Lesson 147

Pronunciation practice: the French alphabet
This lesson – lesson 147 – is a Beginner lesson, arising from an email we received from one of our listeners, Bob Burke. Bob said he was having trouble with the pronunciation of some sounds, so we’re going to address those issues right now. There is going to be an overlap between this lesson and one we did way back, when we looked at the French alphabet in Lesson 5. Let’s start this lesson by looking, once again, at the French alphabet. Then we’ll look at the pronunciation of particular words which contain some trickier sounds for learners.

Let’s get started. First of all, Béatrix, I’ll ask you to say the letters of the alphabet, and I’ll repeat after you. Let’s go…


Now, some of these letters are potentially confusing, especially for those whose native language is English. Let’s go back through the letters of the alphabet and give them a context, within actual words. The first letters of the alphabet are straightforward…

A – B – C – D…

Within words, each of these letters sounds as we would expect. Let’s note, however, that the letter…

C … can sound either like an S (ess) or a K (kay), depending on the context.

For example, ‘the sky’ is

le ciel

… while ‘the wax’ is

la cire

On the other hand, the verb ‘to start’ is…

commencer

That word has the letter C twice. The C at the start of the word sounds like a K (kay) while the C at the end of the word sounds like an S (ess): commencer.

The next letters of the alphabet are…

E – F – …

Let’s stop there. The 5th letter of the French alphabet – E (euh) – is very, very common so it is essential to recognise the pronunciation immediately. It is the key sound in the French words…

le
ne
me
se
te
que
je

As for the letter D, it is not pronounced like the English word ‘day’ (which has a hard ‘d’ sound at the beginning.

In French, to create the D sound, the tip of the tongue lightly touches the lower teeth and the very front of the palate.

Le is the masculine definite article, meaning ‘the’. In French, nouns are either masculine or feminine. Le accompanies masculine nouns while la accompanies feminine nouns. When learning new nouns, make sure to learn their gender, too. The gender of nouns has an important bearing on other elements of a sentence including prepositions, and also determines how adjectives behave. (Adjectives must agree in number and gender with the nouns to which they refer.)

le garçon = the boy
la fille = the girl
le taureau = the bull
la vache = the cow
le roi = the king
la reine = the queen
le joueur = the [male] player
la joueuse = the [female] player
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Let’s suppose a person called Ben was spelling his name for a French friend, he would say…

B – E – N

A person called Ted would say…

T – E – D

Let’s note, too, that vowels can be accented, depending on the situation. For example, the letter ‘E’ (euh) in French can simply be a plain ‘E’ (euh), or it can have a grave accent, or an aigu accent, or a tréma, which looks like two little dots. Let’s not worry too much right now about the function of these accents other than to be aware that, depending on the word in which it appears, we may be referring to an ‘E (euh),’ an ‘E-accent-grave,’ an ‘E-accent-aigu,’ or an ‘E-tréma.’

After E – F – comes the letter…

G

Let’s stop there. For English speakers the potential for confusion is obvious. So, an Englishman’s letter ‘G’ is a Frenchman’s letter ‘G’.

To spell this word, we would say…

un congé

Note, in particular, that the letter H is not aspirated. In English, we do have an aspirated sound at the beginning of words like ‘hello,’ ‘howl,’ ‘home,’ ‘heart’ and ‘handle.’ In the case of French words with an ‘h’ at the beginning, however, that sound is not aspirated. A publication that comes out weekly is called

un hebdomadaire

More often than not, it’s simply referred to as

un hebdo

And, to spell this word, we would say…

h – e – b – d – o

So, the word begins with an ‘h,’ but, from the point of view of pronunciation, it is as if this letter simply didn’t exist. Once again, we’re referring to

un hebdo
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Dialogue

Where you see this symbol …

It’s your turn to repeat what you’ve heard. Then we’ll repeat once more.

After…

A – B – C – D – E – F – G – H –…

… comes the letter…

I ⚪️

I

Again, for native English speakers, the potential for confusion is obvious. But it is so important to be familiar with the sound of this vowel. It forms the central sound of many words. For example, ‘an idea’ in French is

une idée

And, to spell the word ‘idée’, that would be…

I – d – e-accent-aigu – e

Béatrix, some years ago, a French film called L’homme идеал was released, in other words, The Ideal Man. Let’s consider how to spell these words. Homme is

h – o – m – m – e

And the adjective idéal is

i – d – e-accent-aigu – a – l

As we’re focusing, Béatrix, on the vowel ‘i’ (ee) in French, let’s make an important note about the pronunciation of this vowel in French. Beginners of French, often mispronounce this vowel as if it were the sound we find in the English words tilt, fill, nil, dip, and so on. This sound does not exist in French. Most people know how to say ‘please’ when asking for something in a French shop or restaurant. It’s…

s’il vous plaît

But let’s emphasise once again, the pronunciation of the first part of that expression. It’s s’il… It’s worth reiterating that the common ‘-ih’ sound doesn’t exist in French.

Ok, Béatrix, we’re making progress. We’ve had A – B – C – D – E – F – G – H – I –… and next comes…

J ⚪️

J

Wow! It’s easy to see how native English speakers, especially, could get mixed up with some of these pronunciations. Let’s put ‘J’ into context. First and foremost we’ll find this consonant in the word for ‘I’ (eye) which is

je

To spell this pronoun in French, that’s…

j – e

Let’s take some more examples, so that we can copper-fasten this sound, so to speak. ‘The leg’, in French, is…

la Jambe

Let’s spell jambe. That’s…

j – a – m – b – e

‘Never!’ is…

Jamais

S’il vous plaît

Pronounced like the English word ‘seal’ (not ‘sill!’)

6 L’homme

Watch the pronunciation! The letter h in French behaves like a vowel. Consequently, the e of the masculine definite article le is elided before the h of homme.

L’homme is pronounced effectively as one word, although it consists of two: l(e)homme. Similarly, we will come across:

l’heras = the stud farm
(pronounced rather like ‘larah’.)
l’héros = the hero
(pronounced rather like ‘layroh’.)
l’herlement = the roar

7 S’il vous plaît
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And, to spell that word, we’ll say
\[ J – a – m – a – i – s \]

Finally, supposing a French boy called Jean was spelling his name, he would say...
\[ j – e – a – n \]

Let’s continue. After J come the letters K – L – M – N – O – P – …
All of these letters tend to go according to plan. There’s nothing much to note, other than that the letter ‘K’ (kah), is relatively uncommon in French and generally appears only in words that are not French, strictly speaking, in origin.
Words like *week-end* or *kidnapper* or *kibboutz*.
After N – O – P, comes the letter
\[ Q \]

The important thing to note here is the narrow ‘u’ sound. It is *not pronounced ‘ooh’!*
After Q comes…
\[ R \]

Note the sound of the ‘uvular’ R, that is, the distinctive French ‘R’ that is created at the back of the throat.
The stops on the Regional Rail System which operates in parallel to the Paris Metro can be identified by the ‘RER’ signs in the French capital. The French don’t say R – E – R (ahr – ee – ahr), however, they say
\[ R – E – R \]
\[ R – E – R \]

After R come the letters S – T –… These shouldn’t pose problems. And next comes…
\[ U \]

Note the narrow, ‘u’ sound. In terms of pronunciations in French, this one is arguably the most important. It’s important for learners to distinguish between the narrow ‘u’ and the wider ‘ooh’ sound. Let’s illustrate the distinction between these two sounds. Béatrix, the word for ‘mud’ or ‘clay’ is pronounced…
\[ boue \]
\[ boue' \]

On the other hand, to ask in French ‘What has he drunk?’ we would need the past participle of the verb ‘to drink’, that is ‘drunk’. In French, that word is
\[ bu \]

Let’s take another example. The word ‘due’ – as in ‘Due to unforeseen circumstances’ – is…
\[ dû \]
\[ dû \]

Whereas, the word for ‘gentle’ or ‘quiet’ is
\[ doux \]
\[ doux' \]

‘The juice’ is
\[ le jus \]
\[ le jus' \]

Other examples of why it is important to make a distinction between the narrow ‘u’ and wider ‘ooh’ sounds are:

- fut (= cask)
- fut (= was)** fou (= mad)
- lu (= read)** loup (= wolf)
- nu (= naked) nous (= we)
- tu (= you) tout (= all)
- vu (= seen) vous you (plural, or formal)

Green letters in the words above are not pronounced.

* (in the expression ‘Ce fut un beau jour…’ = ‘It was a fine day’)
** (as in ‘I have read the book’)

10 doux

gentle, quiet, soft
The x is silent. Dou(ç).

11 le jus

= the juice
The s is silent. Ju(ç). Un jus d’orange, s’il vous plaît.
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While ‘the cheek’, part of one’s face, that is, is...

la joue

la joue

So, Béatrix, from these examples...

boue, bu

dû [12], doux

jus, joue

... it’s easy to see just how important the two ‘u’ sounds are: the narrow ‘u’ sound and the wider ‘ooh’ sound.

Béatrix, we’re coming to the end of the alphabet and associated pronunciations. After ‘u’ come the letters V – W – X – Y – Z.

These last letters of the alphabet don’t pose too many problems. A word, however, about the letter...

Y-grec

Y-grec is the name of the letter. So, to spell the French boy’s name ‘Yves’, we would have...

y – v – e – s

No problem there. But we should also be aware that, in French, there also exists the word ‘y’, which, despite its short length is extremely common and very powerful. Depending on the context, the word ‘y’ can have different meanings, including ‘there’ or ‘of it’. Béatrix, the sound of this word is...

Y (ee)

Let’s take a quick example: ‘I go’ is...

je vais

je vais

And ‘I go there’ is...

j’y vais

j’y vais

The ‘y’ comes before the verb, in fact, in French. ‘I think’ is...

je pense

je pense

And, ‘I think of it’ is...

j’y pense

j’y pense

Béatrix, that’s about it for this lesson. What we have discussed will complement lesson 5 which we prepared a good while back. To our listeners, the full lesson transcript, as well as other useful information, can be found in the accompanying PDF Lesson Guide, available for download from our website at www.learnfrenchbypodcast.com.

Until next time...

À la prochaine fois.

12 du

Don’t forget the accent circonflexe — > dû.

There also exists in French the ‘partitive article’ du — no accent on the u, but pronounced the same — which is used to signify ‘some’ of a substance which cannot be counted, for example:

du sel = salt (or some salt)
du poivre = pepper (or some pepper)
du sucre = sugar (or some sugar)

Note that the nouns above — sel, poivre, sucre — are all masculine. In the case of feminine and plural nouns, du changes to de la and des, respectively. (Before a vowel or ‘h muet’, the partitive article becomes de l’.)

13 je vais

= I go

This is the first person singular of the verb aller (= to go).

Aller is conjugated as follows:

je vais I go

tu vas you go
’il va he goes
’el va she goes
’on va one goes, we go, people go
’nous allons we go
vous aller you go
ils vont they go [masc.]
els vont they go [fem.]
If you understood our lesson, then you should be able to ...

Spell aloud the following:

1. (Your own first and last names.)
2. The French girl’s name ‘Yvette.’
3. The adjective ‘utile’ (which means ‘useful’ or ‘handy’).
4. The French girl’s name ‘Jacqueline’.
5. The French boy’s name ‘Gilles’.

Hear the pronunciations at http://www.learnfrenchbypodcast.com

Now it’s your turn ...

Vocab extra

- boue (f) mud
- bu (past participle of vb ‘to drink’)
- ciel (m) sky
- cire (f) wax
- commencer to start
- congé (m) day off
- doux soft, gentle, quiet
- du due
- géant (m) giant
- géant huge, giant
- hebdomadaire (m) weekly (publication)
- homme (m) man
- idée (f) idea
- jamais never
- jambe (f) leg
- je (pronoun)
- joue (f) cheek
- jus (m) juice
- le the
- me myself
- penser to think
- plaie to please
- plait, s’il vous ~ please
- que that, which
- se himself, herself, oneself
- te yourself
- y of it, there