

Understanding Spoken French

The “I don’t know” Effect



INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET

Imagine always seeing the words 'I don't know' written out as someone learning English and then showing up in the States and only hearing people mutter the indecipherable "ahd'no" all the time. How are you supposed to understand that the recognizable consonants of 'I don't know' have been burnished down over time like a smooth stone on the beach, that when people speak quickly and naturally they drop important, distinguishable sounds from phrases?

You'll hate me at first for making you do this, but your life will be much easier in the end (I promise) if you commit to learning the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The thing is, there's no combination of English letters than can appropriately describe the sounds of French. Don't even get me started on 'ay' being used to describe 'é'...

organized by groups of similar vowels

Regular Vowels

closed to open vowels

- [i] - ici, pire, livre, image, stylo
- [e] - thé, chanter
- [ε] - faisait, père, prêt, chantait, faire, lait, est, jouet
- [a] - rat, patte, aller, papa, va, chat, femme
- [ɑ] - pâte, mâle

open to closed vowels

- [ɔ] - pomme, Paul, sotte, porte, vol, donne, mort
- [o] - haute, beau, chaud, cadeau, mot, gauche, pôle, nôtre
- [u] - poule, pour, dessous, août
- [y] - rue, pull, lune, mur, dessus, j'ai eu

- [ə]* - petit, semaine, me, te, se, premier, je
- [ø]* - feu, peu, veut, heureux, deux, chanteuse
- [œ] - jeune, fleur, peur, veulent, sœur, cœur, ordinateur

Semi-Vowels

- [ʃ] - chant
- [ʒ] - gens, je
- [w] - louis, loi, voix, froid, poêle, oui
- [ɥ] - lui, nuage, fuir, muet, huit, huile
- [j] - hier, pied, ail, soleil, crayon, fille, yoga

English "u" but accompanied by [u] & [y] respectively

same sound as "you" in English

Nasal Vowels

- [ɛ̃] - examen, appoint, brin, vin, faim, pain
- [œ̃] - brun, emprunter, parfum, un, lundi
- [ɑ̃] - enfant, violent, vent, blanc, champ, dent, avant, exporter
- [ɔ̃] - long, violon, bon, vont, ombre

produce these nasals w/ the same mouth positioning for their respective non-nasal counterparts

NOTE:

[ɥ] = [y] when followed by a vowel

[a] et [ɑ] have merged into the same sound in modern Parisian French

[ɛ̃] et [œ̃] have merged into the same sound in modern Parisian French

[ə]* et [ø] are identical sounds - [ø] is always pronounced,

whereas [ə]* represents an 'e' that is typically dropped (ex : 'je' vs. 'jeu')

*[ə] is called a schwa – a sound that is typically reduced or dropped in faster and more natural speech. This concept is essential to grasp as this schwa 'e' vowel appears in some of the most common French words (particularly in pronouns, but not exclusively - **je, le, de, me, se, te**, etc.)

I'll be using IPA (API in French – *l'alphabet phonétique internationale*) to explain how sounds change and disappear as people speak faster – and therefore how to work your way backwards when you listen to a French conversation and figure out what's really being said.

It's certainly not easy to retrain your brain to associate the written words you know so well with the way people actually pronounce them when having a natural, fast-paced conversation. Learning the patterns by which different sounds are reduced or dropped will not only make understanding much more coherent, but will also greatly help you to speak more naturally.

French Phonetics

[fʁɑ̃sɛ]

ielanguages.com

***Disclaimer:** *Like with all languages, French has no 'correct' dialect. My experience lies with Parisian French; the information in this e-book will therefore reference the tendencies of spoken French as it's used in Paris. This is in no means an effort to minimize the importance of different ways people speak French around the world.*

VOICED AND NON-VOICED CONSONANTS

French (and English) has both voiced and non-voiced consonants. Voice and non-voiced consonants appear in pairs and are produced using the exact same mouth positioning with the difference in production being that non-voiced consonants have just air passing through the mouth whereas voiced consonants push sound through from the vocal chords as well.

Let's look at the below example of **beurre** and **peur**. Your tongue and lips form the exact same position to create both the 'b' and 'p' for each respective word.

Beurre : [bœR] – audible (voiced)
 Peur : [pœR] – silent (non-voiced)

VOICED	[b]	[d]	[g]	[v]	[z]	[ʒ]
NON-VOICED	[p]	[t]	[k]	[f]	[s]	[ʃ]

Each grouping acts as a voiced/non-voiced pair. they are the exact same consonant except for the sound pushed through

DEVOICING – Voiced consonants can become de-voiced (and vice-versa) in certain circumstances depending on the letter that immediately follows. This tends to occur most frequently following the disappearance of other sounds (like the droppable [ə]) during faster and less careful speech. As you can see in the below example, once the [ə] of 'Je peux' disappears as is customary, the voiced 'j' of 'je' is immediately next to the non-voiced 'p' of 'peux'.

'Je peux' [ʒəpø] becomes [ʃpø] ~~Je~~ peux → J'peux → Chpeux
 'Je suis' [ʒəsɥi] becomes [ʃɥi] ~~Je~~ suis → J'suis → Chuis

The non-voiced 'p' has an effect upon the preceding voiced 'j' and moves to devoice it. The above consonant chart shows that [ʃ] ('ch') is the non-voiced equivalent of [ʒ] ('j'). Once the weak 'e' of 'Je peux' drops, we are left with 'J'peux' which is what allows the non-voiced 'p' to act upon the 'j' as described above. Once this happens, we are left with 'Ch'peux'.

The exact same phenomenon occurs with 'Je suis' (Ch'uis), 'Je sais' (Ch'ais), and many other constructions. It's important to note that, since the 'ne' most always drops from negative constructions in spoken French, this same devoicement occurs even in negative sentences.

Je **ne** sais pas – Je **sais** pas – **J'**sais pas – Ch'ais pas

← same effect!

As this is a domino effect phenomenon, it's essential to recognize that spoken French operates on a sliding scale; speakers often stop somewhere in the middle based on the speed of their speech and the level formality they wish to convey. You would not take the above 'shortcuts' if you do not firstly remove 'ne' from your spoken French, for example; you must abide by the order in which these processes take place and not overstep the systematic way in which sounds condense and drop from spoken French.

Please be aware that devoicement only occurs when sounds drop due to the above outlined process (mainly between words, with some exceptions) and does not affect regular pronunciation rules.

LIAISON

Liaisons are a classically tricky aspect of learning French; the rules for using a liaison differ based on the grammatical role of words or the level of formality with which you're speaking. A classical poem might be performed with liaisons between nearly every word whereas a group of highschoolers hanging out at a café after school will use almost none. Therefore, the use of liaison is rather directly tied to the level of formality in which a speaker finds him or herself. For example, something as simple as 'pas encore' can be pronounced with or without a liaison between the 's' of 'pas' and 'e' of 'encore' depending on the circumstances.

pas encore [paʔkɔʁ] VS pas encore [paʔkɔʁ]

There are, however, some liaison rules that are essential in that they help to differentiate between similar constructions or otherwise hard-to-pronounce phrases. As a rule of thumb, spoken French operates on a consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel pattern (French syllables always begin with a consonant rather than a vowel as with English – ca-rotte vs. carr-ot), with a preference to never have two vowels back to back. This same rule is in part the reason we are obliged to add a 't' for certain inverted questions ('Qu'en pense-t-il?'). *

PHONETIC LIAISON

A phonetic liaison (one that is between 2 words) acts upon a latent (not normally pronounced) consonant to make it pronounced:

J'ai un garçon [ʒɛɑ̃gɑʁsɔ̃]

J'ai un garçon.

The 'n' only acts to nasalize the 'u' of 'un' & is never pronounced

J'ai un enfant [ʒɛɑ̃nɑ̃fɑ̃]

J'ai un enfant

The consonant is latent when the word is isolated or is followed by another consonant. The 'n' of 'un' is a latent consonant as it typically is never pronounced (like in the example sentence 'J'ai un garçon'), but only acts upon the 'u' vowel to render it nasal. When the word 'un' is followed by a word beginning with a vowel, however, the nasality remains but the 'n' is pronounced as a phonetic liaison between the 'u' and 'e' of 'un' and 'enfant,' respectively.

* Understanding syllables should help to make sense of words that get smushed together when people speak quickly!

SUBJECT-VERB LIAISON

Liaison between subject pronoun + verb:

C'est un mystère [sɛtœ̃mistɛʁ]

C'est un mystère

optional liaison - using it implies more careful speech

Ils ont

[ilzɔ̃]

Ils ont [ilzɔ̃nt]

Ils sont

[ilsɔ̃]

Ils sont

Like with 'pas encore,' the 't' of 'c'est' can be stylistically applied to mark a phrase as more or less formal. You are able to forgo the use of a liaison in these circumstances when the two vowels that would be back-to-back are different enough to avoid confusion as belonging to the same word or syllable. Hence, 'un enfant' will always require a phonetic liaison with the 'n' as the nasal vowels [œ̃] and [ɑ̃] resemble one another. Inversely, [ɛ] and [œ̃] of 'c'est un' are different enough to mimic the classic syllabic distinction of the consonant-vowel pattern of spoken French.

↑ double 's' ('ss') = [s]; single 's' = [z]

'Ils sont', does not technically contain a liaison as 'ils' ends in a consonant and 'sont' begins with one. As such, the 's' of 'sont' retains its non-voiced qualities and is pronounced as a normal 's' (this also follows the same pattern of double 'ss' within words being pronounced as a regular non-voiced 's'). 'Ils ont,' on the other hand, is pronounced with a 'z' sound as the voiced 'o' of 'ont' acts upon the final, single, unvoiced 's' of ils to render it voiced (and therefore transform the 's' to a 'z' sound). A single 's' followed by a vowel in the middle of a word will also exhibit this behavior; while that would not technically be considered a liaison, they play by the same rules.

/bɔ̃zɔ̃v/!

COMMON REDUCTIONS IN EVERYDAY SPEECH

Certain words and phrases will nearly always reduce in a predictable fashion. Similar to “**I don’t know**” becoming “**I dunno**” or “**ahd’nno**,” the following common reductions in French have eclipsed their grammatically correct and more enunciated variants to become the new default form in spoken French. You can expect to encounter these even in more careful contexts such as at work.

You will see examples of the below common reductions in the section entitled ‘Putting It All Together.’

1. NE...PAS

The ‘**ne**’ drops from ‘ne...pas’ (and other negative constructions) in negative sentences. Since it is ‘pas’ the truly carries the meaning of negation, we can eliminate ‘**ne**’ without affecting the meaning of the sentence.

Fun fact: in Middle French, it was ‘ne’ that carried the negation and ‘pas’ was frequently eliminated in spoken French. Since then, the tables have turned!

2. QU’EST-CE QUE

‘Qu’est-ce que’ ([kɛskø]) shortens to ‘kes’ ([kɛs])

When followed by a subject pronoun beginning with a consonant (je, tu, nous, vous) the [ə] of ‘que’ (Qu’est-ce que) drops which means that the initial [k] (‘qu’) sound has difficulty in being enunciated and therefore eventually drops.

3. IL

‘Il’ is famous for getting slammed with a number of reductions that affect multiple highly-used words and phrases. *En règle générale*, the ‘l’ drops off leaving only the vestige [i] long ‘e’ vowel. It’s important to note that this only happens when ‘il’ is being used as an impersonal subject pronoun and not representing ‘he.’

- ‘**Il y a**’ transforms into simply ‘ya’ as a byproduct of this. When the ‘l’ disappears, the two [i] sound of ‘il’ and ‘y’ are put back to back and reduce further to just one [i] to avoid repetition.
- The ‘il’ drops all together in certain common impersonal constructions; Since ‘il’ is the only possible subject for the verb ‘falloir,’ for example, we lose no meaning nor can construe the eliminated subject for anything else.

Il faut y aller demain matin... – Faut y aller demain matin...

4. UNSTRESSED SYLLABLES

Unstressed word-final syllables have a tendency to drop when they immediately follow a consonant. It's important to note here that the below 're' and 'le' endings are never fully articulated in French; as the final 'e' is an e muet, it acts only to phonate the previous consonant ('r' or 'l' in our case here). Furthermore, as 'r' and 'l' are soft, liquid consonants, they have no plosive qualities and are then all the more easily dropped when in this unstressed, word-final position.

- 're' endings

On va prend**re** la route – On va pren' la route [ɔ̃vaʁɑ̃laʁut]

Je vais suiv**re** quelque piste – Je vais suiv' quelque piste [ʒavɛsyivkɛlkøpist]

Je vais y ê**tre** tout de suite – Je vais y êt' tout de suite [ʒavɛiɛttutsyt]

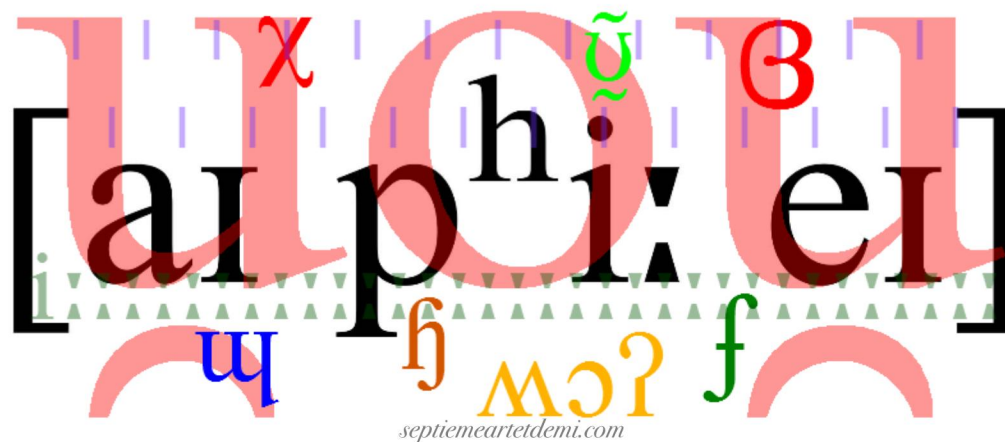
Aut**re** chose – Aut' chose [otʃos]

- 'le' endings

Probab**le** – Probab' [probab]

5. TU

'Tu as' becomes 'T'as' – the 'u' of 'tu' drops in the same way that the 'e' of 'je' contracts when the following word begins with a vowel.



French bears equal weight on spoken reductions as it does word choice and sentence construction (ie inversion, 'est-ce que,' or a statement with question intonation) to mark language register; encountering the above reductions does therefore not immediately imply less care on behalf of the speaker. It's possible to never use 'ne' in negative sentences only to work from a more selective vocabulary and retain a heightened register of expression.

FILLER WORDS & EXPRESSIONS

Reductions aside, another reason you may struggle to easily understand spoken French is the varied use of filler words. Whereas in American English we use ‘um,’ ‘well,’ ‘huh,’ ‘like,’ or ‘uh’ to hold space between words and while thinking of what to say next, the French use more words than the onomatopoeias that American English has codified as fillers.

Enfin (pronounced as ‘fin’ [fɛ̃])

Being the first filler word I picked up during my time in France, ‘**fin**’ holds a special place in my French heart. The closest English equivalent is ‘well,’ but ‘fin’ can also be employed to stop your train of thought and correct something you said.

« Je pense que...’**fin**...c’était vraiment, c’était vraiment bien ’**fin**...c’était pas mal, quoi. »

Bref

‘Bref’ is kind of the short, cool way of saying ‘in short,’ ‘in summary,’ or ‘to the point’ (even though all these phrases are reserved for more formal written language in English). Use *bref* to sum up your thoughts after rambling on for a bit or to cut to the point of a story and put your two cents in.

« J’ai perdu mon travail, je dois vendre ma maison, mon voisin veut me tuer...
Bref, je suis dans la merde. »

You can also combine ‘enfin’ and ‘bref’ – ‘**fin bref**’ – to intensify the meaning of both.

Ben (pronounced [bɛ̃] or [ba] depending on the region)

Although less used than ‘fin,’ ‘ben’ can begin a sentence and also roughly translates to ‘well’ in English. Unlike ‘fin,’ ‘ben’ does not act to specify or correct your train of thought. It fits the true definition of a filler word in that speakers use a drawn-out ‘ben’ in order to buy some time while they formulate the proper response.

« **Ben**, c’était vraiment bien. »

Bon

Meaning ‘right’ or ‘well’ in English, ‘bon’ is used to jump start what you want to say and quickly bring attention to you. It can equally introduce a sentence that you wish to use to end a conversation.

« **Bon**, on commence ! »

« **Bon**. Moi, je m’en vais. »

Quoi

‘Quoi’ is one of those pesky French words that can be applied in seemingly a million ways. Aside from its obvious use as the interrogative ‘what,’ *quoi* is used in casual, spoken French at the end of a thought to add emphasis to the preceding thought – you can think of it as roughly meaning “**ya know!**”

« Elle est petite, blonde, gentille...normale, **quoi** ! »

« J’ai lu du Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Shakespeare... les classiques, **quoi**. »

Tu vois ? / Vous voyez ?

‘Tu vois’ acts the same as ‘ya know ?’ in English and acts both to make sure your interlocuteur is following you and to end your thought.

« J’ai pas pu y aller parce que Marine n’était pas prête et puis il avait trop de circulation, **tu vois**. »

« Ouais, **tu vois**, j’ai eu du mal à le faire puisqu’il a rien fait. »

Genre (pronounced [jɔ̃ʁ])

‘Genre’ is the counterpart to ‘like’ in English. It tends to be used by younger French speakers and even carries the similar ditzy quality of ‘like.’

“You wanna go, like, to the mall?” – « On va, **genre**, au magasin faire du shopping ? »

« Je me rappelle pas très bien. J’avais, **genre**, 5 ou 6 ans quand ça m’est arrivé. »

Du coup

Typical of Parisian French (but identifiable with the French spoken all over France), ‘du coup’ literally means ‘as a result’ and can be used in place of ‘donc’ and to convey the sense of ‘so...’ You might, however, hear it used with ‘donc’ as an intensifier: ‘**donc, du coup...**’ It tends to be used it all the time and all over the place in sentences. French speakers from outside of France (ie Québec) view ‘du coup’ as one of the strongest markers of France French.

« Ouais, **du coup**, j’étais crevé donc je suis pas allé chez eux hier soir. »

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The process by which sounds reduce and drop from spoken French is not only essential knowledge for successfully understanding when people speak, but also as a marker of different language registers (ie more or less formal speech). As with English, more careful, enunciated speech strongly correlates to a more formal level of expression.

Just because you can reduce certain sounds in French when you speak doesn't mean you necessarily should. The number of contractions should reflect both the pace of enunciation and the level of formality required by the situation you find yourself. It would seem out of place to say "**ahd'no**" in English if you're talking slowly/carefully or in a heightened setting. Since these reductions happen gradually and in a prescribed order; we need to decide how the context around the conversation should influence which reductions we apply, how quickly we speak, and how much (or little) we enunciate.

The following examples will be shown in both IPA and by writing phonetically.

Je suis...

Soutenu : [ʒəsɥi]

Familier : [ʃɥi]

~~Je~~ suis

J'suis

Chuis

Je vais te le donner.

Soutenu : [ʒəvɛtələdɔne]

Familier : [ʒvɛtəldɔne]

~~Je~~ vais ~~te~~ ~~le~~ donner.

J'vais te l'donner.

You can choose the [ə] of either 'te' or 'le' to drop

Je ne sais pas.

Soutenu : [ʒənəsɛpa]

Familier : [ʃɛpa]

~~Je~~ ne sais pas.

~~Je~~ sais pas

J'sais pas

Chais pas

Est-ce que tu as faim ?

Soutenu : [ɛskətɥafɛ̃]

Familier : [tafɛ̃]

~~Est-ce que tu as faim ?~~
~~Tu as faim ?~~
T'as faim ?

Tu es là depuis combien de temps ?

Soutenu : [tyɛladɔpɥikɔbijɛ̃dɔtã]

Familier : [tɛladpɥikɔbijɛ̃dtã]

~~Tu es là depuis combien de temps ?~~
T'es là d'puis combien d'temps ?

Qu'est-ce que tu as envie de faire ?

Soutenu : [kɛskətɥaãvidɔfɛ̃ʀ]

Familier : [kɛstaãvidfɛ̃ʀ]

~~Qu'est-ce que tu as envie de faire ?~~
Qu'est-ce t'as envie d'faire ?

Je serais avec mes amis demain à partir de dix heures.

Soutenu : [ʒɛsɔʀɛavɛkmɛzamidɔmɛ̃apartirdɔdizœ̃ʀ]

Familier : [ʃʀɛavɛkmzamidmɛ̃apartirdɔdizœ̃ʀ]

~~Je serais avec mes amis demain à partir de dix heures.~~
~~Je~~ serais avec mes amis d'main à partir d'dix heures.
Chrais avec m'zamis d'main à partir d'dix heures

Je suis allé voir mon ami parce qu'il ne sait plus quoi faire.

Soutenu : [ʒəsqalɛvwarɱnɑmiparsəkilnəsɛplykwafɛR]

Familier : [ʃɥalɛvwarɱnɑmiparskisɛplykwafɛR]

~~Je~~ suis allé voir mon ami parce qu'il ~~ne~~ sait plus quoi faire.

~~J'~~suis allé voir mon ami parce qu'il sait plus quoi faire.

Chui allé voir mon ami parce qu'i sait plus quoi faire.

Je ne suis pas allé.

Soutenu : [ʒənəsɥipazalɛ]

Familier : [ʃɥipaalɛ]

Je ~~ne~~ suis pas ~~pas~~ allé (w/ liaison)

~~Je~~ suis pas allé (No liaison)

Chui pas allé

L'autre jour...

Soutenu : [lɔtrɔʒur]

Familier : [lɔʒur]

L'~~autre~~ jour

L'aut' jour

Il n'y a pas de quoi.

Soutenu : [ilnijapadəkwa]

Neutre + : [ilnijapadkwa]

Neutre - : [japadkwa]

Familier : [japatkwa]

Il ~~n'y~~ a pas de quoi.

~~Il~~ y a pas de quoi.

Ya pas d'quoi.

Ya pas t'quoi.

The 'q' devoices the 'd' which in turn becomes 't'

Il se demande ce qu'il peut bien faire.

Soutenu : [ilsɛdɛmɑ̃dəsəkilpøbijɛfɛR]

Familier : [izdɛmɑ̃dskipøbjɛfɛR]

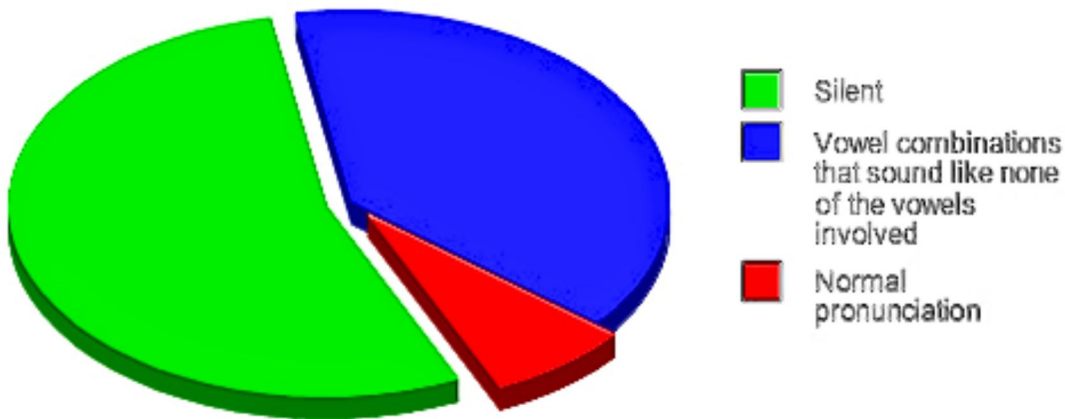
Il ~~se~~ demande ~~ce~~ qu'il peut bien faire.

Il ~~s'~~demande ~~s'~~qu'il ~~peut~~ bien faire.

Il ~~s'~~demande ~~s'~~qu'~~i~~' peut bien faire.

izdɛmande ~~s'~~qu'~~i~~' peut bien faire.

French Letters and Their Pronunciation



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RECOMMENDED MATERIALS

BOOKS

Savoir Dire – Diane M. Dansereau

Le français que l'on parle – Yves Cortez

YOUTUBE VIDEOS

[Understanding Spoken French: Common Reductions in Everyday Speech](#)

[French Sounds](#)

[Spoken French \(Fred Grün\)](#)

[L'alphabet phonétique – les sons français](#)

GET TO KNOW *TEACH ME FRANÇAIS*

I founded Teach Me Français in 2015 following the harrowing experience of mispronouncing neck ('cou') as butt ('cul') for ten-minutes straight during a presentation at the Université de Paris III La Sorbonne Nouvelle...

Realizing that no one during my previous eight years of French language instruction had taught me the drastically important phonological distinction between these two sounds, I launched headfirst into French linguistics studies with a focus on pronunciation and accent-reduction.

I hold a Bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois-Chicago in French language & literature, linguistics, and archaeology; a certificate in French linguistics from the Université de Paris III La Sorbonne Nouvelle; my Master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in intercultural business and marketing was instructed entirely in French through the Professional French Master's Program.

Upon the completion of my Bachelor's degree, I worked as a program coordinator with a French international education company which put me in daily contact with French natives with whom I used a professional level of French. My work also required that I maneuver a multitude of nuanced cultural information to successfully communicate with clients.

I am a registered proctor for the European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages (ECL) French Language proficiency exam through the University of Pécs' Foreign Language Center. This certification allows to accurately and officially assess speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities in the French language.

I currently work in the International Division at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and run Teach Me Français in my free time.

-Bradley Grochocinski

