Son pour Son: Programme d’entraînement à la prononciation française

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type:</th>
<th>Workbook and software for pronunciation training</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language reviewed:</td>
<td>French (aimed at German native speakers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level:</td>
<td>Beginning to intermediate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities:</td>
<td>Pronunciation practice, listening and repeating, voice recording for comparison with a native speaker, vocabulary learning, correspondence between written forms and spoken forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media Format:</td>
<td>CD-ROM with software installation; Workbook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operating Systems:</td>
<td>Windows (XP, Vista, 7, or higher); not Mac compatible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardware Requirements:</td>
<td>1 GHz processor or faster, 256MB of RAM, 50MB disk for the software, 16-bit sound card, microphone and speakers, CD/DVD drive, 1024 x 768 display resolution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supplementary Software:</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Documentation:</td>
<td>Activation key</td>
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<tr>
<td>Price:</td>
<td>Single user: $35 (€25.90); multiple copies: $340 (€248)</td>
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General description

Son pour Son is introduced as a pronunciation training program. The software, developed by the language center of the university Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany), is created for German users who are studying French. The project targets a broad public and appeals to beginner as well as advanced students. It is available as an individual license with a training manual and provides various...
activities to work on French pronunciation. The software itself had previously been released for English learning, before the release of this specific adaptation (with a focus on French pronunciation).

The whole package is described as an informal and engaging initiation to French pronunciation aimed at German native speakers. The product comes with one CD-ROM and a workbook, and the exercises have three levels of difficulty. Based on the structure of the workbook and software, it would be challenging to use them independently. The workbook is divided into 18 modules dedicated to French phonemes, as well as to a few specific contrasts German speakers could have difficulty with when learning French pronunciation. The suprasegmental aspects, such as rhythm or intonation, are not formally introduced in the table of contents, even if some notions are addressed in various units (e.g., in the framework of the ‘e instable’ module). The use of iconic thumbnails through the manual offers a convenient indexation of the different types of exercises and makes it possible to quickly find the level they are intended for. The software itself aims to provide support for practicing phrases and is mainly based on the implementation of imitation and repetition tasks.

Evaluation
Technological features
The installation of the software on two Windows laptops, running Windows Vista and Windows 8 respectively, worked smoothly. A quick test also showed that the software was incompatible with Macs. When launching the program for the first time, users are asked to enter a key code and are then directed to the main menu, where they are prompted to choose the type of sounds they wish to work with. Speakers or headphones are required for listening to audio files and a microphone is required for recording. The whole interface appeared responsive and we experienced no delay as we played or recorded audio files.

The software Son pour Son itself offers basic functions for pronunciation training. The software does not rely on any speech recognition tools. Consequently, its use is similar to that of a recorder. It takes advantage of a sound-recording function to simply allow learners to import their own audio input and compare it to a native speaker reference.

Activities (procedure)
The software
The software is divided into four distinct sections: Alphabet, Voyelles (Vowels), Nasales (Nasals), and finally Consonnes (Consonants). Starting from the main menu, the user is invited to select one of these options. Each one then gives
access to a variety of phonemes and contrasts involving the selected phonemes (Figure 1). Once the selection is made, the user can choose between three levels of difficulty that determine the complexity of the context in which the selected sound is displayed. The International Phonetic Alphabet is used in each section header to introduce the transcription of the phoneme concerned. The interpretation of this notation is made easier (for those who do not have any knowledge of phonetics) by illustrating French phonemes with a German word containing an equivalent sound (e.g., [e] as in Schnee).

Figure 1: Program interface (Son pour Son): (top) section headers in the module on voyelles (vowels), (bottom) display of training items for a given level

Based on the level of difficulty, the user interacts with various sequences ranging from a few syllables (level 1) to whole sentences (level 3) and in various
contexts that more or less facilitate the production/perception of the selected sound. On level 1, the phonemes appear mainly in disyllabic sequences. We observed that some of them were words taken out of context, where meaningful units would probably have brought more consistency to the repetition task (Abry and Veldeman-Abry, 2007). The main activity, as stated by the authors, is a *listen-repeat-listen* type of procedure, which allows users to compare their own pronunciation with that of a native speaker. At first, the lack of direct instructions on the screen is a bit surprising. Each utterance can be heard as many times as desired and is pronounced either by a male or female speaker. However, only one native speaker is available for a given item. The users can listen to each item, record their own production, and finally compare it to the given model. Each trial can then be refined in order to match the target sentence as well as possible. It would be more useful for the learner if the product offered the possibility for users to listen to each item with both male and female native speakers. It is sometimes difficult for a woman to reproduce a low voice and vice versa. Finally, the software offers the possibility to store a user’s recordings for future access or to simply follow one’s progression. However, the comparison between the two samples is accompanied by neither precise technical indications based on an evaluation of acoustic data (F0 variations, formants, etc.) nor any reference to articulation parameters, which could give some guidance to the user. The unsupervised repetitions of the items could therefore potentially lead to the fossilization of incorrect pronunciation habits. For this reason, the use of the software initially requires professional supervision and individual correction. Only then can the software (with the help of the workbook) serve as the basis for practicing independently or for ensuring follow-up work.

It is also worth mentioning that adding new speech samples has not been made possible in the version we reviewed. The possibility to extend and deepen the contents of the training sections – in order to adapt it to individual needs – could have made the software more flexible and could have strengthened its versatility. It would have been useful to add an option that enables teachers to upload their own audio files to create their own pronunciation exercises, work on specific mispronounced sequences/dialogue extracts, or highlight variations relating to French regional accents.

**The workbook**

In each unit, the presentation of the phonemes relies on photographs along with a description. This allows users to visualize the way lips are involved in the phoneme’s production (Figure 2) and the main differences that are involved in their realization in French and in German.
The use of pictures throughout the workbook also provides the opportunity to introduce exercises, engages the learner in the various activities, and alleviates the repetition that could be felt by the user in the various tasks (i.e., identify a phoneme, graphemes recognition).

The excerpts in Figure 3 illustrate the use of pictures provided to work on different phonemes. For example, in the section dedicated to [ε], the user can work on a picture of a forest where various words are assigned to each tree. The instructions invite the learner to help Sonia (a character present throughout the workbook) find her way through the forest by showing her each tree corresponding to the sound [ε]. For solving this task the reader has to pronounce each sequence and determine which word contains the phoneme [ε], making him/her think about the relationship existing between written and spoken forms of this vowel. A picture of a dartboard raises awareness of the written forms of [e] in the same way, inviting the user to circle the written forms corresponding to the particular phoneme and to throw them in the middle of a dartboard. This kind of exercise is used in different forms in order to brainstorm both spelling and sound correspondences, while minimizing the redundancy related to this task.
Figure 3: Exercises on correspondences between written forms and spoken forms for [e] and [έ] in the Son pour Son workbook

Along with these exercises, each unit briefly introduces some general tendencies related to each sound. It also provides rules to the learner, which may help raise awareness of different aspects of standard spoken French. The manual often focuses on spelling and frequently underlines the correspondences between phonemes and their graphic representations. The advice given by the authors in the various units also addresses many tendencies that appear in spoken French. The frequent use of more informal variants in less formal styles (schwa deletion, liaison usage, phonetic realizations, etc.) is pointed out, which offers learners an interesting practical perspective.
**Teacher fit (approach)**

*Son pour Son* appears to focus its attention on French phonemes, although the phonemic systems in French and German share a lot of similarities. Working on the fine variations that distinguish some phonemes in the two languages would be difficult to do on the sole basis of the exercises suggested in the software. None of them really provides tools or representations to help in the learning or comprehension of an accurate articulation or in reaching a specific perceptual target. Moreover, if each utterance can be heard as many times as desired, the software offers neither any hints to the users about their errors nor any ways to make corrections or to improve their production. It would have been interesting to find some of the pictures and the suggestions alluded to in the book in the software itself, or to find a quick description of the most common pitfalls to avoid. The user is left alone with a few sentences and no precise instructions/directions. However, we have contacted the authors and they have stressed that the combination of software and workbook allows tasks to be split in the context of a language laboratory. While a group of students can become familiar with graphophonological rules (presented in the book), another group can meanwhile be supervised in the laboratory, receiving in this instance the necessary pedagogical mentoring and individual advice.

Furthermore, if phonemes are an important part of pronunciation teaching, language learners can make pronunciation mistakes at two levels: the first one involves the articulation of phonemes and the second one concerns the use of prosody. Surprisingly, the latter is hardly mentioned, yet the flow of speech inserts itself in the foundations laid by the prosody. Pointing out the main differences distinguishing the two languages would have strengthened the contrastive approach adopted throughout the materials. Unlike German, French belongs to the syllable-timed languages (Kohler, 1995). Raising awareness on the lengthening of the last syllable, on the regularity of unstressed syllables and more information of French rhythm (Wioland, 1991), can substantially improve the intelligibility of speech (Celce-Murcia and Goodwin, 2010), particularly for German speakers, even if the phoneme targets are perfectly matched.

Even though the structure of *Son pour Son* is easy to understand and practical to use, some choices are questionable. For example, although it is specified in the workbook that the contrast between [ə] and [ø] should not be taken into account, the sections in the book and the software seem to focus on it. In the software, the related section (Figure 4) refers in its title to this opposition, whereas in the workbook the authors point out in a footnote that no difference was made between the two sounds in the sentences presented on the CD-ROM. The mention of the contrast between [ə] and [ø] in the context of language
learning can appear a little confusing. The confusion lies in the fact that the vowel [ə] refers to a mid-central vowel but this sound is realized in French as one of the rounded vowels [ø] or [œ] (Nouveau and Detey, 2007). It would have been less disorienting to mention it only in the ‘e instable’ section, if the aim was to stress the labile nature of the schwa in French. Since the purpose is to improve learners’ pronunciation, rather than bringing the user to focus on theoretical issues, the mention of this opposition seems unnecessary here.

**Figure 4:** Section in the Son pour Son software about contrasts involving the schwa [ə]

The lack of consistent use of the International Phonetic Alphabet – in particular for the nasal vowel [ã], which is sometimes transcribed [ũ], sometimes [ä] – is also unfortunate in a product aimed at pronunciation learning. Finally, some examples in the unit dedicated to [i] would fit better with the examples describing the semi-vowel [j], as il y a [ilja] or Yannick [janik] which appears in level 1, where unambiguous examples would have been expected. Thus, various approximations in the final product tend to weaken the overall impression of the product and provide an opportunity for improvement in future updates.

**Learner fit (design)**

This program is designed for students wishing to perfect their pronunciation, without the need of a background in phonetics. The exercises and advice provided in the materials do not involve specialized terminology, which might
be discouraging to some users. *Son pour Son* has a considerable appeal due to its modern and engaging design. From the foreword of the authors to the pictures throughout the workbook, this product brings an entertaining and colorful vision of phonetics, which makes one want to play with it and spend time discovering the phonic characteristics of French pronunciation. The book is written so that the learner has a guiding partner speaking directly to him/her. This encourages inductive learning by reflecting, for example, on grapheme-phoneme correspondences (in German and French respectively) and inducing on the basis of these observations the pronunciation of new words. Analytical learners, who like facts and explicit explanations, will also find useful hints in the workbook. Additionally, the software will keep records of different attempts done over time. It is nonetheless regrettable that the software does not take advantage of the high potential which multimedia can bring to pronunciation learning by enhancing the understanding of key points. Recent technological advances have led to the development of speech recognition tools and new visual displays. Combining these tools with the interpretation of acoustic information to corrective phonetics allows the software to provide constructive feedback to learners. For example, suprasegmental features can be visually displayed and therefore quickly understood. The use of various displays (photographs, animations, video recordings) that are easier to implement can also ensure that learners develop a better understanding of what is expected in the target language. Taking pictures from the book and systematically attaching speech files to them could have been both interesting and useful in maintaining continuity with the contrastive approach initiated in the workbook. Finally, the interaction between the workbook and the software is far from obvious (for instance, the numbering of the chapters in the two media does not coincide. Likewise, the various exercises in the workbook hardly ever refer to the software). If the two learning tools cover different aspects of pronunciation training, their complementarity relies more on the type of activities they have to offer than on a seamless interface of the contents. On this matter, the authors have drawn our attention to the difficulty they met combining a phoneme by phoneme presentation. This was meant to keep continuity between the software and the accompanying workbook, with the mainly grapheme-based approach used in the written exercises. This slightly conflicting situation would partly explain those inconsistencies.

**Summary**

Due to various limitations, the use of *Son pour Son* is not particularly well aimed at self-directed learning. Assuming learners are supervised and are provided guidance in making the most out of the available tools, it can certainly be considered a classroom supplement. Based on the information provided by
the publisher’s website, one gains the impression that *Son pour Son* consists of software and its accompanying workbook. However, this description is a bit deceiving, as it is actually difficult to consider the software independently in its present form, considering the limitations of both features and interface. The French designation of the product is also a bit ambiguous, as the term ‘programme’ can refer to two expectations: the first one referring strictly to the software itself, whereas the second one would make reference to the software with the workbook as a training course. We had the feeling from the presentation of the product and its description that the authors wanted to highlight the use of computer and multimedia based instruction to help learn pronunciation. However, the overview of the product has led us to consider the software as only a complement of the workbook. Nevertheless, the manual’s open, friendly approach and the diversity of advice and suggested exercises make it an interesting pedagogic medium to begin work on French pronunciation. It is also a good starting point for teachers wishing to incorporate this dimension in their language courses. Overall, there is still room for improvement and some aspects of the software could be easily modified or further developed to address the limitations mentioned.

**Scaled rating**

(1 low-5 high)

- Pedagogical Features: 3
- Use of Computer Capabilities: 1
- Ease of Use (student/teacher): 3
- Overall Evaluation: 3
- Value for Money: 3

**Producer details**

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**Notes**

The single user version of *Son pour Son* was installed and used for this review. There is another edition available, for schools, which contains additional guidelines for the teacher.
References


Reviewer information

Ludovic Ibarrondo is an associate member of the Laboratoire de Phonétique et Phonologie (CNRS/Sorbonne-Nouvelle) and holds a Ph.D in phonetics from the Sorbonne-Nouvelle University, in Paris. His areas of interest include pronunciation teaching methodology and second language acquisition, especially the acquisition of second language phonology. He also works in the field of language teacher education.