

ACCENTEDNESS IMPLICATIONS ON FRENCH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS' IDENTITY AND INVESTMENT: A CASE STUDY

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In this study, I explore the relationship between the perceived accentedness of French-language learners (FLLs) and its impact on their identity and investment in pronunciation skills. I draw on the concept of learner *investment* (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2013) as a key aspect of language learning research focused on identity and in connection to pronunciation. This paper's primary goal is to explore the link between the perceived accentedness of FLLs and their identity. I also examine the repercussions of accentedness on FLLs' investment in their pronunciation skills. To address these questions, I focused on four participants' replies to an online survey and examined the semi-structured interviews through *Analysis of Narratives*. This case study highlights that positive or negative implications on their identity may arise depending on their perception of their accentedness, driving their desire to invest in pronunciation.

INTRODUCTION

Accent, often described as one of the most salient linguistic features associating individuals with social groups, may also drive second language learners' *investment* in their learning process (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2013). According to Moyer (2013), "Accent is a set of dynamic segmental and suprasegmental habits that convey linguistic meaning along with social and situational affiliation." (p. 11). Accentedness, in turn, represents the perceived strength of a foreign accent by listeners compared to native speakers. It is often measured on a 1-9 point scale (e.g., Munro & Derwing, 1995) and may depend on listeners' attitudes. Learners' self-perception of their accentedness may help us understand the relationship between what they think of their pronunciation and their identity. Derwing (2003) explored ESL learners' self-perception of their pronunciation skills and stated that learners' perceptions of their accents help to raise pedagogical awareness, emphasizing the need to prioritize personalized pronunciation instruction within the broader social context. The current study explores the self-perception of French-language learners (FLLs) on their pronunciation of the language. By collecting learners' perceived accentedness on their own speech, we can better understand to what extent accentedness intersects with learners' identity and how this connects to their investment as language learners toward pronunciation skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a growing interest in exploring identity in language learning in the last decades (Norton & De Costa, 2017, p. 90). Drawing on poststructuralist theory, Norton (2013) called for the need to reconceptualize identity in language learning. Norton uses the term *identity* "to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 45). In doing so, Norton argued that SLA theory should develop an understanding of identity in the broader context of social interactions. However, in applications to the field of pronunciation, most studies are still focused on approaches that cannot always unveil the social

meaning of speech implications. By adopting an identity approach that sees the language as always socially situated (Norton & McKinney, 2011), we can gain a more socially embedded vision of accent and better understand what its implications are for learners' pronunciation and, therefore, how "*Intention*, in some ways similar to Norton Pierce's (1995) idea of *investment*, may drive the learner's eventual attainment by profoundly impacting engagement with the target language." (Moyer, 2004. p. 98).

Identity and Pronunciation in Language Learning

As stated by Moyer (2013), "Accent, as an essential aspect of our identity, can be the site of resistance when we do not wish to yield our established sense of self, or it can be the gateway to integration into another culture." (p. 62). However, Derwing (2003) found that ESL learners did not perceive accent change as a threat to their identity because their primary connection to identity was through "the native control of their first language," showing no interest in retaining an accent as an identity marker (p. 559). Echoing Derwing, McCrocklin and Link (2016) pointed out that ESL students were not deeply concerned about losing their identity and "showed no fear of loss of accent and many wanted to speak like a native speaker" (p. 140), resetting thus the need for instructors to envisage practical and feasible goals in pronunciation teaching. Nonetheless, it is true that "Adults have their own L1 identities (multiple roles), but when they start to learn an L2, they may find it impossible to present their true selves because of linguistic limitations in grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, and, of course, pronunciation" (Derwing & Munro, 2015, p. 139). Among the most cited studies in terms of the impact accent has on identity, Marx (2002) recounts her experience and struggles where accent choices play a role in crossing community boundaries beyond a language learner's full control (LeVelle & Levis, 2014, p. 108). In another important study in the field, Piller (2002) examines the process of "passing" (as a native speaker), connecting pronunciation to speakers' identity and their native-like attainment. Finally, Achirri (2017), in exploring identity through the lens of accent, found that her participant (a Chinese ESL learner) questioned assumptions about identity linked to accent, highlighting the connection between cultural identity perceptions and L2 accents even if still prioritizing comprehension and intelligibility over accentedness. In this study, I look at the repercussions of accentedness on FLLs' identity to provide additional insights into the interplay between accent, identity, and language learning goals.

Investment and Pronunciation in Language Learning

In pronunciation research, investment has often been overlooked in favor of motivation (see Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Piske et al., 2001). However, if motivation is a "psychological construct that focuses on conscious and unconscious factors, investment is primarily sociological and focuses on how histories, lived experiences, and social practices shape language learning" (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 29). Consequently, a motivated learner may not always be invested (Norton, 2001). Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment proposes identity in language learning as one of three constructs central to the investment process. Thus, investment reshapes the importance of identity in language learning, highlighting how one must be able to identify with the target community to be successful. Darvin and Norton (2016) later pointed out that "language learners invest because there is something that they want for themselves. [...] At the center of language learning is a desire for a target language, the identities represented by

particular accents and varieties, and the recognition, security and symbolic ties that are associated with the learning of this language” (p. 26). In this sense, Moyer (2014) also indicated that “Evidence shows that both integrative and instrumental motivation make a positive difference for accent, but what likely matters more is *a sustained desire over time* to improve one’s fluency and/or to sound like a native speaker” (Moyer, 2014, p. 17). This “*sustained desire over time*” is related to social aspects and may be embedded in the construct of investment. By exploring FLLs’ perceived accentedness, I seek insights into how identity may play a role in FLL’s investment beyond their motivation.

Relevance of Case Studies

A case study is an appropriate approach to explore these aspects as it may reveal important and in-depth aspects of individuals’ experiences by providing a “contextualized profile of a person. [...] By making sound methodological decisions, identity researchers, through the case study, are able to cast a light on the complexity and contradictions of individuals and to find generalizable connections” (Darvin, 2018, pp. 779-780). As highlighted by Duff (2014), “Case studies in applied linguistics have contributed substantially to theories and models in such areas as language development, learner motivation and identity” (p. 234). Therefore, “through detailed, contextualized descriptions of language learners and users in and across a wide assortment of contexts and time frames, new understandings can be gained regarding what it means to be a language learner” (p. 250). Using a case study approach, I highlight the contextualized aspects of accentedness on FLLs to understand the impact on their identity and investment.

Research Questions

I propose two research questions to direct this study.

RQ1: What is the link between the perceived accentedness of French-language learners (FLLs) and their identity?

RQ2: What are the repercussions of accentedness on FLLs’ investment in their pronunciation skills?

METHODS

Participants

Participants were four undergraduate students learning French at a large midwestern U.S. university. They were enrolled in lower or upper-level undergraduate courses. Three had declared a French minor/major, and three traveled to France for a limited time. Only one participant lived in France for one academic semester. *All participants first completed an online questionnaire and then agreed to participate in a follow-up interview.*

Table 1
Participants

Name <i>(all are pseudonyms)</i>	Level	French Minor/Major	Travelled To France	Lived In France
Deric	Advanced	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nelly	High-intermediate	Yes	Yes	No
Helen	High-intermediate	Yes	No	No
Ave	Low-intermediate	No	Yes	No

Instruments

I used two instruments to explore the impact of FLLs' accent on their identity and investment. First, I designed an online survey to gather information on participants' experiences. The survey included 33 questions where learners had to make scalar judgments on a four-point scale (1=Strongly agree to 4=Strongly disagree). For this study, I looked at 14 questions (Appendix A) divided into three themes: skills, identity, and investment.

Second, I conducted semi-structured interviews where I asked seven questions (Appendix B) to explore each FLL's identity and investment more closely. Questions were follow-up questions to the online survey to gather in-depth elements from participants' narratives. These audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, lasted about 30 minutes, and took place in a private, quiet room at the university. I asked questions in English but left participants free to reply in English or French, so we sometimes used both during interviews. Participants were encouraged to provide additional comments beyond responding to questions, and their replies were integrated into the interview to keep the natural flow and tone of the conversation, leading to the semi-structured format.

Data Analysis Procedures

Using Thematic Analysis, I qualitatively analyzed participants' common and unusual replies concerning the three themes of Skills, Identity and Investment.

Table 2
Thematic Analysis of the Survey (questions in Appendix A)

Skills	the FLLs' self-perception of their pronunciation skills (questions 1-3)
Identity	the impact of having an accent on FLLs' identity (questions 4-7)
Investment	the link between FLLs' identity as accented speakers and their investment in pronunciation based on their self-perception of their pronunciation skills (questions 8-14)

To analyze the interviews, I continued to focus on the same themes with three subsequent questions.

Table 3
Process for the Analysis of Narratives (questions in Appendix B)

Theme	Analysis question	Observation	Linkages
Skills	How do participants perceive their own accent?	Positive, negative, or neutral perceptions of their pronunciation skills	Participants' perception of their accents based on the importance they give to pronunciation (question 1) and their specific goals regarding pronunciation and/or accentedness (question 2)
Identity	How does accentedness impact their identity?	Connection between pronunciation and self-confidence and their influence on identity	Participants' accentedness based on their self-confidence (question 3), how they think they are perceived by native speakers (question 4) and which are the implications of accentedness on identity during social interactions (question 5)
Investment	What is the link between FLLs' self-perceived pronunciation skills, identity, and investment in pronunciation?	Eagerness toward pronunciation and linkages with skills; implication of experiences and linkages with identity; linkages with investment	Participants' investment level based on their desire to improve pronunciation/sound like a native speaker (question 6) and experience where accentedness may have helped acceptance (question 7)

I followed a sociocultural approach to the *Analysis of Narratives* (Grbich, 2013) of the recorded interviews as a critical element to provide additional insights, contrasting and interpreting the content of the stories. Therefore, I listened to the interviews multiple times and took notes on the participants' experiences as key points. The resulting file comprised around 4,750 words of transcriptions and side notes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Analysis of The Survey

The participants generally had a positive perception of their French accent. They believed their pronunciation could be improved with focused practice, valuing it as an important component of their L2 proficiency and interactions. Looking at Deric and Nelly's replies, it is possible that proficiency, combined with the length of contact with native speakers, may influence the perception of their pronunciation skills. However, this perception also seems to be based on their self-confidence. Therefore, self-confidence is linked with accentedness and can play a role in FLLs' identity and how they want to appear.

Table 4
Perceived Skills

	Participant Name	Deric	Nelly	Helen	Ave
N	Questions	Skills			
1	I'm confident in my ability to speak French with a precise accent, reflecting the correct pronunciation of the language	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree	Agree
2	I believe that my proficiency in French pronunciation is on par with my proficiency in other aspects of the language	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3	I believe that having a native-like accent when speaking French can positively impact interactions with native French speakers.	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Agree

The survey revealed mixed feelings among the participants regarding the impact of their accents on their identity, reinforcing its link with pronunciation acquisition. Overall, they indicated that they felt comfortable with their accent and that it may contribute to their identity. However, they displayed highly variable replies regarding the impact of accentedness on their cultural and social identity (Questions 5 and 6). Except for Nelly, they all acknowledged that accentedness could result in an identity gap, further increasing a lack of confidence during interactions. It is, therefore, possible to see a relationship between pronunciation and identity that plays, in turn, a central role in FLLs' investment.

Table 5
Identity

	Participant Name	Deric	Nelly	Helen	Ave
N	Questions	Identity			
4	I feel at ease when speaking with my accent in French and believe that it adds to my unique identity as a non-native speaker	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
5	I prefer to be perceived as a non-native speaker when I speak French.	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree
6	My native language accent has already made me feel uncomfortable when speaking with native French speakers	Strongly agree	Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
7	I believe that my way of pronouncing French words and sentences can affect my usual personality, causing a lack of confidence when interacting with native French speakers	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Agree	Disagree

Responses suggest that the participants seemed *motivated* with their French pronunciation and expressed their eagerness to improve it as much as possible. However, as differing replies to the survey and the analysis of narratives (below) confirm, elements contributing to the identity gap (like too low or too high self-confidence, expectations, or anxiety in pronunciation) may drive a lower investment even in motivated students. In contrast, students whose identity seemed less influenced by their accentedness seemed more invested, especially in pronunciation.

Deric and Nelly's replies showed an opposite pattern and brought a supplementary dimension to the analysis. For example, Nelly's lack of confidence in her pronunciation skills (Q. 1 and 2), in combination with her strong identity claim (Q. 5 and 7), does not lead her to be particularly invested in her pronunciation skills, even if she believes that dedication can still help her improve (Q. 8). Unlike Deric, she doesn't seem to value being seen as a distinguished speaker (Q. 13). At the same time, Deric's responses indicate both confidence in his pronunciation skills (Q. 1 and 2) combined with pronunciation and accent anxiety (Q. 6 and 7). This seems to impact his identity more strongly than other learners and, therefore, sometimes has repercussions on his investment (Q. 12). Overall, the thematic analysis shows connections between self-perception of accentedness, the participants' identities as non-native speakers, and their investment in pronunciation skills. Exploring participants' narratives will help provide a detailed description that adds to these results.

Table 6

Investment

	Participant Name	Deric	Nelly	Helen	Ave
N	Questions	Investment			
8	I am confident that with focused practice and dedication, I can significantly enhance my accent when speaking French	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
9	I believe that it is important for speakers with a foreign accent to make an effort to pronounce words and sentences clearly and precisely when communicating with native speakers.	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
10	I place a high value on the way I pronounce words and sentences when I speak French and believe that clear and accurate pronunciation is an essential for effective communication	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree
11	I believe that improving my pronunciation skills is a key aspect of becoming a more valuable speaker of French.	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
12	I strive to continually improve my French accent by working on refining my pronunciation skills	Disagree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
13	I am careful to improve my French pronunciation proficiency to the point that speakers who do not have French as their native language (e.g. English speakers) find it distinguished and skillful	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree	Agree
14	Interacting with native French speakers motivates me to improve my pronunciation accuracy and boosts my confidence in speaking the language.	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree

Analysis of Narratives

Deric's story highlighted how accent helps him to build relationships. As a perfectionist, he emphasized the importance of accentedness and stressed that good pronunciation is essential for building self-confidence during interactions. However, Deric shared an experience of being ridiculed by native French speakers due to a mispronunciation, which harmed his self-esteem, leading to a defensive reaction and impacting his confidence.

Excerpt 1. *"I struggle with accepting that my pronunciation isn't perfect"*

{[My accent] always made me feel unsecured [...] Once the whole [host] family laughed at me because I struggled to pronounce the difference between "ou" ([u]) and "u" ([y]) [...] so I reacted badly. [...] I'm a perfectionist and struggle to accept that my pronunciation isn't perfect.}¹ (Deric's interview, 10.07-11.10 min.)

Deric's narrative illustrates that he sets high expectations for his pronunciation. He also related about being easily bothered by non-native-like pronunciation and unsettled by being ridiculed for his own. However, Deric displayed an identity gap that his pronunciation revealed. His reply to question 6 highlights the impact of pronunciation on his identity and how he wants to appear.

Excerpt 2. *"The best compliment of my life!"*

{I had already been taken for a [French region speaker] once. [...] and that was the best compliment of my life! (simulating an excited voice) "Yeah! I'm not American anymore. I'm not an English speaker anymore! I did it!" ... No, I mean... I accept to be American...it's hard sometimes...if no one asks, I don't say it.} (Deric's interview, 31.39-32.20 min.)

Deric's statement underscores the importance of accent as a maker of identity. Interestingly, Deric still seems invested ("I had a teacher in high school who had a terrible accent...and so I don't want to be *That*"), but he would still privilege the conversation flow over accentedness hypercorrection.

On the contrary, Nelly did not feel the necessity of conforming to any specific pronunciation. However, she admitted that being more intelligible would have made her more confident. Nelly appeared to have a relatively neutral approach to pronunciation. In other words, she does not struggle with her accent:

Excerpt 3. *"I don't really think it's the end of the world"*

"When I hear like... peers in class, and they talk like... they just sound so fluent, and so native [...] but also for me personally, I don't really think it's the end of the world". (Nelly's interview, 8.42 min.)

However, she was still eager to pronounce words correctly but without the goal of reaching a better pronunciation, displaying acceptance and flexibility toward pronunciation without significant repercussions on her identity. Because of this, she seems to represent a motivated but not especially invested learner.

Helen also shared her struggles in improving her pronunciation of specific features of French, such as the "r" sound and nasal vowels. She expressed a desire to get a more "standard" accent to improve her French pronunciation. However, like Deric, she indicated how much a strong non-native accent can irritate her:

¹ Curly brackets indicate that participant's reply was translated from French.

Excerpt 4. *“That sounds horrible”*

“That sounds {horrible} it's {horrible, the accent} ... really strong American accent it's {I}... I remember {in high school, other students} they didn't really care they were like... I'm not... I can't even... I won't even...” (Helen’s interview, 16.05 min.)

Afterward, while still concerned about the sounds of the French language, she compared accents through a music metaphor.

Excerpt 5. *“When you have that accent, you're playing all the right notes”*

“Speaking a language is... in comparison to singing or to music, it's... when you have that accent, you're playing all the right notes.”. (Helen’s interview, 17.06 min.)

However, Helen situates accent more in connection to her general proficiency, showing how foreign identity as a non-native speaker becomes visible mainly through fluency and intelligibility (“I just want to...I want to be understood”). She associates accentedness more as a sub-consequence of these factors. Therefore, her consistent replies showing her strong engagement toward French pronunciation improvement clearly reflect that she is an invested learner.

Deric, Nelly, and Helen’s narratives offer insights into the interconnected relationship between self-perception of their accentedness, their identity as language learners, and their investment in pronunciation. While Deric’s story highlighted the impact of accent on self-confidence even in more advanced learners, Nelly, contrastively, didn’t display any particular identity gap in connection with accentedness by adopting a neutral stance. This could have sometimes affected their investment in pronunciation skills, with a broader impact on their accentedness.

CONCLUSION

This case study presented four FLLs with an overall positive self-perception of their accent and highlighted the role of pronunciation in their language proficiency. The impact of accentedness on identity varied among participants, influencing interaction confidence despite general motivation, with occasional implications on the learners’ investment. Applied to pronunciation teaching, this study renews the call toward achievable goals in working on students’ accentedness (beyond intelligibility and comprehensibility). It also seems crucial to raise students' awareness of communication gaps because of pronunciation to empower them to navigate interactions more confidently. By managing the impact of accentedness on their identity as non-native speakers, learners could have a more positive perception of their pronunciation skills, feel more self-confident during interactions, and, therefore, be more invested. Finally, on a broader scale, instructors can try to encourage the development of ties toward the community of the taught language. Learners could thus have this opportunity to "want something for themselves" (Darvin and Norton, 2016), increasing learners’ investment, especially in pronunciation, which may later benefit students’ accentedness.

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APPENDIX A

Selected questions of the survey by themes and participants' replies.

	PARTICIPANT NAME	DERIC	NELLY	HELEN	AVE
N.	QUESTIONS				
SKILLS					
1	I'm confident in my ability to speak French with a precise accent, reflecting the correct pronunciation of the language.	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree	Agree
2	I believe that my proficiency in French pronunciation is on par with my proficiency in other aspects of the language.	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3	I believe that having a native-like accent when speaking French can positively impact interactions with native French speakers.	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
IDENTITY					
4	I feel at ease when speaking with my accent in French and believe that it adds to my unique identity as <u>non native</u> speaker.	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
5	I prefer to be perceived as a non-native speaker when I speak French.	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree
6	My native language accent has already made me feel uncomfortable when speaking with native French speakers.	Strongly agree	Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
7	I believe that my way of pronouncing French words and sentences can affect my usual personality, causing a lack of confidence when interacting with native French speakers.	Agree	Strongly disagree	Agree	Disagree
INVESTMENT					
8	I am confident that with focused practice and dedication, I can significantly enhance my accent when speaking French.	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
9	I believe that it is important for speakers with a foreign accent to make an effort to pronounce words and sentences clearly and precisely when communicating with native speakers.	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
10	I place a high value on the way I pronounce words and sentences when I speak French and believe that clear and accurate pronunciation is an essential for effective communication.	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree
11	I believe that improving my pronunciation skills is a key aspect of becoming a more valuable speaker of French.	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
12	I strive to continually improve my French accent by working on refining my pronunciation skills.	Disagree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
13	I am careful to improve my French pronunciation proficiency to the point that speakers who do not have French as their native language (e.g. English speakers) find it distinguished and skillful.	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree	Agree
14	Interacting with native French speakers motivates me to improve my pronunciation accuracy and boosts my confidence in speaking the language.	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree

APPENDIX B

Selected interview questions

N.	QUESTION
1	Can you explain if pronunciation has any particular importance for you when you speak French with native speakers and why?
2	Do you aim to acquire any specific pronunciation in French, or do you hope to develop any accent in particular?
3	In what way do you think that a like-native French standard accent could be useful in terms of self-confidence during interactions with NSs? How concerned do you feel by this question? (i.e. it does not apply to you/your situation)
4	In what way your pronunciation skills are important when native French speakers listen to you?
5	Do you have the feeling to relate differently than usual if you are speaking with native French speakers, and why?
6	Do you try for any reason to sound like a native speaker / hide the pronunciation features of your mother tongue when you relate with native French speakers, and why?
7	Can you share any experiences, if you have some, where you got the feeling that your accent could have helped you to be better accepted by French native speakers?