguistics and phonetics, concepts and methods of data analysis (spreadsheets, graphics, statistics, Praat, Audacity), as

well as corpus creation techniques. This category also includes expectations in terms of writing skills. Students should acquire the codes of writing scientific English, and citation. Finally, the third category includes transversal skills, which are not specific to linguistics or English. These are the approaches, methods and skills that make it possible to collaborate with peers, to work in groups, to plan in advance, to seek reliable information and to synthesize it.

All these skills are therefore assessed in the form of a criteria grid, and a number of points is assigned to each skill. It is up to the teacher, depending on the objectives of the tutored project, to weigh the skills. Therefore if the work in sociophonetics is essential, but the transversal skills are considered secondary, this should appear in the number of points obtained for each skill. However, this type of project precisely aims to combine disciplinary skills, methodological skills, and transversal skills. From this perspective, a certain balance is justified between these categories.

The evaluation grid is shown to the students at the start of the semester, and they have access to it. This represents a learning contract with them, in terms of expectations, but also allows, thanks to the indications in the grid, to guide their work. The teacher, throughout the semester, must also be able to guide and help the groups.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Target
Objectives and hypotheses	The aims of the study are not presented in the paper **0 pt**	The aims of the study are only vaguely expressed **1 pt**	The research objectives and the hypotheses are present but lack precision and/or clarity **1.5 pts**	The research objectives and the hypotheses are presented clearly **2 pts**
Literature review	The relevant concepts or terms necessary in the study are not presented and explained **0 pt**	The relevant concepts or terms necessary in the study are used but not explained **1 pt**	The relevant concepts or terms necessary in the study are presented but should have been more complete or precise **1.5 pts**	The relevant concepts or terms necessary in the study are presented and explained clearly and in details. **2 pts**
Methodology and corpus	The methods used are not presented in the paper **0 pt**	Some elements of the methodology are presented, or are extremely imprecise OR the corpus size is not sufficient **1 pt**	The methodology used in the study (speakers, data, analysis, etc.) is incomplete or too vague OR the corpus size should have been larger **1.5 pts**	The methodology used in the study (speakers, data, analysis, etc.) is presented in details. Sufficient data was analysed. **2 pts**

Table 2. Example of some disciplinary skills and their description in the evaluation grid

Benefits for Students and Conclusion

Although the evaluation criteria are quite different, it is possible to compare the grades that students obtained at the end of the first semester, when they took a one-hour exam on the content of the lecture, with those they obtained at the end of the second semester, with the tutored project.

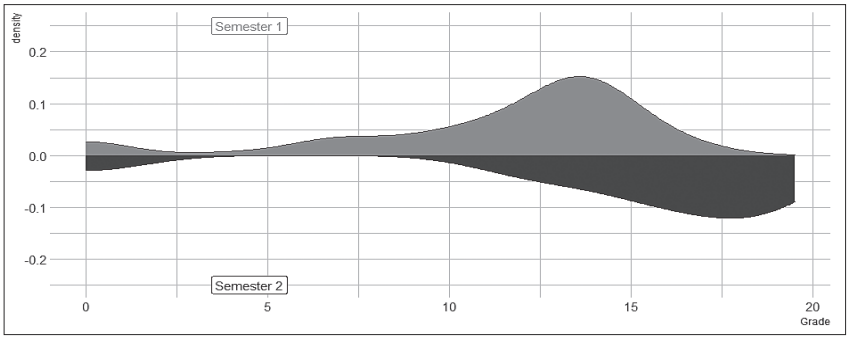


Figure 1. Mirror density plots of the grades students obtained at the end of the first semester with a content exam (top) and at the end of the second semester with a tutored project (bottom)

The results of the grades of the first semester (M=11.2, SD=4.4) and second semester (M=14.5, SD=5.8) indicate that the change towards a skill-based evaluation through the tutored project resulted in an objective improvement of the results, $t(58)=5.33$, $p<.0001$ (Figure 1). That the better grades really reflect a better understanding of English pronunciation and sociophonetic research still remains to be tested empirically, but this is an indication that it might be the case. In addition to the quantitative comparison of results, most students who completed an online survey about the tutored project (N=13) claim that they had a better understanding of English pronunciation and variation after their project (61%), while some are unsure (23%), and only some (16%) disagree. Finally, even though a majority of students (69%) found that the tutored project required more work than the regular course, only 15% found the project less interesting. This needs to be tested, but increased engagement may well facilitate the learning process in this case.

Although it remains rare in English studies, project-based pedagogy is an innovative pedagogy which makes it possible to give a new role to both the student and the teacher. It appears that the back and forth between analytical work, theory, and empirical studies helps consolidate students' knowledge of the sociophonetic variation of the English language. Better acquisition is achieved through student autonomy and personal and group work. This type of project therefore seems relevant to enable the acquisition of language skills, research

skills, and transversal skills, and might be used more frequently for the teaching of English and its pronunciation.

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