

From Play to Sound Mastery: Rethinking the Learning of Phonetics in French as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

In response to the persistent difficulties in phonetic competence and the demotivation observed among French as a Foreign Language (FFL) learners, this article proposes a didactic reinvention. It explores gamification not as a mere playful addition but as a strategic lever for radically transforming the teaching of phonetics. By integrating targeted game mechanics, the aim is to move beyond traditional approaches to foster deep engagement, intrinsic motivation, and greater learner autonomy. The study presents a range of practical activities designed to refine auditory discrimination and articulatory accuracy while also developing essential linguistic and transversal skills. In so doing, the article invites critical reflection on the balance between playful enjoyment and pedagogical rigour, emphasising that the success of gamification lies in its thoughtful implementation adapted to the specific needs of the target audience, thereby promising the revitalisation of the learning of pronunciation in French as a foreign language.

Keywords: Phonetic competence, pronunciation, interactive learning, auditory discrimination, gamification

Introduction

In the learning of a foreign language, pronunciation plays a highly decisive role, as mastery of it is essential for being understood orally. Indeed, “without good phonetics, we have no chance, orally, of conveying a message that will be properly understood, even if the words have been well chosen and the syntax is correct” (Berri, 2007, p. 247). Good pronunciation, in principle, entails the acquisition of a “phonetic-phonological system” encompassing both the perceptual and productive aspects of linguistic competence (Detey et al., 2016).

The main aim of pronunciation teaching is to improve learners’ ability to perceive and produce sounds with greater authenticity, which may influence other linguistic skills. A good sense of pronunciation contributes to learners’ self-confidence and fosters their motivation and auditory attention. Nevertheless, learning pronunciation often constitutes a major challenge for learners of French as a foreign language. Numerous studies in the Algerian pedagogical context have highlighted the difficulties encountered by these learners in acquiring phonetic competence (Aisset, 2023; Benazzouz & Zerari, 2021; Gharbi, 2023; Kheloui, 2015).

Two main causes explain these difficulties (Aisset, 2023). First, the phonetic and phonological system of the source language, Arabic, influences that of the target language, French. The fact that certain phonemes of the foreign language do not exist in the mother tongue sometimes leads learners to make errors. Second, phonetics occupies a marginal position in school curricula. It is neglected at all levels and set aside in relation to other linguistic skills (Kheloui, 2015). Its teaching appears only at the primary level, in the form of isolated activities integrated into oral production sessions, which are often monotonous and not very motivating. In their lessons, teachers “aim to make learners speak in order to ensure that they have understood properly, or that they know how to identify the notions covered in class; in other words, they focus on comprehension without taking into account difficulties related to pronunciation and articulation” (Aisset, 2023, p. 331). At these stages, phonetics is not taught as a competence to be acquired; rather, it is perceived as a secondary subject (Benazzouz & Zerari, 2021).

At university, phonetics courses are limited to an introduction to basic notions. Teachers largely favour the teaching of articulatory phonetics. The proposed activities are often restricted to phonetic transcription exercises or written exercises on the basic notions already studied, while auditory discrimination and phonetic correction activities are neglected. Consequently, some students feel demotivated and eventually display shortcomings in pronunciation.

In the face of these challenges, it is essential to rethink learning strategies and practices to stimulate learner engagement and motivation. From this perspective, we assume that gamification constitutes a highly promising approach that can make pronunciation learning more ergonomic and, consequently, more attractive. By integrating playful elements such as rewards, challenges, levels, rankings, and interactive activities into the process of learning a foreign language (Mahfoud et al., 2024), gamification has demonstrated its effectiveness in developing various linguistic skills (Abd El-Aziz El-Tantawi, 2021; El-Arch Enany, 2022; Mahamed Seyam, 2023; Malek, 2024; Mehrabi & Habibi, 2023; Refai Ibrahim, 2023). It has thus also been proven to affect learner engagement, motivation, and interaction (Dhailis & Miloudi, 2024; Ouahbi & Darhmaoui, 2020).

The questions addressed in this research are as follows: How can gamification be used to improve the learning of pronunciation among learners of French as a foreign language, and in what ways does this approach constitute an effective solution in comparison with traditional methods?

In view of the persistent challenges associated with the acquisition of phonetic skills, which are often intensified by linguistic and cultural influences, our study aims to examine the extent to which the integration of playful elements can facilitate this learning process while making it more accessible and engaging. In particular, we examine the potential effects of gamification in terms of learners’ motivation, auditory attention, and phonetic progression.

To achieve this objective, we first define the concept of gamification and explore its applications in the field of education. We draw on existing studies and practices to illustrate its potential. We then detail a series of playful activities specifically designed for pronunciation practice and adapted to the specific needs of French as a foreign language.

I. What Is Gamification?

The term *gamification*, also referred to as *ludification*, first appeared in the digital media industry in 2008 and subsequently spread to the fields of marketing, academia, and game design.

Gamification is defined in various ways. According to Deterding et al. (2011, p. 5), it is “the use of game design elements in nongame contexts”. It consists, in effect, of using game techniques and mechanisms, such as badges, rewards, challenges, rankings, competitions, and levels, in nongame contexts with the aim of engaging and motivating individuals to adopt previously desired behaviours (Kevin, Hunter, & Dixon, 2012), as well as encouraging them to achieve specific objectives (Walther & Larsen, 2020).

In the educational context, it is defined as a set of “activities that place learners in a position of competition or cooperation and that employ game mechanisms” (Schmoll, 2016). The objective of integrating gamification into learning processes is to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge; stimulate learners’ motivation, engagement, and productivity; and promote learning by making it more interactive and playful. Boring or routine activities can become interesting and captivate through gamification’s capacity to generate intrinsic motivation.

The design of gamification can take different formats; this depends on the specific needs and requirements of each learner and each learning situation. It may take place in a virtual context through online games, interactive simulations, quizzes, or online training platforms with integrated game elements (Boucher, 2024). Game mechanisms such as badges, points, and leaderboards are used to transform ordinary activities into intrinsically motivating learning experiences. This type of gamification enables users to strengthen their autonomy and monitor their progress.

Nevertheless, limited resources and logistical problems can sometimes make digital gamification impossible. The design and implementation of gamified digital platforms are, most often, costly, and even open-access gamified platforms require technological equipment and teacher training to design gamified environments (Qiao et al., 2023).

Another type of gamification can be implemented in a nonvirtual environment. In this case, the teacher uses physical game-design elements such as real badges; tangible rewards such as cards, certificates, and stickers; a stamp in the notebook; or words of praise. In this context, Rioux and Chenette (2021) argue that “gamification, although often associated with video games, does not have to be technological or digital to be considered as such. One needs only consider the use of dice or card games. Nevertheless, it is increasingly tending to be so in the current context”.

The final type of gamification is blended gamification, which combines nondigital game-design elements in a face-to-face learning environment with digital design elements used online, with the aim of benefiting from the potential advantages of both approaches and creating a successful learning experience by fostering interactivity, engagement, and learners’ active participation. Several pedagogical practices can be integrated: ice-breaking activities, role-playing or simulation games, discussion games, cooperative games, puzzles, or challenges to be solved collectively (Hovington, 2023). Whether digital, nondigital, or

blended, the main objective is “to design stimulating and relevant learning experiences in order to optimise learners’ engagement and understanding” (Boucher, 2024, p. 34).

The design of a gamification-based learning situation must follow a set of stages (Tantaoui, 2021). First, the teacher must identify the characteristics of the learners by analysing their prior skills, expectations, perceptions, and attitudes toward learning methods, with the aim of verifying the suitability of new tools and techniques for their needs. Next, the teacher must define clear, understandable, and achievable learning objectives. The teacher then designs gamified pedagogical content and activities according to predetermined objectives and needs. Finally, game elements and mechanisms are added. Challenges, opportunities, missions, feedback, rewards, points, badges, rankings, and medals are mechanisms that guide learners throughout this experience through entertainment and encouragement.

Currently, gamification is becoming increasingly important in schools because of its numerous pedagogical benefits. The use of playful elements stimulates learners’ motivation and makes learning more appealing by fostering more active participation. It also promotes learner autonomy. By introducing game elements such as reward systems and stimulating challenges, gamification encourages participants to engage voluntarily and autonomously, which enables them to progress in their learning at their own pace.

Moreover, gamification can facilitate active learning and skill acquisition. Through interactive and practical learning, learners can develop their linguistic, communicative, and transversal skills (Mahfoud et al., 2024). They can also develop problem-solving skills “through a complex system of rules that encourages active exploration and discovery” (Boucher, 2024, p. 38). Gamification can also encourage collaboration and group work. Mechanisms such as role-playing games, group challenges, or collective rewards help learners interact, work together, support one another, and share feedback, “which enriches linguistic and interpersonal skills” (Krystalli, 2024, p. 163).

However, an inadequate or unbalanced design of gamification may turn it into a mere distraction rather than an effective pedagogical tool. Indeed, “some playful activities are more complex and risk failing to meet the specific objective of the lesson and being too difficult for the teacher to implement” (Mahfoud et al., 2024, p. 114). In addition, the implementation of gamification may require additional resources, such as time, specific skills, and financial investment, which may limit its feasibility in certain cases. It is therefore necessary to maintain a balance between the pleasure of play and learning objectives while taking into account the constraints related to design and technical development.

Furthermore, gamification may not be suited to all learning situations or to all fields. Certain pedagogical content requires traditional teaching methods to be taught effectively.

In summary, gamification has proven effective both in terms of skill development and in fostering learner engagement and motivation. It is an innovative approach that complements other pedagogical methods and enriches the educational experience.

II. Gamification as a Tool for Phonetic Training

The teacher’s creativity is reflected in the ability to design original and personalised activities while moving away from standardised pedagogical tools. Nothing is more suited to learners’

progress and level than what is designed specifically for them. This also includes the idea of working from learners' ideas, interests, or experiences, drawing inspiration from their immediate environment and from projects developed in the classroom (Muller, 2012).

This personalised approach not only makes it possible to adapt teaching to learners' needs but also stimulates their engagement by actively involving them in their learning. It is within this dynamic that playful activities become fully meaningful, as they provide a stimulating framework for pronunciation practice.

In what follows, we detail a series of playful activities designed for pronunciation practice by presenting their concrete implementation, their specific pedagogical objectives, and the benefits observed for learners. Among the selected activities, we include games focused on sound discrimination, articulatory accuracy, and auditory training, with each game being carefully structured to maximise learning effectiveness. In addition to promoting the acquisition of the key sounds of the target language, these playful activities aim to develop learners' transversal skills, such as self-confidence, the ability to work in teams, and perseverance.

Series of Activities

1. Treasure Hunt

This activity is intended for learners at level A2 and above. Its main aim is to improve the correct articulation of the close vowels [i], [y], and [u] while strengthening motivation and interaction among learners. To implement this activity, the teacher prepares the classroom in advance as a genuine adventure space. Clues are hidden in different envelopes or boxes placed in various parts of the classroom, while a final treasure, in the form of rewards intended for the winning team, is prepared to stimulate the spirit of competition.

At the beginning of the activity, the learners are divided into three teams, each composed of three to four students. The teacher then presents the rules of the game, explaining that to access the treasure, each team must find various hidden clues. Each clue contains a word or sentence that the participants must pronounce correctly. In the event of a pronunciation error, the team cannot continue the treasure hunt until it produces correct articulation.

The first clue is then given to each team. Learners must read the indicated word or sentence with phonetic accuracy to obtain permission to search for the next clue. The team that manages to find all the clues and reach the final treasure before the others wins the game. Owing to its playful and interactive nature, this activity not only develops learners' phonetic skills but also promotes cooperation, engagement, and group dynamics within the French as a foreign language classroom.

Examples of Clues

Clue 1: Look for the blue envelope. Pronounce the word *écriture* correctly to receive the next clue.

Clue 2: There is a clue under a table in the last row. Articulate the word *surtout* to continue.

Clue 3: Find the pink box. Read the sentence *Tu dis tout* correctly.

Clue 4: Behind a picture hanging on the wall, there is a clue. Read the following sentence aloud: *Un jour de canicule, sur un véhicule où je circule.*

2. Listening Game

This activity, intended for learners at levels A1 and A2, aims to work on auditory discrimination and to develop learners' listening skills. To carry this out, the teacher uses a projector, an audio player, or a computer equipped with loudspeakers to play the sound recordings. A laser pointer and a stopwatch may also be used to make the activity more dynamic and interactive.

First, the teacher projects onto a board or white wall a route comprising several directions leading to different arrival points, such as a flower, a star, a heart, the sun, a gift, a medal, a butterfly, or a crown. The teacher then presents the following instruction: "Listen to these sentences and follow the directions. Turn left when you hear the sound [ɔ] and turn right when you hear the sound [o]. Where do you arrive?"

A learner is then invited to begin the game. The teacher plays a recorded word or sentence and, using the laser pointer, the learner indicates the direction to take according to the sound perceived. After each answer, the teacher provides immediate feedback to confirm the correct choice or, if necessary, to correct the auditory discrimination error.

To strengthen the playful and competitive aspect of the activity, a stopwatch may be used to measure the time taken by each learner to reach the final destination. A small symbolic reward, such as a pen, a sticky note, or a notebook, may be awarded to the fastest learner who has correctly distinguished the targeted vowels.

On the basis of work involving phonetic comprehension and differentiation, this game promotes the development of auditory discrimination in a motivating and interactive environment (Bugnet, 2022). It enables all learners to participate actively while allowing the teacher to correct errors quickly and provide appropriate explanations.

3. Chinese Whispers

This activity, intended for learners at levels A1 and A2, aims to work on voiceless/voiced consonantal oppositions, particularly [p]/[b], [f]/[v], and [s]/[z]. It also seeks to develop learners' listening and memorisation skills by encouraging sustained attention to the spoken chain.

To implement it, the teacher prepares cards containing sentences suited to the learner level, as well as a stopwatch, to make the activity more dynamic. The learners are divided into three teams of no more than six people, and each team forms a circle. A first player is designated in each group to begin the activity; the three teams play simultaneously.

The teacher gives each first player a card containing a sentence to read, for example, *je voudrais boire un jus de poire, on cherche du fil de fer vert, or c'est une saison sèche avec des brises douces mais saisissantes*. The player reads the sentence twice, memorises it, then whispers it to the person next to them, and so forth until the last participant. The latter must reproduce the sentence aloud.

The sentence produced by the last learner is then compared with that of the first learner to identify any transformations or distortions. Immediate correction is provided by the teacher to raise learners' awareness of the phonetic difficulties encountered.

From a motivational perspective, the teacher may measure each team's completion time using a stopwatch. A reward is awarded to the fastest team that has transmitted the sentence with the fewest possible distortions.

The game of Chinese whispers, which belongs to the category of social games, thus fosters the development of listening, comprehension, and memorisation skills. Integrated into phonetics teaching, it also contributes to improving pronunciation and sound perception. Teamwork, combined with a reward system, strengthens learners' motivation and their active engagement in the activity.

4. The Sound Duel

This activity forms part of a phonetic awareness-raising approach and is intended for learners at levels A2 to B1. Its aim is to work on vowel oppositions, particularly between oral vowels and nasal vowels, as well as certain distinctions between oral vowels, such as [ɔ̃]/[o], [ɑ̃]/[a], [ɛ̃]/[ɛ], [ɛ]/[i], and [o]/[œ]. It also aims to strengthen learners' motivation and encourage interaction within the classroom through a playful and competitive dynamic.

To implement this activity, the teacher prepares cards presenting different vowel oppositions, a score board, and rewards for the winning team. The learners are divided into two balanced teams of five to six participants.

The teacher then explains the rules of the game: the activity is conducted over several rounds, each centered on a specific vowel opposition. In each round, two players compete against each other, each representing one team. They must produce words containing the targeted vowels to form minimal pairs. One point is awarded to the team whose player successfully produces the word correctly, while an error results in the loss of one point.

The game begins after a draw determines which team plays first. The teacher then presents the first card containing the opposition [i]/[ɛ]. The first player from the designated team must produce a word containing the vowel [i], for example, *pire*, while the player from the opposing team must respond with a word containing the vowel [ɛ], for example, *père*. Throughout the activity, the teacher intervenes to provide immediate corrections and guidance.

The process is repeated with new oppositions and new players to allow all the learners to participate. At the end of the game, the points are counted on the score board. The team with the highest score is declared the winner, and its members receive badges as a reward.

This activity thus promotes phonetic discrimination, awareness of vowel oppositions, and learners' active engagement in a playful and interactive setting.

5. Tongue Twisters

Designed for learners at levels B1 and B2, this activity forms part of a phonetic refinement approach. Its main aim is to develop the pronunciation and articulation of difficult phonemes in French, as well as to work on rhythm and intonation through playful and repetitive practice.

To implement it, the teacher prepares cards containing different tongue twisters that include complex phonemes such as [s], [z], [ʃ], and [ʒ], as well as a stopwatch to make the activity

more dynamic and introduce a competitive dimension. The learners are then divided into pairs and placed face to face to facilitate interaction and mutual listening.

Each pair receives a card containing a tongue twister. In turn, each learner must pronounce it as quickly as possible while maintaining correct pronunciation. The objective is to achieve fluent, rapid, and accurate production. When a learner succeeds in producing the tongue twister without error, they obtain one point for speed and another for pronunciation quality. The teacher may propose tongue twisters of increasing difficulty to maintain motivation and encourage progression.

At the end of the activity, the points are counted, and rewards are awarded according to the learner's performance. A ranking table may also be displayed on the university platform to monitor the development of phonetic skills.

Examples of tongue twisters:

•- *Cinq chiens chassent six chats*

•- *La mouche rousse touche la mousse*

•- *Si ma tata tête ta tata, ta tata sera tâtée*

•- *Si sa saucisse sent, ses six cent six saucisses sentent aussi*

•- *Les versts levèrent le verre vert vers le vert*

•- *Rat vit riz, rat mit patte à ras; rat mit patte à riz, riz cuit patte à rat*

6. Maze

This game is intended for learners at level A2 and above. It aims to work on the phonetic discrimination of sounds, develop learners' auditory and visual attention, and strengthen the correct pronunciation of words in a playful and structured context.

To implement it, the teacher uses printed mazes distributed to the learners. The activity takes place across several levels of progressive difficulty.

At level 1, the teacher first explains the principle of the game: learners must find the correct path through the maze by passing only through squares containing a targeted sound, for example, the sound [ã]. In this case, the route begins with a word such as *lampe* and ends with the word *vent*. Once the path has been found, each learner must read aloud the words that make up their route, ensuring correct pronunciation of the targeted sounds. The teacher intervenes to correct any pronunciation errors. The learner who manages to reach the end of the maze with correct phonetic production obtains one point.

At level 2, the same procedure is repeated with a more complex maze. Learners are then invited to identify two distinct paths: the first containing words with the close sound [e] and the second with words containing the open sound [ɛ]. This stage makes it possible to strengthen the capacity for fine discrimination between similar sounds.

At the end of the activity, the results are displayed on a score board, and badges are awarded to the highest-performing learners. A collective feedback phase is also planned to return to the words that caused pronunciation difficulties, thereby allowing targeted reinforcement and collective correction guided by the teacher.

7. Pronunciation Wheel

Intended for learners from levels A1 to B1, this game aims to develop the pronunciation and articulation of French sounds while strengthening the spontaneous oral production of words and sentences within a playful and interactive framework.

To implement it, the teacher uses a projector, a laptop computer, and an internet connection to access a platform for creating pedagogical resources, such as Wordwall or Flippity. A virtual wheel containing different targeted sounds is created and then projected onto a board or white wall.

The teacher then designates a learner to begin the game. The wheel is spun virtually, and when it stops on a random sound, the learner must spontaneously produce a word containing that sound and pronounce it aloud. If the pronunciation and articulation are correct, the learner obtains one point. In the event of an error, the teacher immediately provides correction to guide the learner toward more accurate production.

In the second round, the level of difficulty increases: learners must produce a sentence containing two or three words that include the targeted sound. This stage fosters not only phonetic mastery but also the development of fluency and spontaneity in oral expression.

At the end of the activity, the points are counted, and the learners who have achieved the best results receive symbolic rewards. Owing to its interactive nature, this activity encourages active participation, stimulates motivation, and contributes to creating a dynamic and engaging learning climate.

This activity may also be proposed in asynchronous mode. In this case, learners access the virtual wheel individually from home and record their oral productions before sending them to the teacher for correction and feedback.

8. The *Petit Bac* Game

This activity, intended for learners from levels A2 to B2, aims to strengthen the recognition and production of French sounds while enriching learners' vocabulary within a playful and interactive framework.

To implement it, the teacher prepares a table comprising several categories, such as animals, first names, objects, countries, or verbs. The learners are then divided into four teams. To encourage their involvement in the activity, they may choose the categories that make up the game table themselves.

The teacher then designates a sound to begin the game and informs the teams that they have a limited amount of time, for example, two minutes, to complete their table. Learners must find words belonging to different categories and beginning with the targeted sound. Once the time has elapsed, each team presents its answers to the class.

The point system is based on both the speed and the originality of the answers. When the same word is proposed by several teams in the same category, no point is awarded for that answer. In contrast, the team that completes its table correctly before the others obtain an additional point for speed. After each round, the teacher designates a new sound, and the teams repeat the process. At the end of the game, the team with the greatest number of points is declared the winner.

This activity makes it possible to develop phonetic discrimination and oral production while enriching learners' vocabulary. It also promotes cooperation, responsiveness, and active engagement within the classroom.

Most of the playful activities mentioned above are designed to be carried out in class. However, the teacher may also add online games. They may thus create quizzes and interactive games using platforms such as Kahoot, Quizizz, Wordwall, or Flippity. These tools allow learners to practice at their own pace, self-assess, and engage more fully in their learning within a competitive environment. The teacher may also use mobile applications such as Duolingo, Babbel, and Rosetta Stone, which strengthen learners' motivation and engagement by offering varied and playful activities. The combination of face-to-face and online activities makes it possible to create a more dynamic learning environment that responds to learners' specific needs.

Conclusion

By proposing a series of activities based on gamification, this study sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach in the teaching of pronunciation through its interactive and enjoyable characteristics. The integration of game elements such as badges, rewards, challenges, rankings, competitions, and levels makes pronunciation learning more dynamic and engaging and arouses greater interest and commitment among learners in relation to their learning. The use of cooperation, mutual support, and exchange also enables learners to take pleasure in experiencing an entertaining process that allows them to feel a range of emotions. Gamification makes it possible to transform the transmissive model of teaching. Although the learner becomes an active agent in their own learning, the teacher remains the planner and guide who supervises this process. Nevertheless, in practice, the use of gamification remains a laborious and demanding task for the teacher. Its effectiveness depends on thoughtful and balanced implementation, which requires considerable research and preparation. It is therefore essential to maintain a balance between playful activity and learning. Excessive use of gamification could indeed undermine pedagogical effectiveness by diverting learners' attention from essential learning objectives. It is therefore important to diversify pedagogical approaches while drawing from each method and each perspective, which may be useful. The present contribution offers several practical implications that may help teachers develop their phonetic skills. It constitutes a promising avenue for designing a more dynamic, enjoyable, interactive, and motivating learning environment. Teachers and researchers are therefore invited to assess the effectiveness of the gamified activities proposed in this study within their own classrooms.

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