Ruellot, V. (2020). Using stereotypical accent to improve French accentuation. In O. Kang, S. Staples, K. Yaw, & K. Hirschi (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 11th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching conference*, ISSN 2380-9566, Northern Arizona University, September 2019 (pp. 326–333). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

USING STEREOTYPICAL ACCENT TO IMPROVE FRENCH ACCENTUATION

Viviane Ruellot, Western Michigan University

Accentuation in English and French differs not only in the placement of stress but also in its strength, leading to a reduction of English unaccented vowels that does not occur in French (Tranel, 1987). Failure to assign equal weight to French syllables not only affects the degree of accent "foreignness" (Dansereau, 1995, p. 645), but the accompanying vowel reduction may considerably impact comprehensibility. This teaching tip proposes practice activities for the development of French accentuation through imitation of a stereotypical French accent. Imitation of a foreign language (L2) accent in the speaker's native language (L1) has proven efficient in improving L2 pronunciation (Everitt, 2015). Not only does it afford learners exclusive focus on that skill, but it also allows them to retrieve phonological and phonetic knowledge acquired through exposure to L2 accent, including stereotypical accent, and apply it to improve L2 pronunciation. As it has helped Spanish learners improve aspiration of L2 English /p/, /t/, and /k/ in Everitt (2015), it may also help English learners with French stress placement and unaltered vowel quality. Proposed is a series of contextualized and communicative activities designed towards that goal.

BACKGROUND

Accentuation—the act of pronouncing or marking speech with an accent or stress—is a complex prosodic component of a language, with wide variation both within and across languages. As an essential contributor to meaning and communication, it is important to introduce accentuation early in the learning process. It is especially so in the learning of French, where accentuation impacts the pronunciation of vowels, and their incorrect realization may considerably affect the comprehensibility of a speaker. Drawing on the salience and familiarity of stereotypical accents, the following teaching tip proposes a pedagogical progression aiming to facilitate the presentation and practice of accentuation in the beginner French class.

Research on L2 Accent Imitation in the Native Language

Language learners speaking their native language with a foreign accent has informed researchers and instructors about learner degree of awareness of certain L2 pronunciation features, such as aspiration of the voiceless plosives /p/, /t/, and /k/ (Flege & Hammond, 1982; Mora et al., 2014; Neuhauser, 2011; Sypiańska & Olender, 2016). It was also used as a pedagogical tool to improve pronunciation in L2 English and L2 French. While it did not lead Anglophone learners to significantly improve their pronunciation of L2 French /ʁ/ in Ruellot (2018), it helped beginner Spanish learners pronounce L2 English voiceless plosives with more target-like aspiration (Everitt, 2015). Therefore, imitating French accent in English, and an exaggerated version of it at that, may help learners improve their accentuation of French, as it can guide them to identify appropriate stress placement and become aware of French vowel stability.

Stereotypical French Accent

Recourse to stereotypes in disciplines such as L2 learning might first be deemed ill-advised and counterproductive. As stereotypes present a fragmented, simplified, and often exaggerated aspect of a people's culture, they fail to provide learners with the adequate information necessary to foster understanding and acceptance of cultural differences. However, when it comes to L2 pronunciation, the stereotypical version of a foreign accent features two characteristics—exaggeration and familiarity—that may help learners with several pronunciation aspects, including accentuation. Take the utterance "hon-hon-hon!" for example. This stereotypical rendition of a French laugh implies that nasal vowels are very frequent in French, perhaps more than they truly are. Its exaggerated aspect further makes salient (Kristiansen, 2003) the equal intensity with which each vowel is pronounced, with slightly more weight on the last vowel. As it is exaggerated, the feature becomes more noticeable, which is conducive to its processing and acquisition (Schmidt, 1990, 1993). And while it was originally inspired by Anglophone perception of the famous mid-nineteenth century celebrity Maurice Chevalier's laugh (Chaverou & Combis, 2017), it has been widely featured in the media, by characters such as Chef Louis as he sings "Les poissons" in *The Little Mermaid* (Musker et al., 1989). This now 'official' stereotypical French laugh, and the accentuation characteristics it features, are highly familiar to learners who grew up watching such movies (Lippi-Green, 1997). Tapping into this knowledge and practicing French pronunciation following a stereotypical accent may help learners become aware of the characteristics of French accentuation and improve that aspect of their pronunciation.

French and English accentuation

Tranel (1987) explains that stress (or accent) falls on a word's syllable and corresponds to the "relative prominence that distinguishes [that] syllable as salient in relation to [the] others" (p. 33). By contrasting the English words *phoTOgrapher* and *PHOtoGRAPH*, he illustrates how English word stress placement varies, whereas it remains steadily on the last syllable of standard French words: *phoTO*, *photoGRAPHE*, *photograPHIQUE*. At the phrase and sentence level, while every English lexical word is accented, as in "The HARE CHASED the CAT," stress falls on the last syllable of the last word in a syntactic/semantic group of words in French: *J'ai beSOIN de pâte à TARTE*, I need pie dough (pp. 197-198). Stress is weaker in French (see below) and consequently less perceptible. In running discourse, however, where sentences are broken down into groups of words, the stress that falls on the last syllable of the group is generally accompanied by a change in intonation or pitch, i.e., rising in intermediate groups and falling in the last group in the sentence (Tranel, 1987, p. 202).

Another fundamental distinction between French and English accentuation mentioned by Tranel is that stress is weaker, less prominent in French, with a contrast between accented and unaccented syllables that is much less marked than in English. The consequence is that French syllables are pronounced with comparable intensity, which allows vowels to retain their full quality. In contrast, the vowel in unaccented English syllables is reduced, commonly to a schwa or a sound with similar characteristics (cf. the unaccented syllables in *phoTOgrapher* and *PHOtoGRAPH* above). Therefore, the challenge for Anglophone learners of French is to pronounce each syllable with comparable strength and each vowel in its full quality.

This challenge is rarely addressed in language learning material before the intermediate or third year level, and outside of courses with pronunciation as the primary focus of instruction. An informal survey of nine first- and second-year college level French textbooks reveals no mention of the concepts of accentuation and stress. Intonation is generally covered, but mostly in relation to 'yes/no' question formation. Three of these nine textbooks introduce prosodic aspects related to accentuation. *Chez Nous* (Valdman et al., 2014), *Contacts* (Valette & Valette, 2014), and *Espaces* (Mitschke & Tano, 2019) do it through the notion of rhythm, explaining how in French, it is made up of groups of words in which each syllable receives the same degree of strength, with the last syllable in the group generally being slightly longer than the others. *Chez Nous* additionally explains that because of this, each vowel is pronounced "evenly and distinctly" (p. 35), and invites students to listen to English and French words and repeat them while "[counting] out the rhythm or [tapping] it out with [their] finger" over two activities in the textbook and one in the student activity manual. While neither *Espaces* nor *Contacts* mention vowel stability, *Espaces* also presents the notion of stress on a different syllable to express emotion. *Chez Nous* does as well, but unlike *Espaces*, it does not accompany it with a practice activity. It appears then, that the commendable efforts to introduce French accentuation to beginner learners and provide them with practice opportunities remain rare and incomplete. The following approach, which incorporates the use of stereotypical foreign accent, may help compensate for these shortcomings, as it provides a tool that is already familiar to both learners and teachers and which does not require prior extensive teacher training.

PRESENTATION OF ACCENTUATION AND PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

A. Accentuation

As it is affected by meaning, grammar, and a host of other factors, the placement and expression of French stress can vary widely. To facilitate its introduction to beginner learners, accentuation is presented in its basic, neutral state, i.e., as it appears in declarative and emotionally neutral discourse.

1) Presentation

As previously mentioned, stress in French is hardly perceptible in and of itself. However, it is accompanied by a change in intonation, with a rise that is characteristic of the end of intermediate groups, and a fall in the last group in the sentence (Tranel, 1987, p. 202). Focus on this change can help learners identify the proper placement of stress. Intonation can be introduced and illustrated with the showing of the video clip from the American TV show "Saturday Night Live" titled "America's Funniest Cats", featuring the so-called French TV presenters Joelle LaRue and Noelle LeSoup as guests of the American show (Jost et al., 2018). Another illustration of stress and its corollary intonation can be found in the excerpt of the movie "Along Came Polly," at the end of which Claude, a French scuba diver instructor, converses with Ruben and Polly, the main characters of the movie (DeVito et al., 2004). Both excerpts are freely available on YouTube respectively at https://youtu.be/AH4yRRTgcE8 and https://youtu.be/mxFnMHatVpk?t=224. Students are presented with a script of the excerpt in which they will underline the syllables they perceive to be marked by rising intonation (e.g., Figure 1).

- You know because in Paris, we are the center of the world as far as arts and culture, so when we see this show of yours, you know, we say, we have to have this!
- This life is euh too much to bear. She's quietly backing out of this world euh.
- Euh, boy oy oy! This cat has a neurological disorder, euh, she cannot gauge euh distance between herself and the couch.

Figure 1. Annotated script of "America's Funniest Cats" excerpt

2) Practice

Once students have identified the syllables with rising intonation, they are invited to imitate the protagonists in the clip and repeat their lines from the script, paying particular attention to accent placement, i.e., to marking the target syllables with the modelled rising intonation.

Students are then directed to create a dialogue in English in which they introduce themselves to their partner. After proper greetings, students are invited to tell their partner: their name, where they are from, where they live, what they like to do in their free time, and what they want to do after they graduate. They are instructed to underline the syllables which would be marked by rising intonation if Joelle LaRue or Noelle LeSoup performed their dialogue and to practice saying this dialogue with their partner, paying particular attention to the rising intonation typical of stereotypical French.

To further their practice of intonation, and as a first step towards transfer from English to French, students are asked to practice and record themselves reading the following French text (Figure 2) where Julie introduces herself, marking where the intonation would rise when read with a stereotypical French accent. The instructor subsequently provides feedback on student performance and application of rising intonation.

Bonjour, je m'appelle Julie. J'ai trente-deux ans. Je suis française et je viens de Paris. J'habite à Orléans. C'est à une heure au sud de Paris. Je suis professeur de biologie. Ma journée commence à sept heures et demie tous les matins et je rentre chez moi après cinq heures. Le week-end, je fais du vélo, je joue au football, et je vais courir. Je vais deux fois par semaine à la salle de gym. Je suis assez sportive. Je joue du violon. J'aime bien regarder la télé, sortir et aller au cinéma avec mes amis. Quand je peux, je retourne chez moi, à Paris, pour rendre visite à ma famille et passer du temps avec mes amis d'enfance.

Hello, my name is Julie. I'm thirty-two years old. I am French and I come from Paris. I live in Orléans. It is located one hour south of Paris. I am a biology professor. My day starts at seven thirty every morning and I go back home after five. On weekends, I ride my bike, I play football, and I run. I go to the gym twice a week. I am fairly athletic. I play the violin. I like to watch TV, go out and go to the cinema with my friends. When I can, I go back home to Paris, to visit my family and spend some time with my childhood friends.

Figure 2. French text and English translation

B. Vowel Stability

1) Presentation

The previous set of activities guided students to appropriately place French accent by having them focus on the syllables marked by rising intonation. The goal of the following activities is to bring to their awareness the stability of French vowels, and to provide them with opportunities to practice pronouncing all French vowels with equal, full quality, i.e., without reducing the unstressed ones. The instructor first contrasts vowels in French and in English by presenting students with a table featuring the English words "photograph" and "photographer," and the French words "photographe' and photographie," as displayed in Figure 3, and demonstrates how the vowel 'o' in unstressed syllables are reduced to schwa in English but retain their full quality in French.

English	French
photograph	Photographe
ə	o o
photographer	photographie
ə	o o

Figure 3. Accentuation and vowels in English and French

To illustrate French vowel stability, the instructor shows an excerpt of the Disney movie titled "Really Scent" freely available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tej7Fqyd8FQ along with the script below (Warner Bros & Levitow, 1959). The clip features the so-called French skunk Pepé le Pew, who discovers that he smells bad. The lack of vowel reduction is particularly clear for the 'a' of 'appear' in Pepé's line "(…) every time I **a**ppear" (see Figure 4).

- Where **a**re you, loving doll?
- Come t**o** me, my melon-baby collie!
- I must find out what this 'pew' means every time I **a**ppear
- Ah, here **i**t is! "Pew." It means… No, no, not me!
- C'est le r**i**d**i**c**u**l**ou**s!
- C'est true. Pepé, you are a pew.
- F**o**r her, I w**i**ll make myself dainty!

Figure 4. Script of "Really Scent" excerpt

2) Practice

To practice pronouncing all vowels with their full quality without reducing the unstressed ones, students are invited to imitate Pepé le Pew in the excerpt, following the script and paying particular attention to the underlined and bolded vowels.
Students are then provided with the description in English of famous Parisian buildings (Figure 5). They are to read each description to their partner who will guess which building is described. Again, they are directed to pronounce each vowel in its full quality.

1. This square and arched m**o**n**u**m**e**nt h**o**n**o**rs those who fought and died f**o**r France in the French R**e**v**o**l**u**ti**o**n**a**ry and N**a**p**o**l**eo**ni**c** Wars. B**e**n**ea**th its vault is the Tomb **o**f the **U**nkn**o**wn S**o**ldi**e**r fr**o**m World War I. It was c**o**mmi**s**si**o**ned by N**a**p**o**l**eo**n in 1806 t**o** c**e**l**e**br**a**te h**i**s v**i**ct**o**r**y** **a**t **Au**st**e**r**i**tz.

2. This l**a**ndm**a**rk is a c**a**b**a**r**e**t. It is known f**o**r its **e**xtr**a**v**a**g**a**nt shows and it is the b**i**rthpl**a**ce **o**f the can-can dance. It is **a**ls**o** the name **o**f **a** f**a**m**ou**s m**u**s**i**c**a**l. It is close t**o** the m**e**tr**o** st**a**ti**on** Blanche in M**on**tm**a**rtre.

Figure 5. Scripts for the description of French monuments

As a final practice opportunity, students are invited to draw inspiration from the English dialogue they created earlier, in which they introduced themselves, to create a French version they will practice performing, making sure to mark the appropriate syllables with rising intonation and to pronounce all vowels so they retain their full quality.

CONCLUSION

French accentuation is a challenging component of pronunciation for Anglophone learners, as its acoustic properties are not as salient as they are in English. However, with the help of stereotypical French and its exaggerated—therefore likely noticeable—rendition of intonation and vowel stability, students can practice their pronunciation and increase their degree of comprehensibility, enhancing their communicability.

While the activities proposed were originally designed for intermediate learners, they can easily be adapted to lower levels of proficiency with minimal change, i.e., with simpler grammar structures and more basic vocabulary in the French text introducing Julie which is used to practice intonation. The same approach would also fit a focus on other pronunciation features, such as the pronunciation of French /y/. Finally, it can be adapted to other languages using, for example, Hank Azaria's rendition of a Spanish stereotypical accent in *The Birdcage* (Machlis et al., 1996), or Michael Caine's German accent in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (Williams & Oz, 1988).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viviane Ruellot is an Associate Professor of French at Western Michigan University, where she teaches French, French linguistics and applied linguistics. Her research focuses on the pedagogy and acquisition of French pronunciation by non-native speakers. She studies how stereotypical

accent may help second language learners improve their pronunciation. She is also interested in the stages of pronunciation acquisition and the history of French pronunciation teaching.

Western Michigan University
Department of World Languages and Literatures
1903 W. Michigan Ave.
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5338
(269) 387-3043
viviane.ruellot@wmich.edu

REFERENCES

Chaverou, E. & Combis, H. (2017, August 9). Chevalier, Montand, Cotillard, et autres artistes au si sexy french accent! Retrieved from https://www.franceculture.fr/societe/chevalier-montand-cotillard-et-autres-artistes-au-si-sexy-french-accent.

Dansereau, D. (1995). Phonetics in the beginning and intermediate oral proficiency-oriented French classroom. *French Review*, 638-651.

DeVito, D., Shamberg, M., & Sher, S. (Producers), & Hamburg, J. (Director). (2004). *Along came Polly* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

Everitt, C. (2015). Accent Imitation on the L1 as a task to improve L2 pronunciation [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Barcelona, Spain.

Flege, J. E., & Hammond, R. M. (1982). Mimicry of non-distinctive phonetic differences between language varieties. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *5*(1), 1-17.

Jost, C., Che, M., & Sublette, K. (Writers), & King, D. (Director). (2018, September 29). [Television series episode] In Lorne, M. (Producer), *Saturday Night Live*. New York: National Broadcasting Company.

Kristiansen, G. (2003). How to do things with allophones: Linguistic stereotypes as cognitive reference points in social cognition. In R. Dirven, R. Frank, & M. Putz (Eds.), *Cognitive models in language and thought: Ideologies, metaphors, and meanings* (pp. 69-120). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. London: Psychology Press.

Machlis, N., Nichols, M. (Producers) & Nichols, M. (Director). (1996). *The birdcage*. [Motion picture]. United States: United Artists.

Mitschke, C. & Tano, C. (2019). *Espaces : Rendez-vous avec le monde francophone* (4th ed.). Vista Higher Learning.

Mora, J. C., Rochdi, Y., & Kivistö-de Souza, H. (2014). Mimicking accented speech as L2 phonological awareness. *Language Awareness*, *23*(1-2), 57-75.

Musker, J., Ashman, H. (Producers) & Clements, R., Musker, J. (Directors). (1989). *The little mermaid*. [Motion picture]. United States: Buena Vista Pictures.

Neuhauser, S. (2011). Foreign accent imitation and variation of VOT and voicing in plosives. In *Proceedings of the XVIIth International Congress of Phonetic Science, Hong Kong* (pp. 1462-1465).

Ruellot, V. (2018). Can Pepé Le Pew help? Stereotypical accent and French pronunciation learning. In J. Levis (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 9th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching conference*, ISSN 2380- 9566, University of Utah, September 2017 (pp. 163-173). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.

Schmidt, R. W. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, *11*(2), 129-158.

Schmidt, R. W. (1993). Awareness and second language acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *13*, 206-226.

Sypiańska, J., & Olender, A. (2016). *Phonetic awareness in Polish learners of English* (pp. 1-9). Poznań Working Papers in Linguistics, *1*(1).

Tranel, B. (1987). *The sounds of French: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Valdman, A., Pons, C., & Scullen, M. (2014). *Chez nous. Branché sur le monde francophone* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Valette, J. & Valette, R. (2014). *Contacts: Langue et culture françaises* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Warner Bros (Producers), & Levitow, A. (Director). (1959). *Really scent* [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Williams, B. (Producer), & Oz, F. (Director). (1988). *Dirty rotten scoundrels*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Orion Pictures.