

## **Integrating Computer-Assisted Phonetic Transcription in Classroom Phonetics Teaching : Does Listening to English Help French Students Transcribe?**

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### **Abstract**

For some years, we successfully tested a semi-automatic transcription marker that had been created at the University of Lille 3 (France), and designed for French University students of English as a second language. Our initial aim was to improve the students' ability to provide a phonetic transcription of texts, thanks to individualized training and immediate feedback on error, using the transcription marker as a learning tool in a non-judgemental environment. However, by increasing their ability to symbolize oral English, our main purpose was to improve their own oral production in English.

In 2007, the transcription marker was integrated into the classroom situation and used as a teaching aid in a constructivist approach to phonetics teaching. Experiments were carried out to evaluate its role and validity as part of our instructional sessions, comparing three different groups of students with homogenous educational backgrounds. The results showed that students in the computer-assisted class had made increasing and stabilized progress in phonetic transcription and in building a phonological competence.

The present experiment took place after sound was added to the original transcription marker and integrated into the transcription protocol in class; in this task, the students were now presented with a text that they could listen to, before they started transcribing, as well as at any point - on demand - during their transcription task. Indeed, an analysis of recurring errors had shown that lack of reduction of vowels in unstressed grammatical words and stress placement ranked high among error types. To test the hypothesis that the passage from a syllable-timed to a stress-timed language would be facilitated by an oral model, sound was also made available to our French students of English by presenting each rhythmic unit in its graphic form for transcription. The same tests were performed as in the earlier projects, and showed that the results followed the exact same progression as with the original marker. However, improvement was neither quicker nor greater, as could have been expected.

The improved version of the computer-assisted learning and practice tool had not proved to be an additional aid. The results raised a number of problems for the phonetics teacher leading to questioning of the task itself and to discussions with the students taking part in the project. Apparently, contrary to our expectations, they had not made systematic use of the sound provided during the task, considering multi-tasking (listening and transcribing) a burden rather than an aid. Discussions revealed that listening difficulties were greater than could have been expected; ear training had not been sufficient in the overall teaching process, which partly explained how sound could be considered as an obstacle in performing the task of going from grapheme to phoneme. We will now explore other possibilities of filling the gap between sound and its symbolisation, with the aim of developing better pronunciation skills.