

French Applied Foreign Language students' perceptions of their foreign accent in English

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Today, L2 competency is increasingly demanded in the international labour market – which may explain the increasing enrolment in LEA (Foreign Applied Languages) courses in French universities (study of two foreign languages plus professional disciplines e.g. marketing, law, commerce) (Rault, 2014). The study of languages on this course is generally promoted as, and viewed by the students as, a “linguistic investment”- raising chances of future employability (Wolstenholme & Wilson, 2019). Given the position of English as a global language, the emergence of new Englishes, and the push by some (cf. Dziubalska-Kolaczyk & Przedlacka 2008; Frame 2006) to move away from the “native-speaker model”, an investigation into LEA students' perceptions of their own foreign accent¹ in English as well as of native-speaker norms is pertinent.

This paper is part of a larger mixed-methods study investigating French LEA students' perceptions of their accent in English and the evolution of these perceptions over the course of the academic year. The study also aims to investigate the impact that two different approaches to teaching oral English may have on these perceptions (phonetics-based vs. communication-based courses). Secondary research questions include: How do they perceive their accent? Do they aspire to speak with near-native pronunciation and view this goal as achievable? Which accents do they desire and why? To what extent are they aware of linguistic diversity in the anglophone world? This paper will focus primarily on 43 participants' responses to a questionnaire and a free-response accent identification test (completed in two French universities). Descriptive statistical analysis was carried out using Excel. Responses to open questions were analysed qualitatively using a thematic analysis approach and RQDA qualitative data analysis software.

Data from Phase 1 of the study suggests that many participants heavily stigmatise their French accents and often associate negative feelings with participating in English in class. Certain participants feel particularly apprehensive about their accent and afraid of being judged or mocked by peers. Participants tend to aspire to speak with near-native pronunciation (specifically British, or RP, and American) and most deem this goal to be attainable. Thus far, only one university cohort's Phase 2 data has been analysed (University 1 – phonetics-based approach). For almost two thirds of these participants, either their desire to speak with a particular native-speaker accent or their belief that this goal is being achieved get stronger over the course of the year. However very few show an actual improvement in their ability to recognise their desired accent in the accent identification test. Also, for those who consider themselves to speak with a particular native-speaker accent, their actual ability to do so is questionable. Differences between the two groups will be explored upon analysis of the data from the second university cohort.

It is important to acknowledge the desire, and societal pressure, to speak with near-native pronunciation, given the reality that accent is central in some forms of employment discrimination, amongst other reasons (Moyer, 2013). However, I argue that an over-emphasis on native-speaker accents - some for which even the existence of a real speech community is questionable (cf. Carrie, 2017; Preston, 2008) - and the stigma around the French accent contribute to the students' linguistic insecurity. This can discourage participation in class and impede their progress in fluency and communication skills which are indispensable in today's international job market.

¹ “Foreign accent” is defined technically by Moyer (2013) as “a set of dynamic segmental and suprasegmental habits that convey linguistic meaning along with social and situational affiliation” but I also refer to the non-technical sense of the term when used with or by the participants.

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