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## **SPOKEN FRENCH IN A PRONUNCIATION COURSE: IMPRESSIONS AND APPLICATIONS**

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Standard French, also called international French, is typically taught in the second language (L2) classroom because native speakers of French from any geographical or social background should be able to understand it. Therefore, standard French gives learners a communication tool useful in most contexts. However, this arbitrary choice creates a linguistic dichotomy: native speakers, particularly those in the age group of our own L2 learners in a university setting, do not speak standard French. In this small-scale study, students enrolled in university French pronunciation courses share their opinions on standard and non-standard varieties of French in the second language classroom. Data were gathered through online pre-course and post-course questionnaires. A vast majority felt that being exposed to different varieties of French is important. In addition, most found standard and non-standard varieties equally important to learn, the former being a necessary foundation and the latter important building blocks giving relevance and authenticity to language learning. After discussing the results and pedagogical implications, activities on standard and non-standard language features are presented.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A language is not, as we all know, a static and single entity. It is composed of many varieties. But it is neither logical nor practical to task second language (L2) students with learning them within the L2 curriculum. Instead, it is assumed that learners ought to be exposed to standard varieties. For example, standard French, also called international French, is typically taught because native speakers of French from any geographical or social background should be able to understand it. Therefore, standard French gives learners a communication tool useful in most contexts.

However, this arbitrary choice creates a linguistic dichotomy: native speakers, and in particular those in the age group of our own university L2 learners, do not speak standard French (Gadet & Guérin, 2008; Jeanmaire, 2014; Vitez, 2002). While they will understand our learners, will our learners understand them? In this small-scale study, students enrolled in university French pronunciation courses share their experience and opinion on standard and non-standard varieties of French in the second language classroom. Data were gathered through online pre-course and post-course questionnaires. Results are presented and pedagogical implications and applications for language courses are discussed.

### **Previous Research**

Because language educators strive to train students to communicate effectively, the types of register and lexis taught are an important discussion point. As any language, French not only varies geographically (e.g., French from France, Switzerland, Québec, etc.), it also changes with

social influences (e.g., age groups, social class, gender, etc.). Which French should we teach and why? Few studies have looked into which variety of French is best suited within the communicative language approach to equip learners with tools that will increase their comprehension and intelligibility: should they be exposed to formal standard French or to spoken colloquial French? (Armstrong, 2001; Knaus & Nadasdi, 2001; Meissner, 1999).

Gadet and Guérin (2008) have referred to the oral mode as the “actualization of the language”, i.e., the language used authentically in a non-written, non-standard manner. They believe that both the written and oral modes have an important role in the classroom. Rather than opposing oral and written modes by associating them with phrases such as “non-standard/standard, incorrect/correct, deviant/normed, informal/formal” (p. 22, our translation), they described a continuum in which both are equally valued, but in different contexts. This sociolinguistic approach advises instructors to expose learners to many levels of the continuum, as they would be in authentic contexts. Teachers should also explain the values and implications of each level.

In terms of practical pedagogical implications, exposing students to various registers could be as simple as proposing alternate ways of speaking. Often we train students to view language use as right or wrong. That perspective may simplify language learning and teaching, but it does not portray languages and cultures as the rich entities that they truly are. In reality, language keeps changing, and what is considered wrong by some in one context on a given day, can be deemed right in other circumstances. Accepting that French is constantly changing should motivate teachers to include some new trends needed for authentic communication (Vitez, 2002).

Jeanmaire (2014) has recently questioned the normalization of the French language in regard to its actual development. He argues that because French cannot be constrained by rules and is in constant movement, French classes should reflect some of those current changes to equip learners with current authentic communicative tools. He particularly criticized calling language changes ‘mistakes’ and pointed to current rules that were initially considered barbarisms and which eventually became part of the norm. Jeanmaire suggested that learners of French should be exposed to language innovations such as borrowings or anglicisms as long as their usage is contextualized and meaningful.

For example, the French negative particle ‘ne’ has been disappearing in conversational French, making the secondary particle ‘pas’ a stronger marker of negation. This phenomenon is found among all age groups and social classes in France and Québec (Coveney, 1990). However, the vast majority of textbooks still teach the regular double negation *ne...pas* as the default negation. Occasionally, a note is added stating that ‘ne’ is dropped in oral French (Amon, Muyskens, & Hadley, 2015). But that fact is not emphasized in practice and learners may attribute too much importance to ‘ne’ and misunderstand oral French when it is absent. The question whether to actively teach our students to drop this particle in conversations was investigated by van Compernelle (2009). He remarked that discourse formality plays a strong role in the presence or omission of ‘ne’ in spoken French and suggests that teachers should prepare students to expect a variety of discourses to reach authentic communicative competence.

## Research Questions

The discrepancies between ‘textbook French’ and ‘authentic French’ seem to widen as language change fails to be reflected in the classroom. Teaching standard French appears to be a safe choice: learners are potentially understood anywhere and, by using a neutral language in any

social context, they do not run the risk of using an inappropriate register that could embarrass them or others. Yet at the same time, they might feel excluded from native groups with whom they identify because they cannot interpret certain non-standard language cues, and therefore would be denied many important authentic learning experiences. The present investigation is thus motivated by the need to reconcile the practicality of teaching and learning a standard language with the authenticity of its use with native speakers. In order to find a path towards this reconciliation, we ask the following questions:

1. Do learners feel that being exposed to different varieties of French is important?
2. What variety of French is more important to learn in their opinion?

## **METHODS**

Data were collected among adult students enrolled in three third-year semester-long pronunciation courses in three different American universities within their regular French language undergraduate programs. The content of those courses was similar as the three instructors, two of whom are the investigators of the present research, had collaborated to create teaching and learning material and were using the same textbook, *Sons et Sens: La Prononciation du Français en Contexte* (Violin-Wigent, Miller & Grim, 2013). They were free to use their preferred teaching strategies, but they all covered every phonetic and cultural theme of the textbook, thus exposing learners to both standard and non-standard varieties of French. Other than standard French, those varieties include familiar French (verlan, argot, slang, abbreviations, truncations), Québec French, Senegalese French, Meridional French, and Swiss French.

### **Questionnaires**

Two online questionnaires were administered to gather data: one during the first week of the pronunciation class, and one, with adjusted related questions, during the last week of instruction. Responding to the questionnaires was strictly voluntary and done outside of class. As a result, end-of-semester attrition impacted our number of participants. Because many respondents who took the first questionnaire did not take the second one, the results should be taken with caution. However, all who took the second one also took the first one.

### **Participants**

A total of 37 students completed to the pre-semester questionnaire, though only 13 of them returned for the post-semester follow-up questionnaire. The age of students who volunteered to provide data for this study ranged from 19 to 54 (median = 21). Most were native speakers of English, and none were native speakers of French.

## **RESULTS**

At the beginning of the semester, participants answered the question “Do you think being exposed to different varieties of French is important?” A few students (8%) found it neither important nor important, while the rest (92%) thought it was rather or very important (Table 1).

One question that was repeated in both questionnaires was “In your opinion, what variety of French is more important to learn?” Before taking the pronunciation course (Table 2), a small majority (51%) favored standard French but others still believed that they were at least equally

important (49%). At the end of the term (Table 3), fewer favored standard French only (46%) and more thought that both were equally important (54%).

Table 4

*Do you think being exposed to different varieties of French is important? (pre-course)*

<b>Response options</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Not important at all	0	0%
Rather unimportant	0	0%
Neither important or unimportant	3	8%
Rather important	14	38%
Very important	20	54%

Table 5

*In your opinion, what variety of French is more important to learn? (pre-course)*

<b>Response options</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Standard French	19	51%
Regional varieties of French	0	0%
They are equally important	18	49%
Neither is important	0	0%

Table 6

*In your opinion, what variety of French is more important to learn? (post-course)*

<b>Response options</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Standard French	6	46%
Regional varieties of French	0	0%
They are equally important	7	54%
Neither is important	0	0%

In the second questionnaire our students were asked “Did you like being exposed to different varieties of French?” Over two thirds of them (69%) responded positively. The others expressed no preference (Table 4). In that same questionnaire we asked “If you have studied abroad, did

you sometimes have difficulties understanding or being understood because you were not familiar with conversational, familiar French?”. Only nine of them had studied in a French-speaking region before and were able to answer. Among them, a third (33%) said that they faced such a problem. Fewer (22%) were sure that they had not, while more (44%) were not sure (Table 5).

Table 7

*Did you like being exposed to different varieties of French? (post-course)*

<b>Response options</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	9	69%
No	0	0%
No preference	4	31%

Table 5

*If you have studied abroad, did you sometimes have difficulties understanding or being understood because you were not familiar with conversational, familiar French? (post-course)*

<b>Response options</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	3	33%
No	2	22%
Not sure	4	44%

The research questions detailed earlier can now be addressed. 1) Do learners feel that being exposed to different varieties of French is important? Yes, a vast majority (92%) thought so at the onset of their French pronunciation course. 2) What variety of French is more important to learn in their opinion? While most of them (51%) expressed a preference for standard French at the beginning of the course, this number decreased slightly (46%) after they had been exposed to different varieties and registers. Parallel to that, more students valued standard and non-standard as equals at the end of the semester than at the onset (up to 54% from 49%). Because there were fewer respondents in the follow-up survey, it is difficult to say if this trend would hold with a larger pool of participants.

## **DISCUSSION**

As learners of French are rarely exposed to varieties other than standard French in the classroom it seems logical that our participants would favor learning standard French (51%), which is what they are familiar with. As they gained exposure and familiarity with other varieties throughout

the semester in the pronunciation class, so did they gain an appreciation for non-standard varieties. More students therefore attributed equal importance to those varieties at the end of the semester (54%) than at the beginning (49%).

### **A Basis as Building Blocks**

Respondents' comments can help further interpret this finding. One student remarked: "Standard French is important to learn because it gives the basic building blocks to the language, but being able to take that knowledge and conform it to specific situations, i.e. with friends or family or at work, makes someone more capable at communication [...]." Another one wrote: "I think after taking this course it is important to grasp standard French with the regional varieties/informal French. I think standard French helps students grasp the main concepts and ideas, but that the regional varieties/informal French help to make the concepts relevant." Those observations underline the dichotomy between classroom vs. real life, or theory vs. practice. Both students describe the standard language as a basis on which to build, with the non-standard varieties serving as building blocks with which authentic French is constructed. In other words, standard French is seen as the necessary skeletal structure one needs to study in a classroom (much like a theoretical anatomy course) before being able to make sense of the true complexity of the language in authentic settings (like a medical practicum). A pronunciation course may help bridge those two stages by showing students dialectal varieties they had not noticed before, thus preparing them to expect language variation when they communicate with natives.

Another student's comment supports the idea that exposure to non-standard varieties prepares learners for more effective communication: "It's important to at least know that there will be variation between regions. And it will be helpful to know what to expect." Including different varieties of French in a third-year class is equipping learners with important linguistic and cultural tools that will help them be sensitive to variation when they encounter it, and perhaps ask questions about dialectal idiosyncrasies, thus enriching their learning experience and expanding their knowledge of the French language.

### **Helping Students Notice**

In the end-of-semester questionnaire, a third of the respondents who had traveled in a French-speaking region reported having difficulties understanding or being understood because they were not familiar with conversational French. One of them notes: "I went to Paris and couldn't understand some of the conversational language because the person shortened the phrase and spoke quickly. Now I'm aware of liaisons, enchaînements, etc." This student seems to think that receiving training on some phonological features of the French language, specifically linking, could have increased his/her comprehension skills prior to traveling to France.

Indeed, many native English speakers perceive French as being spoken fast because syllable boundaries do not match word boundaries, as they do in English. As a consequence they listen for cues to parse words and interpret oral language that would work for English, but not for French. That technique can be successful with audio material targeting language learners, since it often provides slow and over-enunciated speech samples. However, the flow of an authentic conversation would throw off students unaccustomed to it and unfamiliar with its characteristics, and it does according to our data. Once learners are made to notice the right cues such as syllabic

structures and intonation patterns, comprehension of conversational French is facilitated. This type of parsing occurs in formal standard French, but has a complication in colloquial French in which optional schwas tend to be dropped, thus affecting syllabic structures. Without knowledge of how syllables function, it can be especially difficult for learners to interpret informal input.

### **Implications for Language Programs**

Every student in this investigation believed that learning standard French is either more or equally important as learning non-standard varieties. Their comments, as explained above, support standard French as an essential foundation, and non-standard dialects as important building blocks. We can consequently recommend teaching standard French first without forgetting to include increased exposure to non-standard varieties in curricula.

At the same time, it is important to stress in which contexts those dialects or registers are appropriate as noted by Gadet and Guérin (2008). Without that crucial prior knowledge, it is not uncommon to have students returning from a semester abroad mixing formal and informal French in our classes. They pick up tidbits of conversational French without knowing how to categorize or handle them. For example, one of those returning students once described Voltaire as “un mec” (in English, a “dude”) in her/his French literature exam. That type of information would also benefit heritage speakers who are often comfortable with spoken French yet unable to switch to a more formal register for written projects. Even though students will likely not master registers by the end of a four-year university program, they should be made aware of their consequences. This information does not all have to be delivered and practiced in a pronunciation course. For a longer-lasting impact, it would be best to recycle it across various courses.

### **Further Research**

Future studies should perhaps investigate what features of colloquial French have the most impact on comprehension and intelligibility, so that those characteristics can be taught in introductory courses. For example, negation is traditionally taught as requiring both ‘ne’ and ‘pas’ when in reality native French speakers often drop ‘ne’ and rely on ‘pas’ as the main cue to negation. Native English speakers tend to forget ‘pas’ and instead associate ‘ne’ with the negation as it resembles the English ‘not’ and is placed where ‘not’ or ‘don’t’ would be, which can create communication difficulties. When and how can negation be most effectively taught to avoid possible communication break-downs? Should other phonological rules concerning the schwa be taught (e.g., pronunciation of the masculine article ‘le’ and the preposition ‘de’)? In addition, teachers may wonder whether exposing learners to both standard and non-standard French might slow down their students’ movement up the ACTFL proficiency scale. As many institutions of higher education are concerned with preparing students to take an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview, one may object to exposing learners to more than one variety of French. On the other hand, a requirement of the Intermediate High and Advanced levels is for interviewees to be understood by non-sympathetic listeners. What phonological or syntactic features of colloquial French help non-sympathetic listener understand a non-native most easily?

## Pronunciation Activities Promoting Exposure to Non-Standard Varieties

In a pronunciation class, certain phonetic themes lend themselves well to the exploration of non-standard varieties. For instance, learners can study syllabic structure (crucial in French to understand ‘enchaînement’, ‘liaison’, omission of schwas, and complementary mid-vowels) through activities around “verlan,” a way of creating words by inverting syllables in certain social contexts. The “verlan” dialect is itself in constant movement, and helping learners understand that the examples given in class may not be relevant when and where they travel is important to further demonstrate the constant evolution of a language.

The following activity (Table 6) is one way to bring to light current changes as recommended by Vitez (2002) and Jeanmaire (2014). This exercise introduces a non-standard variety of French, “verlan”, that students will encounter in authentic situations and can therefore be of value to them as they expressed in the present study. After students understand the preferred syllabic structures of French and are given a brief historical account of the development and formation of “verlan”, they can be given the following table to fill out. This task requires that they either derive the “verlan” form of a standard word or guess the original form of its “verlan” version. The top row provides a model. In the last row students can choose any word and produce its “verlan” counterpart.

Table 6

*Verlan to teach French syllabic structures*

Standard	Verlan
méchant	[ʃɑ̃.me]
	[si.mεʁ]
maison	
comme ça	
tomber	

Understanding syllable structures in French plays an essential role in many innovations of conversational French. The next activity (Table 7) helps learners apply their knowledge of French syllables and the language preference for open syllables in order to predict the truncations of common words, in contrast to English that favors closed syllables. The last row is blank to allow students to come up with their own words.



Table 7

*Truncations to teach French syllabic structures*

<b>Original</b>	<b>Truncated</b>	<b>English equivalent</b>
réfrigérateur	frigo	
	labo	
vétérinaire		
adolescent		
interrogation		

Texting is a language that most college students know, use, and understand as an ever-changing code. This skill depends on understanding phoneme and grapheme correspondences. The next activity (Table 8) offers an opportunity for students to learn common texting codes while testing their understanding of the French sound system.

Table 8

*Texting to teach French sounds*

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Text language</b>
à demain	a2m1
	koi29
	Je tM
	TT où?
A+	
elle est au ciné	

The omission of the schwa in the negation particle ‘ne’, or even the omission of the entire word ‘ne’, needs to be taught in terms of type of discourse (van Compernelle, 2009). An activity offering sentences without ‘ne’ or with the absence of the schwa in ‘ne’ could ask students if they hear sentences in the positive or negative pole. Generally, the omission of schwa in any word is linked to informal contexts. The following listening activity (Table 9) helps learners associate the presence or absence of [ə] with the proper context. It teaches them to not expect to hear the letter <e> pronounced at all in everyday French. If they hear it, the situation is likely formal (e.g., a speech). If they don’t, the setting is likely informal (e.g., a conversation). This could also be done to distinguish standard French from Meridional French, since the latter tends to keep all schwas.

Table 9

*Omitting schwa in informal contexts*

<b>Learner hears</b>	<b>Formal</b>	<b>Informal</b>
Nous ne savons pas		
C'est cela		
Tout de même		
Il se trompe		
Donnez-moi le ticket		
J'ai repris l'argent		
Ils verront demain		
C'est la semaine prochaine		

In addition to using film to expose learners to various types of discourse as suggested by van Compernelle (2009), different genres of music can be proposed. Shadowing exercises can help pronunciation and expand vocabulary. For instance, a movie scene with the volume off can be played while learners reenact it live, trying to match the actors' lips as much as possible. Exercises as those presented here will draw attention to language variety, encourage students to create, and demonstrate that there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer, but rather a complex continuum of situations in which language types are more or less appropriate (Gadet & Guérin, 2008). Authentic resources are available to help, such as dictionaries that have recently given value to the language of the youth (Ribeiro 2014; Tengour, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

Exposing second language learners to non-standard varieties supports the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) World-readiness standards for learning languages by giving learners tools for more effective Communication (standard #1), by representing the variety of Cultures (#2) of the Francophone world, by helping learners make Connections (#3) with other disciplines like geography and sociology, by helping them make Comparisons (#4) across cultures and linguistic varieties, and equipping them with language they can use to integrate real Communities (#5).

L2 Learners of French seem to value being exposed to non-standard varieties of French as long as their knowledge of standard French gives them a solid foundation. In this small-scale study no non-standard variety emerged as more important to explore than another. Students seemed to find value in being exposed to a wide array of dialects and registers. Deciding on which varieties to focus can be left up to the instructors or study-abroad programs, based on certain language features meaningful to course content or specific target regions. No matter what the students' goals in L2 language education, a clear map of linguistic diversity is essential for greater awareness and sensitivity of our global world.

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