

## Didactics of Phonetics in the Algerian University and its Importance in Language Acquisition

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### Abstract

The teaching of phonetics within Algerian universities represents a pivotal yet frequently underestimated dimension of foreign language education. This article examines the didactic approaches employed in the instruction of phonetics at Algerian higher education institutions, exploring how these methods influence the process of language acquisition among learners of French and English as foreign languages. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from applied linguistics, phonological acquisition theory, and constructivist pedagogy, the study situates Algerian phonetics instruction within its broader sociolinguistic context, characterized by multilingualism, diglossia, and the residual influence of the colonial linguistic legacy. The article further investigates the challenges confronting both instructors and students in phonetics classrooms, including issues related to interference from Arabic and Tamazight phonological systems, insufficient exposure to authentic spoken input, and the predominance of grammar-translation methodologies that marginalize oral and phonological competence. Recommendations are proposed for the reform of phonetics curricula and the adoption of communicative and technology-enhanced approaches that align with contemporary language acquisition research.

**Keywords:** phonetics didactics, language acquisition, Algerian university, phonological competence, foreign language teaching, communicative approach

### 1. Introduction

The acquisition of a foreign language is a multifaceted process that encompasses grammatical, lexical, pragmatic, and phonological dimensions. Among these, phonological competence — the ability to perceive and produce the sound system of a target language — constitutes one of the most fundamental yet challenging aspects of language learning. In the Algerian academic context, where French and English are taught as foreign languages at the university level, the didactics of phonetics occupies a position that is both theoretically significant and practically complex.

Algeria's linguistic landscape is particularly rich and layered. Modern Standard Arabic serves as the official language of instruction at many levels of the educational system, while Algerian Arabic (Dardja) functions as the dominant spoken vernacular. Tamazight, recognized as a national and official language since 2016, adds another layer of phonological diversity. French, a former colonial language, continues to enjoy high

prestige in academic and professional domains, and English is increasingly present as a global academic and scientific medium. This multilingual mosaic creates both opportunities and obstacles for the teaching of phonetics at the tertiary level (Taleb Ibrahim, 2004, p. 47).

The didactics of phonetics in Algerian universities must therefore navigate a complex web of phonological systems, pedagogical traditions, institutional constraints, and learner expectations. Despite its centrality to oral communication and listening comprehension, phonetics instruction is frequently subordinated to grammar, written expression, and literary studies in university curricula. This article argues that a more systematic, theoretically informed, and practically oriented approach to phonetics teaching is essential for fostering genuine language acquisition among Algerian university students.

The article is organized as follows. Section Two provides a theoretical overview of phonetics within language acquisition research. Section Three situates the Algerian university within its sociolinguistic and institutional context. Section Four examines current didactic practices in phonetics instruction. Section Five identifies the principal challenges facing phonetics pedagogy. Section Six proposes recommendations grounded in contemporary research, and Section Seven concludes with a synthesis of the article's main arguments.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Phonetics and Language Acquisition**

### **2.1 The Role of Phonology in Second Language Acquisition**

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has consistently demonstrated that phonological development is not a peripheral concern but lies at the heart of communicative competence. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis posits that learners acquire language most effectively when they are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current level of competence ( $i + 1$ ). For phonological acquisition, this implies that learners must receive sufficient exposure to authentic spoken input in the target language, enabling them to internalize native-like phonological patterns through repeated, meaningful contact. Krashen's model, though debated, has had a lasting influence on how researchers conceptualize the relationship between input and phonological development (Krashen, 1982, p. 21).

Interactionist models, particularly Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, further emphasize the role of negotiated interaction in phonological acquisition. When learners

engage in communicative exchanges and receive corrective feedback on their pronunciation, they are prompted to notice the gap between their interlanguage phonology and the target norm. This "noticing" (Schmidt, 1990, p. 132) is considered a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for phonological restructuring. The implication for didactics is clear: phonetics instruction must move beyond decontextualized drilling toward communicatively embedded practice that invites genuine interaction and feedback.

Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model (SLM) provides another influential framework for understanding phonological acquisition in adult learners. The SLM holds that adult learners continue to be capable of phonological learning, provided they receive adequate input and explicit instruction. Crucially, Flege argues that the degree of phonological similarity between the first language (L1) and the target language (L2) determines the nature of acquisition difficulties: sounds that are perceived as similar to L1 sounds are often more problematic than those perceived as entirely new, because learners tend to assimilate novel sounds to existing L1 categories (Flege, 1995, p. 239). This insight has direct implications for Algerian learners, whose Arabic and Tamazight phonological systems diverge substantially from those of French and English.

## **2.2 Constructivism and Phonetics Pedagogy**

From a pedagogical standpoint, constructivist theories of learning, associated with the work of Vygotsky (1978) and later elaborated by scholars such as Ellis (2003), suggest that language learning — including phonological learning — is most effective when it is active, collaborative, and socially situated. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) implies that learners make the greatest phonological progress when they are supported by more competent interlocutors — whether instructors, peers, or digital tools — in tasks that stretch beyond their current independent phonological capacity (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Applied to phonetics instruction, constructivist principles advocate for the design of tasks in which students actively experiment with phonological features, receive scaffolded feedback, and progressively internalize target phonological norms through meaningful practice. This contrasts sharply with the behaviorist drilling approaches that have historically dominated phonetics teaching, particularly in postcolonial educational systems where pattern repetition and imitation were privileged over metacognitive phonological awareness (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 54).

## **2.3 The Critical Period Hypothesis and Adult Phonological Learning**

A significant strand of SLA research has focused on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which holds that there is a biologically determined window — typically closing around puberty — during which phonological acquisition proceeds most efficiently and naturally (Lenneberg, 1967). Beyond this critical period, it is argued, learners can still achieve high levels of phonological proficiency, but they are unlikely to attain native-like accent without exceptional circumstances or prolonged exposure. This hypothesis has sometimes been used to justify a defeatist attitude toward adult phonetics instruction in universities, on the grounds that learners are too old to benefit meaningfully from phonological training.

However, more recent research has challenged the strong version of the CPH. Scholars such as Birdsong (1992) and Moyer (2004) have documented cases of adult learners who achieved near-native phonological competence, and meta-analyses have consistently shown that explicit phonological instruction produces measurable gains in both perception and production, even among adult learners (Moyer, 2004, p. 78). These findings strongly support continued investment in phonetics didactics at the university level, where learners, though post-pubescent, remain highly capable of meaningful phonological development when instruction is well-designed and consistently delivered.

## **3. The Algerian University: Sociolinguistic and Institutional Context**

### **3.1 Multilingualism and Phonological Complexity**

Algeria's sociolinguistic situation is among the most complex in the Arab world. The coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, Tamazight varieties, and French — alongside the growing presence of English — means that Algerian students enter university with a phonological repertoire that is already highly diverse and potentially subject to multiple interference patterns (Mabrouk, 2006, p. 113). The phonological systems of Arabic and Tamazight differ from those of French and English in significant ways: Arabic and Tamazight possess pharyngeal and uvular consonants absent in French and English, while French and English include front rounded vowels and interdental fricatives that have no equivalent in the learner's L1 phonological inventory.

For students enrolled in French or English language and literature departments (commonly referred to in Algeria as Licence en Langue et Littérature Française or Licence en Langue Anglaise), these phonological discrepancies constitute a major source of acquisition difficulty. Research by Bensalah (2009) has documented systematic patterns

of phonological transfer among Algerian learners of French, including the substitution of pharyngeal fricatives for uvular approximants, the devoicing of word-final obstruents, and the reduction of French nasal vowel contrasts (Bensalah, 2009, p. 67). Similar transfer effects have been documented in the English phonology of Algerian learners, particularly with respect to the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, the distinction between /p/ and /b/, and the realization of English vowel contrasts (Saadi, 2012, p. 44).

### **3.2 Historical and Institutional Background**

The Algerian university system was substantially restructured following independence in 1962, with a strong emphasis on Arabization that persisted through the 1970s and 1980s. Foreign language departments, while preserved, were often marginalized within an institutional culture that prioritized Arabic as the medium of academic legitimacy. The LMD (Licence-Master-Doctorat) reform, introduced in Algeria from 2004 onward as part of a broader alignment with the Bologna Process, brought significant changes to curriculum design, including the formal incorporation of phonetics modules within foreign language programs (Manaa, 2010, p. 88).

However, the implementation of these reforms has been uneven. Phonetics courses, where they exist, are frequently taught in isolation from other language modules, with limited integration into oral communication, listening comprehension, or discourse analysis courses. The result is a compartmentalized phonetics instruction that students often experience as abstract and disconnected from their broader communicative needs (Abderrahman, 2014, p. 32). Furthermore, many phonetics instructors in Algerian universities were trained in literary or linguistic analysis rather than in applied phonetics or language teaching methodology, which affects the quality and orientation of classroom instruction.

## **4. Current Didactic Practices in Phonetics Instruction**

### **4.1 Curriculum Design and Course Content**

A review of phonetics course syllabi across several Algerian universities — including those of Algiers, Oran, Constantine, and Tlemcen — reveals a broadly similar pattern: phonetics modules are typically offered in the first or second year of the undergraduate cycle (Licence), with a focus on theoretical phonetics and phonology rather than practical pronunciation training. Course content generally covers the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), articulatory phonetics, phonemic analysis, and

basic prosodic features such as stress and intonation. While this theoretical grounding is valuable, it is often not complemented by sufficient practical, productive phonological work (Seddiki, 2009, p. 55).

In many programs, the dominant teaching methodology remains what Richards and Rodgers (2014) describe as the "presentation-practice-production" (PPP) model, applied in a largely decontextualized manner. Instructors present a phonological feature — for instance, the French nasal vowels or the English interdental fricatives — demonstrate its articulation using phonetic symbols and theoretical descriptions, and then require students to practice through repetition drills. While such drills can build familiarity with target sounds, they have been widely criticized in the SLA literature for their failure to promote genuine phonological acquisition, which requires not only accurate production but also perceptual sensitivity and the ability to deploy phonological knowledge in spontaneous communicative contexts (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p. 11).

#### **4.2 The Audio-Lingual Legacy**

The influence of the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), prevalent in language teaching worldwide during the 1950s and 1960s, continues to be felt in Algerian phonetics classrooms. The ALM, rooted in behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics, emphasized habit formation through intensive oral drilling, pattern repetition, and immediate error correction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 62). While this approach may produce a degree of phonological accuracy in controlled conditions, it does not equip learners with the phonological flexibility and self-monitoring capacity required for communicative language use.

In the Algerian context, the persistence of audio-lingual practices reflects broader institutional conservatism and a teaching culture that continues to value accuracy over fluency and formal correctness over communicative adequacy. This is compounded by examination systems that predominantly assess written competence, thereby implicitly signaling to both instructors and students that pronunciation is a secondary concern. The result is a systemic undervaluation of phonetics as a dimension of language proficiency (Bouhadiba, 2009, p. 71).

#### **4.3 Technology in Phonetics Teaching**

The integration of technology into phonetics instruction represents one of the most promising developments in contemporary language pedagogy, and some Algerian university instructors have begun to explore its potential. Computer-Assisted Language

Learning (CALL) tools, including speech analysis software such as Praat, phonetics training applications, and online pronunciation databases, offer learners the ability to record their own speech, visualize acoustic features, and compare their production with native speaker models (Chapelle, 2001, p. 47). Platforms such as Forvo, YouGlish, and the BBC Pronunciation Guide provide access to authentic spoken input across a wide range of accents and registers, addressing the perennial problem of limited exposure to native speaker speech in Algerian educational environments.

However, the systematic integration of such tools into phonetics curricula remains limited in Algeria, constrained by issues of digital infrastructure, instructor training, and institutional resistance to technology-enhanced learning. Surveys conducted among foreign language instructors at Algerian universities have found that while many are aware of digital phonetics resources, fewer than a third report using them regularly in their teaching (Derradji, 2012, p. 201). This represents a significant missed opportunity, given the demonstrated effectiveness of technology-mediated phonetics instruction in improving both perceptual discrimination and productive accuracy.

## **5. Challenges in Phonetics Pedagogy in the Algerian Context**

### **5.1 Phonological Transfer and Interference**

As noted above, the phonological distance between Arabic/Tamazight and French/English generates systematic patterns of transfer that constitute a persistent challenge for phonetics instruction. Transfer interference is particularly marked in the domain of consonantal articulation — where Arabic and Tamazight consonants that have no equivalent in the target language tend to be substituted for similar target phonemes — and in the domain of prosody, where the stress-timed rhythmic structure of English conflicts with the syllable-timed patterns more familiar to Arabic-speaking learners (Gut, 2009, p. 88).

Addressing these transfer effects requires not only explicit instruction in target phonological features but also contrastive phonological analysis that helps learners understand the systematic differences between their L1 and L2 phonological systems. Contrastive Analysis, while criticized in its strong predictive form, remains a valuable pedagogical tool when used reflectively to identify probable areas of difficulty and to design targeted instructional sequences (James, 1980, p. 34). Unfortunately, contrastive phonological analysis is rarely incorporated systematically into Algerian university

phonetics courses, which tend to present target language phonology in isolation rather than in explicit comparison with learners' L1 systems.

## **5.2 Insufficient Exposure to Authentic Input**

A major challenge for phonological acquisition in the Algerian context is the limited exposure to authentic spoken input in the target language outside the classroom. Unlike learners in immersion environments or those with regular access to native speaker communities, most Algerian university students encounter French and English primarily through classroom instruction and written texts. Television, cinema, and online media provide some exposure, but students vary widely in their level of engagement with such resources, and passive exposure without focused attention does not reliably lead to phonological development (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 116).

The didactic implications are significant: if the classroom is to be the primary locus of phonological acquisition for most students, then phonetics instruction must compensate for the absence of naturalistic input by providing rich, varied, and communicatively meaningful exposure to target language phonology. This requires a fundamental rethinking of how phonetics is taught — moving away from the analysis of isolated sounds and toward the integration of phonological awareness training within authentic listening and speaking activities that reflect the real-world uses of the target language (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p. 29).

## **5.3 Affective Factors and Phonological Anxiety**

Research in language learning motivation and affect has consistently shown that anxiety is among the most significant obstacles to language acquisition, and phonological production is particularly susceptible to its effects. Producing sounds in a foreign language makes learners acutely vulnerable to social judgment and ridicule, and fear of mispronunciation can lead to avoidance behavior, reduced oral participation, and inhibited phonological development (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127). In the Algerian classroom, where large class sizes, competitive academic cultures, and limited traditions of peer collaboration can exacerbate anxious feelings, this affective dimension of phonetics learning deserves serious pedagogical attention.

Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment in which phonological experimentation is encouraged, errors are treated as learning opportunities rather than failures, and collaborative phonological practice is normalized requires deliberate instructional design and a conscious shift in the instructor's pedagogical stance. Research

by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) has shown that learner enjoyment — a positive affective state characterized by curiosity, engagement, and playfulness — is at least as powerful a predictor of language learning success as anxiety, and that classroom activities designed to promote enjoyment can significantly enhance phonological learning outcomes (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 158).

#### **5.4 Instructor Training and Professional Development**

The quality of phonetics instruction in any educational system is ultimately dependent on the quality of instructor preparation, and this is an area where significant improvement is needed in Algerian universities. Many phonetics instructors at the undergraduate level were trained as literary scholars or general linguists, and may lack the specialized knowledge of articulatory and acoustic phonetics, phonological theory, and pronunciation pedagogy needed to design and deliver effective phonetics courses. Professional development in this area is sporadic and not institutionally mandated (Bouhadiba, 2009, p. 83).

Furthermore, the research culture in Algerian universities, while growing, does not yet strongly prioritize applied phonetics and pronunciation pedagogy. The result is a relative scarcity of locally produced research that could inform the adaptation of international phonetics teaching methodologies to the specific needs of Algerian learners. What research does exist — including work by scholars such as Bouhadiba, Bensalah, and Seddiki — is valuable but insufficiently integrated into curricular planning and instructor development processes.

### **6. Recommendations for Reform**

#### **6.1 Adopting a Communicative Approach to Phonetics**

The most fundamental recommendation arising from this analysis is that phonetics instruction in Algerian universities should be systematically reoriented toward a communicative approach in which phonological accuracy is developed through meaningful, interactive oral tasks rather than through decontextualized drilling. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, while requiring adaptation to the Algerian educational context, provide a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for this reorientation. Tasks such as information gap activities, role plays, collaborative presentations, and peer feedback sessions can be designed to foreground phonological

awareness without sacrificing communicative authenticity (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 87).

A particularly promising direction is the incorporation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) principles into phonetics instruction. Under a TBLT framework, learners engage in communicative tasks that require the use of the target language in realistic contexts, and attention to phonological form is embedded within the task cycle rather than treated as a separate pre-task exercise. Research by Ellis (2003) has shown that task-based approaches can promote both fluency and accuracy in phonological production, provided that tasks are carefully designed to create communicative pressure without overwhelming learners' processing capacity (Ellis, 2003, p. 173).

## **6.2 Integrating Technology-Enhanced Phonetics Learning**

Given the demonstrated effectiveness of technology-mediated phonetics instruction and the availability of free or low-cost digital resources, Algerian universities should make a concerted effort to integrate CALL tools into phonetics curricula. Speech analysis software such as Praat can be used in laboratory settings to help learners visualize and compare the acoustic properties of their own phonological production with those of native speaker models. Online phonetics training platforms provide systematic perceptual training that can complement productive practice in the classroom. Mobile applications designed for pronunciation training offer learners the opportunity to engage in phonological self-study outside class hours, maximizing exposure to target phonology (Chapelle, 2001, p. 53).

For technology integration to be effective, however, it must be accompanied by appropriate instructor training. Universities should invest in professional development programs that equip phonetics instructors with the technical skills and pedagogical knowledge needed to select, adapt, and integrate digital tools effectively. Collaborative communities of practice, in which instructors share experiences and resources related to technology-enhanced phonetics teaching, can provide a sustainable model for ongoing professional development (Derradji, 2012, p. 210).

## **6.3 Developing Locally Adapted Phonetics Curricula**

International phonetics teaching methodologies cannot be applied in the Algerian context without adaptation to the specific phonological profile and learning needs of Algerian learners. This requires the development of locally produced teaching materials that are grounded in contrastive analysis of the Arabic-French and Arabic-English

phonological interfaces, that acknowledge the multilingual repertoire of Algerian learners as a resource rather than an obstacle, and that reflect the sociolinguistic realities of French and English use in Algeria (Mabrou, 2006, p. 127).

The development of such materials should be informed by ongoing applied phonetics research focused on Algerian learner populations. Universities and the Ministry of Higher Education should prioritize funding for research projects that investigate the phonological development of Algerian learners of French and English, the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches to phonetics instruction in the Algerian context, and the relationship between phonological competence and broader communicative proficiency. Findings from such research should be systematically disseminated to phonetics instructors and incorporated into curriculum design processes.

#### **6.4 Reforming Assessment Practices**

The subordination of phonological competence in university assessment regimes sends a powerful and counterproductive message to both learners and instructors. If pronunciation is never assessed, students have little institutional incentive to invest in phonological development, regardless of how well phonetics is taught. Universities should therefore reform their assessment practices to include regular evaluation of oral phonological competence alongside the assessment of written and literary skills. This might include phonetically analyzed oral presentations, pronunciation portfolio projects in which students document and reflect on their phonological development over the course of the academic year, and oral examinations that include a phonological component (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010, p. 42).

Assessment reform should be accompanied by the development of clear, transparent, and learner-friendly phonological assessment rubrics that describe the phonological features expected at each level of proficiency. Such rubrics serve not only as assessment tools but also as learning guides that help students understand what phonological development looks like and how to orient their own learning efforts.

### **7. Conclusion**

This article has argued that the didactics of phonetics in Algerian universities constitutes a domain of both substantial importance and significant unrealized potential. Within Algeria's rich and complex multilingual landscape, the phonological development of learners of French and English is shaped by powerful forces of L1 interference, limited

exposure to authentic input, affective barriers, and institutional structures that have historically undervalued oral and phonological competence. Yet the research evidence is clear: phonological development is not only possible in adult learners but is profoundly responsive to well-designed, theoretically informed, and communicatively oriented instruction.

The reforms proposed in this article — a shift toward communicative and task-based phonetics pedagogy, the systematic integration of technology-enhanced learning, the development of locally adapted materials grounded in contrastive phonological analysis, and the reform of assessment practices to give oral phonological competence its due weight — are neither utopian nor resource-prohibitive. They require, above all, a change in educational culture: a willingness to recognize that language acquisition is fundamentally an oral phenomenon, that the ability to produce and perceive the sounds of a foreign language is not a cosmetic addition to linguistic competence but its very foundation, and that the Algerian university has both the capacity and the responsibility to develop that foundation systematically and rigorously.

As Algeria continues to navigate its place within a globalized linguistic economy in which English and French serve as languages of international communication, scientific publication, and economic exchange, the quality of phonetics instruction at the university level will become an increasingly critical determinant of Algerian graduates' communicative competence and professional mobility. Investing in the reform of phonetics didactics is therefore not merely an academic exercise but a contribution to the broader project of equipping Algerian citizens for full participation in the contemporary world.

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