

STRATEGIES FRENCH LEARNERS USE TO ACQUIRE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION THROUGH ACTIVITIES IN INFORMAL CONTEXTS: A CASE STUDY

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The objective of this case study is to explore the strategies of a group of English learners in the acquisition of pronunciation markers of the various accents they are exposed to through activities in informal contexts. Data were collected through oral diaries and interviews with non-language students in a French university. The preliminary results show that these learners use cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies such as (1) exposition to authentic resources, (2) viewing mode, (3) attention to aural input, (4) accent preference, (5) oral interaction (6) multiple viewing and recall, (7) repetition and imitation, (8) online search, and (9) global comprehension. Pedagogical implications are drawn concerning the exploitation of audio-visual input.

Keywords

strategies, informal learning, oral diary, pronunciation, audio-visual input

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INTRODUCTION

In France, the sound landscape is composed of a wide array of input that learners of English are exposed to, through music, movies, television series, games, and videos on social media (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, etc.). Activities stemming from these forms of input (e.g., discussions, blogging, vlogging, fan-fictioning or gaming) are carried out by learners in individual informal contexts (home mainly) for leisure purposes, and emerge from a communicative intention (Sockett, 2014). Several studies within the field of informal language learning (or Online Informal Learning of English - OILE) have shown many benefits of such input for English language learners, ranging from vocabulary development to effects on learning strategies and autonomy (Kusyk & Sockett, 2012; Toffoli & Sockett 2015). The potential impact of such media on the acquisition of pronunciation, in particular, has generated strong debate among sociolinguists over recent decades (Androutsopoulos, 2014). In this regard, Yibokou (2019) has shown that French students who regularly engage in informal learning through such input and interaction display a variety of pronunciation features typical of an American accent (flapping, rhoticity, nasal vocalization and yod-dropping).

Pronunciation strategies in L2 learning refer to specific means deployed by a learner to acquire phonological elements and are crucial for language development (Ellis, 1994: 558). Peterson (2000) described such strategies as “steps taken by students to enhance their own pronunciation learning” (p. 7). In the past decade, studies of pronunciation learning strategies have produced largely consistent findings. Among the three types of strategies, namely cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies (a term coined by O’Malley & Chamot, 1990), cognitive strategies have been found to be the most frequently used by students (Albaladejo, 2022; Stander, 2022). Osburne (2003) found imitation to be the most used pronunciation learning strategy among the eight identified in a study involving 50 learners with various initial languages (L1). In another study, Pawlak (2011) asked a group of 60 students to keep a diary retracing how they learn pronunciation, and the results indicated that both cognitive and

metacognitive strategies were used, among which repetition and searching were most common. Most studies that have analyzed pronunciation strategies were conducted in more formal, corrective, and controlled situations, investigating relationships between number and types of strategies used and pronunciation level (Vahdany, Divsar & Alem, 2022). Interestingly, Alghazo (2021) gathered data on strategies used by students both inside and outside the classroom and observed that cognitive strategies are dominant in receptive activities through the media. Sardegna (2021) advocates a strategy-based pronunciation instruction model that considers students' self-regulatory learning efforts combined with goal-setting and awareness activities, online conversation models and resources, video recordings to assess progress, guided reflections on oral work, continuous feedback, and re-evaluation of goals after improvements.

Research question and aim of the study

Despite the growing number of studies on pronunciation acquisition, little is known regarding the strategies used by learners in informal naturalistic contexts. To bridge this gap, the question that this study intends to answer is: How do French students acquire English pronunciation in informal contexts? Drawing on Yibokou (2019), the primary aim of this paper is to qualitatively explore the strategies used by French learners of English to acquire the phonological markers of the various accents they are exposed to, whilst engaging in leisure activities.

METHOD

To achieve the objective of this case study, it was essential to collect qualitative self-report data from a sample of students, as recommended by Dörnyei (2014). As far as this research is concerned, the identification of the pronunciation strategies was solely based on personal reports provided by the learners themselves.

Data collection and participants

The data collection involved 18 French third year students from the University of Lorraine, Nancy, France. These 18 to 25 years old students were enrolled in social sciences (Psychology, History, Sociology, Arts, Music, Education sciences). They self-evaluated their English levels from A2 to C1, thus forming a heterogeneous group. They were asked to keep, in either the French or English, an oral diary of any activity they carried out in English during their spare time over the course of the first semester of the 2021/2022 academic year. There were no formal instructions as to which activities to choose, how to exploit them, when, and with whom. During the same period, interviews were conducted each month with five volunteers, with the aim of deepening their practices and identifying the strategies they used to access meaning and to acquire pronunciation. It included open-ended retrospective questions (e.g., How do you know you are learning pronunciation?). The interviews were conducted in either French or English. This activity was not part of the exam requirements, therefore was not graded. It was done voluntarily as the students were told that it would help them improve their English (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) by keeping track of their learning development.

In this paper, I present only the results of the five participants who were interviewed (Speakers 2, 3, 9, 10 and 14). As can be seen in Table 1 below, there were two females and three males, aged 19 to 25, with a self-report language level ranging from B1 to C2. According to their self-report, they spent between 100 and 400 hours during the five-month period practicing English. These activities involved written and oral interactions, listening to music, playing games, and watching movies and TV series. Drawing on Vanderplank (2019), the Original Version (OV)

refers to aural input without any orthographic transcriptions, and while Original Version with Captions (OVC) are same language transcriptions, Original Version with Subtitles (OVS) are different languages transcriptions (English to French). They provided between five and ten oral diaries and stated the accent they targeted when speaking in English.

Table 1
General information about the speakers

<i>Speaker</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>14</i>
Level	B1	C2	B2	C1	C2
Gender	female	male	male	male	female
Age	20	22	19	24	25
Activities	series, movies, music, YouTube videos	music, movies, series, internet videos	series, movies, music, YouTube videos	movies, games, series, oral interactions	series, music, movies, other videos
Mode of viewing	OVS OVC OV	OV OVC OVS	OVS OVC OV	OV OVC OVS	OV OVC OVS
Time spent (in hours)	300	300	100	400	200
Accent	American	American	British	American	American
Number and language of interviews	5 – English and French	5 – English	5 – English and French	3 – English	5 – English
Number of oral diaries	10	5	8	5	6

Data analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed, and thematic content analyses were manually run by the researcher to identify the strategies these learners made use of. No formal codes were utilized, and the researcher was the sole rater of the oral productions. The identification phase consisted of the assessment (reading, underlining and selecting) of the participants' speech that could constitute a mean (strategy) for language learning. The participants were referred to as SPK (for speaker), the oral diary as OD and interview as INT. A number was then assigned to each element for easy identification and understanding of the results, especially when quoting passages. For instance, SPK9-INT2 refers to the second interview conducted with speaker 9.

RESULTS

This section presents the strategies identified and drawn from the oral diaries and interviews conducted both in English and in French with five of the participants. The following citations are non-exhaustive excerpts showing the strategies; they were selected for their salience. Some words and expressions in the quotations are in bold to highlight the strategies which are (1) exposition to authentic resources, (2) viewing mode, (3) attention to aural input, (4) accent

preference, (5) oral interaction (6) multiple viewing and recall, (7) repetition and imitation, (8) online search, and (9) global comprehension.

(1) Exposure to authentic resources

The first strategy identified, which was common to all participants, is exposure to audio-visual input such as video games, music, movies, and TV series, most of which contain American aural input. As can be seen in the citations below, the main objective for engaging in these practices was for leisure (SPK3), but interestingly, some of the participants intentionally aimed to learn English (SPK2).

- *You watch a **movie** or you watch a **series** or you play **video games** and then you practice your English, uhm you learn new words, I remember when I was really young my first, like the first word I learned was moon because there was this Pokemon game and there was this item called moonstone and I was like ok what's the moonstone so I learned what was the moon (SPK10-INT1)*
- *Right now I'm watching **Seinfeld**, you know that old **sitcom**, I'm mostly mostly watching **movies** than series, I just wanna like relax and chill with just one short episode... (SPK3-OD1)*
- *Two **movies** probably a week, I'll say like good five or six hours a week, I really don't care like it's just a **hobby** right like **movies** are the main thing ...(SPK3-INT2)*
- *Beaucoup de **séries télévisées américaines**, des **films** et des **vidéos sur internet** pour améliorer mon anglais...(SPK2-INT4)*

(2) Video viewing mode

Another strategy related to input from series and movies is viewing mode. While some participants prefer the original version (OV) only, others mixed different modes, by moving from subtitles (OVS) to captions (OVC). Speakers 2 and 9 mostly watched with subtitles because they thought they did not have the required level to apprehend everything in OV or with the captions. Thus, the viewing mode seems to relate to the level of language of the participants. One other mode that is not represented in the quotations are dubbed versions, which some participants used in elementary school. For instance, two participants from the larger group related initially watching dubbed versions of English TV series and only switching to English versions once their English proficiency had improved.

- *Whatever I watch, I will always watch it in the uh in the **native language**, most of the time **English** (SPK10-INT3)*
- *I started watching **with subtitle** in English. I bought the DVD and stopped watching with the subtitle I started watching **without the subtitles** (SPK14-INT3)*
- *I watch movies **with subtitles in English**, so it's **VO** and then I put the **subtitles in French** most of the time because I think I don't have all the vocabulary (SPK9-INT1)*
- *my friend he does this, uh when we watch movie, in English, he has to put the **subtitle in French** and then I am like just ok we put the **audio in French**, because I'm like ok I rather just see everything than just read in French and not even listening to the English (SPK3-INT3)*
- *Je me suis rendu compte qu'en regardant les series avec des **sous-titres en français**, ça m'aidait pour comprendre. Je pouvais faire le lien entre les **traductions** anglaise-français. (SPK2-INT4)*

(3) Attention to aural input (noticing)

It also appears in the comments below that participants pay some attention to the language when engaging in these activities. This noticing strategy not only applies to the general functioning of the language but also to the aural input, namely pronunciation. What is more, this attention allows for development of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, but reduces the pleasure aspects of the activity (SKP2). This can be explained by the cognitive load students may encounter while trying to read the captions and listen to the pronunciation simultaneously.

- *I **listened** to the music and I **wrote down** the the lyrics as I hear them and then I **compared** them with the actual lyrics to see where I **misheard**, like sometimes they would say gonna and I would write gonna but they were saying ‘going to’...(SPK14-INT2)*
- *I was more **paying attention** to what was happening in terms of situation rather than trying to **understand** it because yeah (SPK3-INT1)*
- *I would more uhm kind of trying to **make an association** of the words that they're saying and the, the context that was happening, so I was enjoying maybe less the movie (SPK2-INT2)*
- *Pour comprendre, il faut que je me concentre sur la série pour entendre et faire le lien, ensuite je me pose la question de **comment ils disent** des choses et **ce que ça veut dire** (SPK2-INT4)*
- *je dois avouer que qu'en regardant les series, **je fais attention** aux mots qu'ils disent et la **façon de prononcer** des acteurs, leurs accents, que nous on prononce différemment... (SPK9-INT3)*

(4) Accent preference

Although the participants speak English with a mixture of accents, they claim to know the difference between American and British accents, and they aim to speak with a particular accent (see Table 1). This strategy seems go beyond mere accent preference and might be related to the question of identity (SPK2). I

- *if you say to me in British English and then in an American I will **choose** which one I **prefer**, I have a certain level on English, so uhm, I can **choose**. (SPK10-INT5)*
- *I know American but **I do like British**. I like to hear British because for example the word water [wɔrə] they say water water [wɔtə] (SPK9-INT4 – Transcriptions added by the researcher)*
- ***L'accent français**, c'est comme ça. Je ne cherche pas et je sais pas, je sais que **je ne peux pas** parler comme les anglais donc j'aime bien mon **accent français** (SPK9-INT3)*
- *Je pense parler avec un **accent britannique**, **j'aime bien**, c'est joli. En ce moment je regarde IT Crown (SPK9-INT1)*

(5) Oral interaction

Oral interaction is another strategy used by only a handful of participants to practice their pronunciation, but the opportunity to interact in English appears to be scarce or nonexistent. What is more, while the classroom remains the only space to practice their oral expression and hence their pronunciation, the time allotted to formal language learning, and the time the teacher utilized does not allow any development. For lucky participants, English serves as a Lingua Franca to communicate with other English speakers.

- *one or two persons that I **speak English with** that live in France because they speak German, and I don't speak German. (SPK10-INT4)*
- ***je ne parle avec personne en anglais**, sauf en classe et avec mon professeur, mais souvent on parle en français et on écoute en français (SPK2-INT2)*

(6) Repeated viewing and recall

From the comments below, it can be observed that viewing a program multiple times and frequent exposure to audio-visual input leads participants to use a recall strategy. They intentionally retrieve or remember words and expressions they have met in specific situations. The repetition of dialogues seems to also facilitate the recall strategy and allow them to better “enjoy” what they watch (SPK2).

- *I was trying to **remember** how do you say this word or this sentence, I would **remember** to myself oh so how did Ross said this how did Rachel responded to that (SPK14-INT3)*
- *I remove the subtitles because I watched it many times, **I had the dialogue in my head** I knew what they were going to say, and so the movie will become more interesting. (SPK2-INT4)*
- *you will get to your **memory** the way you heard it, like for example France [f.ɪɑːns] you will be more able to get it from your **memory** in a natural way and say France [f.ɪɑːns] even if you know that you can say France [frɛ̃s].. (SPK3 INT2 Transcriptions added by the researcher)*
- *je me **souviens** des mots que j'ai entendus dans les series quand je les entends, je les revois souvent dans d'autres series que je regarde, **ça reste dans la tête** (SPK9-INT2)*

(7) Repetition and imitation

To practice their pronunciation, the participants engaged in repetition (including mental) and imitation of aural input. This corroborates with the results of Osburne (2003) who found imitation to be the most widely used strategy among students. If unconscious imitation is frequently observed within students learning English in France (Yibokou, 2019), the speech shadowing phenomenon observed here tended to be conscious among the participants of this study. They intentionally planned to work on their pronunciation, as the verbs “target”, “practice”, “work” and “try to imitate” indicate in the following passages.

- *I **target** hard to pronounce words like “our” “field” “where no one else could” “heartbeat like” “hammer” “arms”, first **I say it many times in my head** then I **practice** on the whole text... (SPK 9 OD 2)*
- *Afterwards, I **worked on the pronunciation** of the text. I have a lot of **trouble pronouncing** when I start learning a song so I have to do this work **all the time**. (SPK2-INT1)*
- *I've started this vocal for the **fifth time** and I've tried for five or **six times**, but I'll begin and I'll talk about a Netflix show that is called Love is blind... (SPK2-OD2)*
- *the way I'm talking now is probably an **imitation** of the **all the things** that I've heard mostly in American English language and I'm **trying to imitate what they are saying** (SPK14-INT1)*

(8) Online search

Online search for meaning and pronunciation of unknown words and expressions were also commonly-used strategies among participants. It is worth mentioning that the search strategy used by the students was carried out with a specific purpose, that of fulfilling a task, for instance producing a summary (SPK14). This strategy is in line with Sockett (2011) who talks about communication being the goal behind OILE practices. Captions also allow searching unknown words for subsequent comprehension and use.

- *It is (idiz) interesting but there are a lot of **words that I didn't know**, so I **write it down and search them on the internet**. (SPK3-OD3)*
- *I'm going to make a summary of an episode of *Suit* [...] **I search the words in the dictionary on the internet** so I can **remember the pronunciation** and use them to do my summary. (SPK14-OD4)*
- *Il m'arrive souvent de **googler** la prononciation des mots que je ne comprends pas mais après j'oublie, c'est pourquoi j'aime mettre les sous-titres en anglais (SPK2-INT4)*
- *je cherche dans **DeepL** ou **Reverso** ou sur **Google**, des fois ça te donne les mêmes traductions mais pas tout le temps, il faut vérifier toujours le vrai et après tu peux **cliquer sur écouter** (SPK9-INT4)*

(9) Global comprehension

In the absence of captions or word search, students focused on global comprehension (rather than detailed or selective comprehension) of what they watched, mostly by relying on context. This top-down processing strategy seemed to depend on learners' proficiency level, the objective for watching, and some features related to the videos (captions, accents).

- *for the **movies that don't have English subtitles I watch without them** and it's it's it's perfectly fine, I try to get the **whole picture** even if I don't understand all (SPK9-INT2)*
- *Do you know *Peaky Blinders*? they are so so London I mean the accent is..., so I I need like 20 minutes to get used to the accent and then when I'm used to it it's fine. I **just concentrate on the general ideas** (SPK3-OD2)*
- *Je lis les sous-titre en français et j'écoute en même temps... non ça ne me perturbe pas du moment où je regarde juste pour avoir une **comprehension globale** et me détendre (SPK2-INT4)*
- *Quand je regarde des series et les films, et les sitcoms, **je cherche pas forcément à tout comprendre**, le **contexte** me donne de quoi ils parlent... (SPK9-INT4)*

DISCUSSION

In this study, data were collected through interviews and oral diaries kept by the participants. It was found that (1) exposure to authentic resources, (2) viewing mode, (3) attention to aural input, (4) accent preference, (5) oral interaction (6) repeated viewing and recall, (7) repetition and imitation, (8) online search, and (9) global comprehension were the main learning strategies used by the participants. Recall that these results are solely based on learners' self-reported strategies, meaning that the researcher did not conduct any direct measurement, but only interpreted self-reported behaviours. Nevertheless, the findings are in line with previous studies on PLS concerning certain strategies such as imitation, repetition, global comprehension, oral interaction, noticing among others (see Stander, 2022; Albaladejo, 2022; Alghazo, 2021; Pawlak, 2011; Osburne, 2003). Thus, the strength of this study lies in its exploration of pronunciation learning strategies in an informal language learning context in France, using

semi-naturalistic data. However, because of its preliminary nature, the study entails some methodological limitations such the form of data coding and analysis.

In future studies, data could be collected using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) or the Strategic Pronunciation Learning Survey (SPLS). Correlation tests could be run between language proficiency level, length of exposition to aural input, motivation and so on. Another perspective is to run a perception test involving English teachers (raters). The objective then would be to assess the participants' oral production in terms of comprehensibility, intelligibility and accentedness (Levis, Derwing, & Munro, 2022). Using a coding and classification system to define each strategy would enhance the scientific robustness of the results. Since the collection of data within an ecological environment is the best way to gather natural phenomena, it would be interesting to analyze strategies within oral interactions between participants. Longitudinal and retrospective studies can also be considered. Finally, the speech of learners in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Housen Kuiden & Vedder, 2012) could also be assessed.

Participants in this case study used various learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective) to acquire pronunciation features from the English accents they were exposed to. As learners are aware that exposure to naturalistic authentic input leads them to the acquisition of vocabulary and pronunciation skills, educators must encourage learners to engage in out-of-class leisure activities, even in the classroom. Digital tools can be suggested to learners to keep track of their oral productions, so that they can be used to practice, monitor and receive feedback (Alghazo, 2021). Learners can be advised to gradually move from subtitles to captions, then to the original version (Vanderplank, 2019). Finally, naturalistic and semi-naturalistic tasks such as oral diaries, tandem and e-tandem, group discussion and debates, should be implemented in the classroom setting, with the help of the teacher who then plays a mediator role (Miras, 2021) by providing formative and regular feedback. The creation of such spaces and opportunities for oral communication and interaction can lead to speaking practices that enhance pronunciation development. There could be a space in language centers where learners can come and discuss their favorite movies, films, music, and games. In the spirit of social interaction and oral practices and anxiety-free environment, these events could be organized and led by the students themselves to promote learner agency and autonomy.

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