

# French Phonology Acquisition: Unit Assessment Project for the Department of World Languages and English Language Learning

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(Picture by Ranjith Siji via Pixabay)

## Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Department buy-in and outcome definition	3-4
Assessment research and design	4
Pilot assessment tools and processes	4-5
Administer specific assessment	5-12
Data analysis	12
Supporting evidence-based change	12
Program assessment update in discipline	13
Conclusion	13-14

Appendix A  
Appendix B

14  
14-15

# Introduction

This report outlines the progress on assessment projects within the World Languages and English Language Learning Department at Harold Washington College during the Spring of 2021.

All assessment projects follow a six stage process that has been agreed upon by the Assessment Committee at the college. These six stages are the following:

1. Department Buy-in and Outcome Definition
2. Assessment Research and Design
3. Pilot Assessment Tools and Processes
- 4. Administer Specific Assessment**
5. Data Analysis
6. Supporting Evidence-Based Change

The Assessment Committee has changed the Unit Liaison with the task of fostering and supporting and reporting about assessment projects at the Program Level and at the Unit Level within the Department.

## Program Level Assessment

See below.

## Unit Assessment

The ongoing French phonology acquisition project. See below for details on progress.

## Stage 1: Department buy-in and outcome definition

The Department Chair when this project began was Jacqueline Cunningham, whose expertise is in Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language. She is also a French speaker and has spent substantial time living and studying in France. Professor Cunningham enthusiastically approved this project because she saw it as a way to learn more about how French students acquire French phonology which she considered useful given that the department was in the process of establishing a study abroad program for students of French in the department.

About two years ago, the World Languages Department's only full-time French professor, Andrew Aquino-Cutcher, proposed that we work together to help his students acquire

French phonology more effectively. We discussed the six-stage process of assessment and began with the selection/creation of a course SLO.

- Proposed SLO: *Students will pronounce the sounds of French with a high degree of accuracy.*

There was no existing SLO focused on pronunciation, and the professor was reluctant to add one as the World Languages Department had just completed the process of aligning unit level SLOs within and among the French courses as well as aligning these with the pathways that were then listed in the course catalog. I proposed that, if this project is successful, then the above listed SL be added to all French syllabi.

## **Stage 2: Assessment research and design**

The assessment tool we designed was a pronunciation activity utilizing an open-source speech analysis app called Praat. The activity procedures call upon the students to do the following:

1. Choose any French speech sounds (from the inventory of French consonants, oral vowels, and nasal vowels) that they want to practice and improve upon.
2. Use Praat to create a spectrogram of those target sounds in French.
  - a. Which will produce a spectrogram
3. Study the diagrams of the vocal tract as well as the instructor-provided materials showing tongue positions for various French vocal sounds, isolating those diagrams and materials that demonstrate how to pronounce the sound(s) they have chosen.
4. Reproduce the chosen sound(s) using Praat.
5. Analyze the target sound spectrogram and the spectrogram of their version of that sound to look for similarities and differences.
6. Make adjustments in the student's vocal tract.
7. Repeat steps 4 through 6 as needed until the student-produced sound matches (more or less) the target sound.

In order for any of this to be possible, the students had to be trained in the procurement and use of Praat as well as trained in the basics regarding what a spectrogram is and how it can provide a visual aid to help them acquire more target-like French pronunciation.

## **Stage 3: Pilot assessment tools and processes**

This process was a long one, involving a lot of review, reflection, and revision. We received help from students, faculty and staff of the college, all of whom provided valuable input

regarding the tool we had created. This input resulted in us revising the activity procedures to make them more accessible. This process resulted in the addition of the following:

- more visual elements in the instructions such as diagrams of the vocal tract (the throat, mouth, and nose) so that students could connect the sound they were making with what was happening in the vocal tract.
- Instructional videos for students to guide them as they learn to use the Praat app as well as how to follow the procedures for the assessment tool (the pronunciation activity that calls on students to use Praat to record and analyze vocal sounds).
  - Video 1 - About Praat
  - Video 2 - How to use Praat
  - Video 3 - Recording with Praat
- It was felt that the above video tutorials were too long and too complex to hold student interest, so revisions were made to make them shorter and to make the explanations simpler.

By the end of the Fall, 2020 semester, we felt that the activity procedures and other supporting materials were sufficient to try and run a full assessment after the winter break.

## **Stage 4: Administer specific assessment**

This semester, we attempted to administer the pilot as a full assessment which we have been carrying out in several parts:

### **Part 1 - Choosing Class Sections**

At the beginning of this semester, Professor Aquino-Cutcher volunteered to have the following sections of HWC French for participation in the assessment:

- French 102
- French 103/104 (combined sections due to low enrollment due to the ongoing pandemic)

Professor Aquino-Cutcher is the instructor of record for all three sections.

There were ongoing challenges

- Low enrollment which led to a limited number of sections this semester
- Maintaining momentum with students

- Students not seeking extra help with project

It is unclear whether these difficulties are caused directly by the pandemic, by the remote medium, by a combination of the two alone or in concert with another unknown factor.

## Part 2 - Pre-Assessment

We decided to conduct a pre-assessment early in the Spring 2021 semester. This pre-assessment was conducted using Google Forms and consisted of six questions for students who were to participate in the project. Four of the questions focused on student impressions of their ability and needs with respect to French pronunciation. Hence, this was an indirect assessment of their pronunciation ability. Two of the questions asked about their learning preferences related to technology and apps that are new to them.

The following outlines the student responses and how the data helped us. For details, see pages 6 through 11 below:

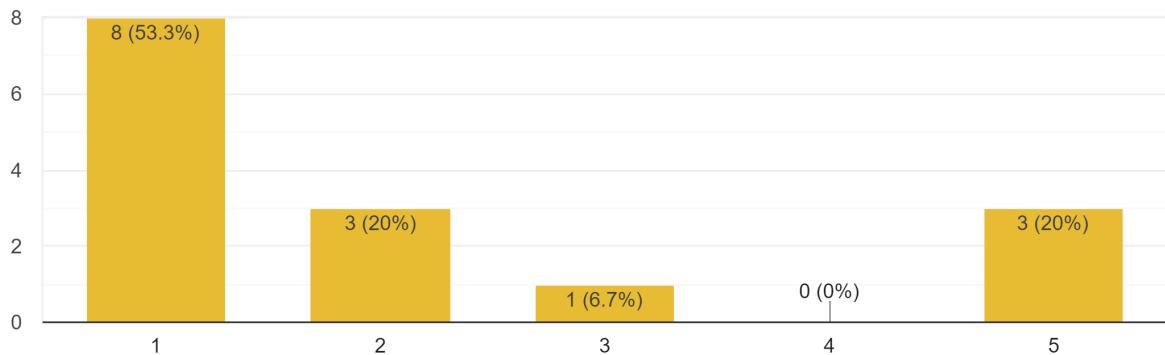
- About 45% response rate among the three class sections
  - From one class only, French 102.
- Responses (mostly) were expected
  - But Q #3 was not (practice time)
- Responses helped us adjust tasks
  - Finding finding target language examples in diverse voices
- Task types of survey questions:
  - Q #1 through Q #4, and Q #6:
    - Scale of 1 - 5
    - From strongly agree to strongly disagree
    - *Issues:* offering a Q #3 option may have encouraged non-committal responses
  - Q #5 is a list of five statements
    - Students check all that apply

Screenshots of each pre-assessment question with accompanying analysis are displayed below:

### Question #1:

1. Pronouncing French well is important to me.

15 responses

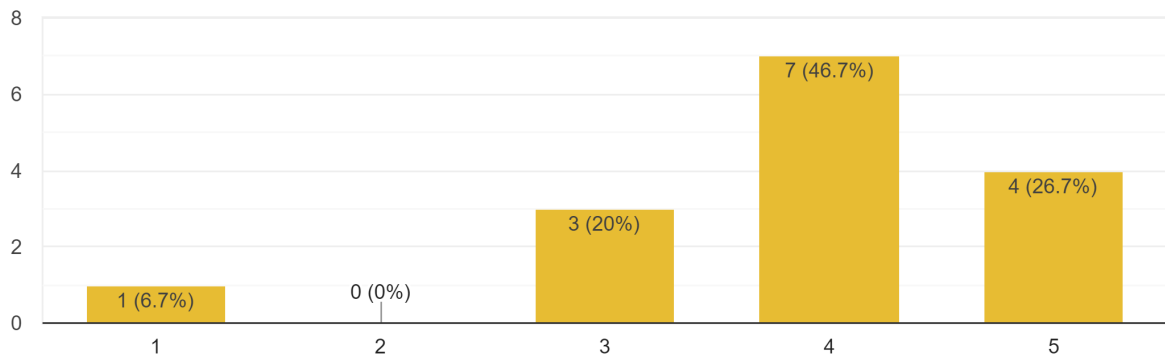


This data shows that pronunciation is important to them as 53% respondents strongly agreed with the question. It also shows that they value communicative accuracy. This data would lead us to expect that they would be more open to using new methods such as Praat to improve their pronunciation,

### Question #2:

2. I have no trouble pronouncing things in French.

15 responses

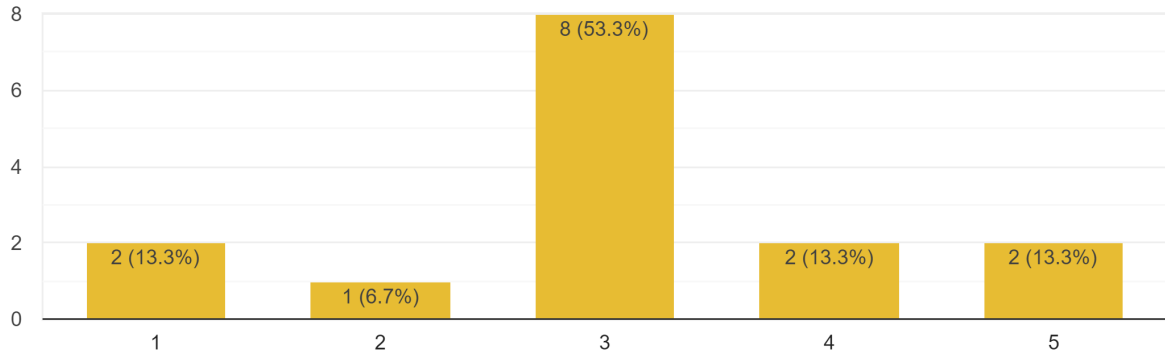


The data shows that the students recognize their limitations as more than 73% respondents disagreed (some strongly) with the question. Again, this shows that they value communicative accuracy. This reinforces the data produced by Question #1.

### Question #3:

3. I spend a lot of time practicing my French pronunciation.

15 responses



The data for this question illustrates the drawback to offering an 'option 3' (equidistant from both poles as it results in ambiguity regarding why they chose it. Indeed, more than 53% of respondents chose this option. As seen in the above questions, these results seem to show that they value communicative accuracy, but are either:

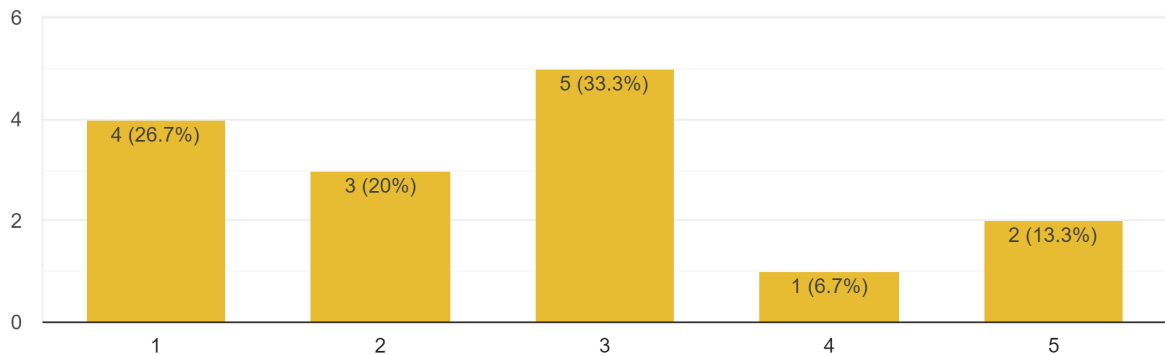
- Unsure of what counts as 'practice', or are...
- Unwilling to admit not doing it

What this means for this project is that we need to revise either the activity procedures, the video tutorials or both (again) in order to more clearly show how Praat can be used with the activity procedures in order to practice their pronunciation. In fact, they may not commit to the activity procedures due to their complexity / novelty.

### Question #4:

4. The examples of French pronunciation that I am able to use should include more diverse voices.

15 responses



This question was included because, in the initial process of developing the assessment tool, we compiled materials that displayed target French pronunciation, but which had a preponderance of what sounded like male voices. We thought it would be advisable to raise students' awareness to that feature of much of the French language learning material available online as well as to show our intention of having gender diversity in the examples we would present in the project. The results of this question were the following:

- 33% (Plurality) chose 'option 3'
- 26% *Strongly agreed* that diversity is important and should be seen in examples
- 20% *Agreed* with the above

The fact that a plurality of the respondents chose 'option 3' could indicate that they were truly indifferent to diversity, or perhaps that they were unwilling to feel/appear 'polarizing'

What this means for this project is that we feel confident that French students in the WL/ELL department at HWC will not object to us including diverse voices in our examples of French for this project.

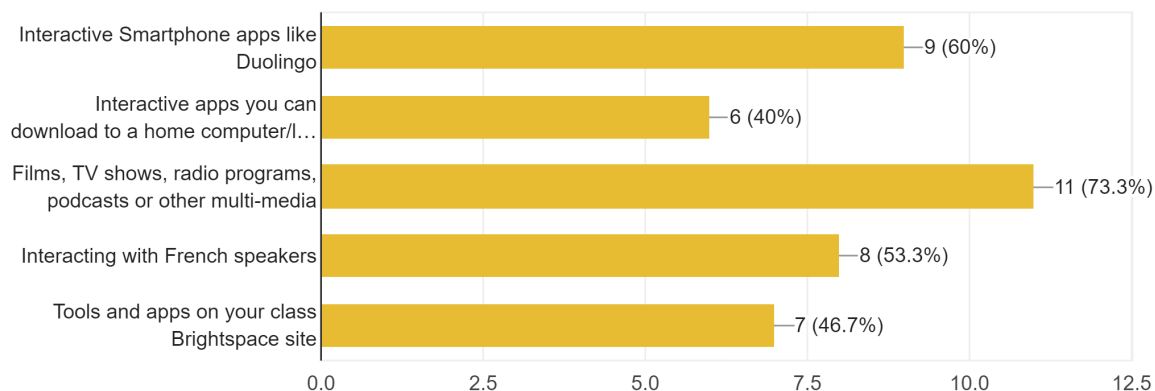
In the future, it may be interesting to think about the usefulness (in terms of what French classes at HWC are designed to do) of including voices that display varieties of French beyond that of north-central France. Examples might include varieties of French that are common in sub-Saharan Africa. Francophone students who come from sub-Saharan Africa comprise a small percentage of the ELL student body at HWC, so obtaining samples of

those language varieties spoken by multiple genders would be possible.

#### Question #5:

5. I prefer to use the following to practice my French pronunciation. (Check all items that apply to you)

15 responses



This question was included in order to discover the students' favored ways to practice their French pronunciation. The data includes the following:

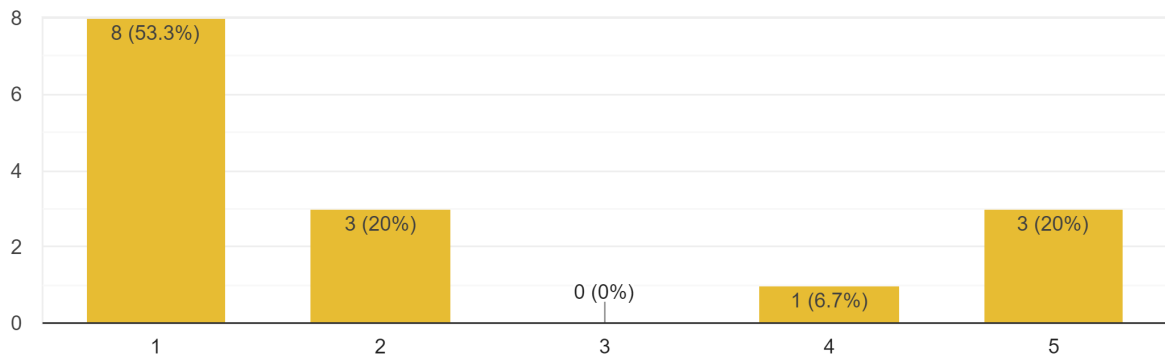
- The bad news:
  - Only 40% of respondents prefer app downloads (does that mean Praat?)
  - 73% preferred methods such as podcasts or TV that typically involve the student listening for the main idea or details rather than trying to accomplish a pronunciation related task.
- What this means:
  - Possible resistance to using Praat
  - Still, it is 'active listening' and no matter what they listen to or how they do it, their brains are still doing the work of deciphering the nuances of the target pronunciation.
- The good news:
  - The results also show that students are interested in using apps and

technology, which bodes well for Praat.

#### Question #6:

6. I enjoy learning new ways to practice my French pronunciation.

15 responses



Question #6 couples with question #5 to indicate an openness to using apps like Praat, provided that it's easy to use and that its results are understandable.

What this means to us:

- To make Praat easier we must be sure to do the following to the video tutorials:
  - Simplify the procedure explanations
  - Minimize background theory
- To make the results more usable we must (in the future):
  - Work through procedures w/ students (shared screen or live)
  - Give them more time (start earlier in the semester)

### Part 3 - Training Students on Assessment Activity Procedures

We conducted live presentations to students of all three sections in late February and early March, 2021 which included opportunities for students to ask questions about the procedures and the rationale behind them. The students expressed a mix of interest and apprehension regarding the novelty of both Praat and of the spectrograms that it produces

The full sequence of revised assessment activity procedures can be found in Appendix B.

## Part 4 - Students took action

After I had introduced the project to the students in a live but remote class setting, Professor Aquino-Cutcher and I distributed a short questionnaire (another Google Form) in which students were presented with the French phonological inventory (a list of all of the consonants and vowels of the French language). The questionnaire asked them to select any sounds that they felt that they needed to practice. At that point, which was mid-March, the students had a chance to get started with the assessment project. However, it is possible that they did not have time to do so (due to midterms) until early April.

We allowed them to decide when to ask for help regarding any aspect of the project, but as of this writing (late April, 2021) none have reached out.

Thus far, we have had only the limited results from the second survey asking them to select sounds to study. The responses we did get indicated that the respondents planned on practicing the entire French phonological inventory, a tall order to be sure! Clearly, this means that we need to revise that second survey so that students are given a maximum limit of sounds they can practice. Not doing so would invariably lead to students becoming overwhelmed and / or withdrawing from the project. Indeed, Question #5 on the pre-assessment survey (Google Form- French Pronunciation Poll) predicted this.

I continue to hold out hope that a few students will complete the activity procedures for one or two sounds so that we may analyze their results and determine if the procedures involving Praat actually do enhance the acquisition process.

## Stage 5: Data analysis

We have not reached this stage as yet.

## Stage Supporting evidence-based change

We have not reached this stage as yet.

# Program assessment update in discipline

Alignment of course SLOs with pathways done

World Language (WL) program done and listed in the course catalog.

List of current WL students following this program can be provided by the Department Chair, Andrew Aquino-Cutcher.

Next step, create program level SLOs that are aligned with the course SLOs

## Conclusion

For the continuation of this stage of the assessment process in Fall, 2021 we plan to do the following:

- Edit video tutorials once more to make them:
  - Shorter, with simpler explanations
- Re-use revised versions of both google form surveys
  - Pre-assessment (indirect assess) Survey - French Pronunciation Poll
  - Short Questionnaire- Which French Vowel/Consonant am I Practicing?
- Start the project earlier in the term
  - Pre-assessment during week 1-2
  - Class visits during weeks 3-4
  - Short Questionnaire during weeks 3-4
  - Visit class to check in on progress/troubleshoot with individual students during weeks 5-6
  - Let students work on it after week 6
  - Begin asking them for results/spectrograms week 10
  - Make a deadline for submitting results by week 13/14
- Increase support for students
  - Don't rely only on tutorial videos
  - More class visits
  - Work through procedures together
- Expand number of sections for project

- Include adjunct instructor courses

It will be challenging if French courses are held remotely again in the Fall, but with these changes, I believe that we can get meaningful results. The entire process will be easier, I believe, if we are permitted to resume in-person instruction, though.

## Appendix A

We are unable to include certain materials directly into this document due to the file types. The two types of materials that we would have liked to include here are:

- The three video tutorials (See Pilot Tools and Procedures section, page 4 for a description):
  - Video Tutorial 1- About Praat
  - Video Tutorial 2- How to Use Praat
  - Video Tutorial 3- Recording with Praat
- The Google Forms Survey acting as an indirect assessment (See Administer Assessment section, pages 6 to 11 for the questions). Survey Title: *French Pronunciation Poll*
  - Follow link for indirect assessment here:  
<https://forms.gle/WJGudN3vwXgzeuh8A>
- The Google Forms Survey to allow students to select French sounds that they will study. Survey Title: *Which French Vowel/Consonant am I Studying?*
  - Follow link for French Vowel and Consonant questionnaire here:  
<https://forms.gle/VSeQi3MgPdnCSiss6>

## Appendix B

Student Procedures (Revised Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 and taken from the Spring 2020 final report)

*Instructions-* This activity is designed to help you hone your French accent. The steps outlined below will allow you to use Praat to improve your pronunciation of difficult French speech sounds. You will begin by reviewing the list of French sounds your professor gave to you after the pronunciation diagnostic. Please ask for assistance from your professor and / or from lab staff if needed.

1. Do the 'pre-assessment' with the professor at the beginning of the course. Pronounce each French sound on the lists of French vowels and consonants.

2. Analyze material on how to read a spectrogram including the diagram of formant locations
3. Select a target sound from professors' list of challenging sounds for you (from the pre-assessment diagnostic)
4. Analyze reference video atop each vowel/consonant table for that sound
5. Practice the sound in isolation
6. Practice the sound in the environments provided on the vowel/consonant table
7. Review diagram of formant locations (from step 2)
8. Download target sound from vowel/consonant table and play sound w/ Praat
9. Analyze spectrogram (back to step 8 in needed)
10. Record yourself pronouncing target sound w/ Praat
11. Compare the target spectrogram with your own.
12. If they differ significantly, repeat steps 9 and 10 until your spectrogram mirrors that of the target sound.

Repeat this process with all of the sounds your professor listed for you in there-assessment.