# The myth of the French author: The construction of learner identity through reading and online discussion with Alain Gagnol

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**Introduction**

This article describes learners' perceptions of an author and the construction and transformation of their own identities through the processes of reading and online discussion. The study focuses on a unique literacy experience involving university-level students of French who were reading the contemporary detective novel *M'sieur* and had the opportunity to engage in online discussion with the author after finishing the book. The activity of reading a literary text, whether in one's first language or in the target language, typically affords access to the author only through the text itself. However, with multimodal technologies becoming increasingly relevant and beneficial in foreign language education, the traditional notion of access to an author can, in fact, be challenged, bringing to light interesting dynamics in reader-writer roles and identity formation. Specifically, this research explores the following questions:

1. What is the nature of learner identity during this literacy activity?
2. How do learners perceive the author throughout the processes of reading and online discussion?
3. In what ways does asynchronous online communication serve as a social context for the development of discursive roles?

Ultimately, these findings reveal a complex web of dynamic social identities within a multifaceted foreign language literacy activity. In the pages that follow, identity formation of learners in relation to the text and its author will be illustrated through the revealing comments of the learners themselves.

## Background

In recent years, a number of researchers in applied linguistics have investigated learner identity in both naturalistic and classroom-based language learning contexts. Although there are multiple perspectives on the concept of identity in language learning, the term essentially refers to learners' self-concepts. Studies on identity have offered compelling insights into the ways learners negotiate the self and the other in social settings where much of language learning takes place. Some researchers have studied the development and transformation of multiple learner identities with regard to power relations, where identity is often a source of personal struggle as learners negotiate the discursive practices of the target culture (Norton; Pierce; Pavlenko and Lantolf). Lave and Wenger argue that the construction of identities is a central component to learning. "As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person" (53). This, in turn, implies that identities will undergo change as learners gain knowledge and as they enter into new relations that they redefine and by which they are redefined (53).

Duff investigated classroom discourse patterns in her ethnography of communication in a diverse high school ESL classroom and found that identity construction and language socialization were complex and wrought with tension and contradictions rather than "static" as they might appear from the outside. Boxer and Cortés-Conde adopt a similar focus in their exploration of the formation of relational identities in the ESL classroom and suggest that these group identities are largely influenced by the role of the teacher. Nguyen and Kellogg studied emergent ESL learner identities in the discourse of online social interaction, where they discovered that students' participation was closely related to interactional patterns such as alignment with peers' values and negotiation of meaning. Finally, in their discussion of second language literacy and the literary, Kern and Schultz highlight the new forms of literacy emerging in multimodal interactive learning communities where anyone can be an author, a reality which undoubtedly challenges educators to reconsider traditional notions of the roles of reader and writer in a literacy activity and how learners perceive themselves as participants in these activities.

Students' ability to construct identities in language learning presupposes their having access to opportunities to engage in the social practices of the target language. The notion of access is particularly relevant to this study because of the unique opportunity for students to have access to the author of a book they have read. Van Lier identifies "access to exposure" as one of several necessary conditions for language learning to take place. In other words, learners must be provided with opportunities to engage in the language that surrounds them through social interaction (44). Pavlenko and Lantolf stress the importance of viewing language development not only in the terms of acquisition but also as participation or engagement in the social activity of

language. They are particularly interested in what happens to the second language self as learners engage in the social practices of another culture. Similarly, in a study on international videoconferencing between native and non-native speakers of French, Kinginger emphasizes the importance of providing learners with access to "real language use" and "samples of real data" in order for learners to develop awareness of current linguistic varieties of the target language (51).

The studies cited above are just some of the recent investigations into issues related to identity in language learning. In this study, as we take a closer look at learners' views of themselves, the author, and the activity, we will see illustrations of the theoretical ideas highlighted above.

## Method

This qualitative study was conducted at a state university in the Midwest and included thirty-four students of intermediate-level French and their instructor. The curriculum consisted of a textbook focusing on building skills and communication and the detective novel *M'sieur,* an authentic text (i.e. intended for native speakers, not modified for language learners) written by French author Alain Gagnol. The novel recounts the inward and outward struggles of M'sieur, a young rebel wrestling with his own identity and coming of age as a member of a group of thugs. Study of the novel, which began during week four of the semester, was interspersed with lessons from the textbook and culminated in a viewing of the movie *Hors service,* based on *M'sieur,* and an online discussion with the author.

Data collected for this study include three sets of questionnaires, discussion transcripts, and an interview with the instructor. During the fourth week of the semester, the day before students began reading the novel, a diagnostic questionnaire (Appendix A) was administered with open-ended questions about students' prior reading experience in French, their attitudes towards reading, and their general impressions of French authors and French books. At the time of the diagnostic questionnaire, students knew only that they would read a French book as part of the course requirements; they had no knowledge of the eventual online discussion with the author or of the fact that their professor and the author were friends[1].

Five weeks later, when students had read approximately half the book, a second questionnaire (Appendix B) was administered to ascertain the reading process and developing attitudes and identities. The questionnaire also asked students to write one comment or question that they would address to the author if given the opportunity. Toward the end of the semester, when students had finished the book, the professor revealed that he and the author were friends, and he announced that the students would be engaging in an online discussion with the author. In preparation, students composed their questions in advance with the assistance of their peers and the professor, and then a week later, the online discussion took place.

The discussion was hosted on the university's course management system (*Blackboard*), where the author was given guest access to the course discussion board. Students were required to post one or two questions, and the author replied to each question individually on the discussion board by the next class period[2]. After the discussion took place and students had read all the postings, a final questionnaire (Appendix C) was administered asking about students' initial expectations for the discussion, their impressions of the author during and after the discussion, and their overall perceptions of themselves as readers based on this experience.

At the end of the semester, the professor of the course was interviewed to better understand his pedagogical choices and to discover his impressions from these literacy activities. All questionnaire and discussion data were then compiled, organized, and coded according to emergent themes.

## Findings

Throughout the phases of this extended literacy activity, which included reading *M'sieur*, preparing the discussion questions, and engaging in class discussions and the discussion with the author, students' expressions of their own identities and their perceptions of the author were closely related. The analysis that follows is organized into three major interconnected themes tied to the author's identity, which emerged through data analysis and wherein the complexities and layers of the learners' own identities are visible. As such, the themes – grouped into author as stereotype, native speaker, and ordinary person – provide a lens for examining the learner more closely.

### *Author as Stereotype*

Comments from the diagnostic questionnaires reveal a wide range of impressions of French authors. Very few students had ever read any original work in French by a French author, and they had not yet started to read the book *M'sieur*. While a few students did state that they viewed authors as no different than any of them (i.e. just an ordinary person who has written a book), most of the participants expressed rather stereotyped views of French authors. They used words such as "intelligent," "cultural," "emotional," "morose," "cutting-edge," "quirky," "romantic," and "pretentious nitwits" to describe their impressions of French authors. Given that students had very limited exposure to French texts, it is interesting that the words reveal such a strongly stereotyped image of the French author[3]. Despite the variety of terms used, the overall impression given is of the French author as a monolithic and exotic entity.

Later in the study, when students were mid way through the book, they were again asked to comment on their impressions of an author, but this time they were asked specifically about author Alain Gagnol. At this point, the students had personal

experience with the author's work, so regardless of their level of engagement in the reading, they began to take on more of a voice, and, not surprisingly, the image of the author as a monolithic entity is much less prominent. A number of students stated that the author is "weird," and others commented that he is "funny," "a little disturbed," and "has some sick ideas." In their comments we can see glimpses of how they were engaged in and affected by the story. Some also commented that they thought the author was "young" and "new," a view which was possibly influenced by the black and white photo of Gagnol on the back of the book jacket. Other comments are more descriptive[4]:

> "Good author, although with some of his poetic lines it is hard as a weak French reader." (Ryan)
> "It's hard to really hear the author's voice. I think it gets lost for me because I'm just trying to dissect it for content." (Jessica)
> "I do not like that he does not use proper French grammar because it is already hard enough to read." (Alison)

In these comments, two interesting dynamics are apparent. First, as stated above, we can see the students' own identities beginning to emerge. Ryan saw himself as a "weak French reader" who could not understand the more vague sections of the book, and the others were having a difficult time just understanding the story. Another item on the same questionnaire provides data to support this claim. The question explicitly asked how learners viewed themselves as readers, and while the responses were varied, many students said they were "confused," "frustrated," "annoyed," "struggling," and one admitted to be "reading [only] to understand the language." Others, however, commented that they were "improving" and were "decent" readers.

The second dynamic reveals that students were starting to take on the role of critic as real participants in a literacy event. Even if they were not "into the reading," they were experiencing the author's work and had an opinion based on their experience rather than on stereotypes. Additional comments revealing this emerging identity came from an item on the questionnaire asking them what they would ask or say to the author if provided the opportunity, before they had any notion that this would actually take place. The following are some of the students' hypothetical comments and questions for the author:

> "Where do you get some of these ideas?!" (Jackie)
> "Why does M'sieur have to be so pathetic compared to his cohorts?" (Ryan)
> "Have you ever thought of having it translated?" (Megan)
> "Set your flashbacks off from the rest of the novel." (Alison)
> "Don't use as much slang." (Tracy)
> "Why do you repeat things so much?" (Emily)

> "Is there a real M'sieur that inspired the story?" (Sasha)
> "As a book for pleasure it is really good, but for school work it is at times a little racy." (Jenny)
> "This is bizarre and you are strange for writing it." (Rachel)
> "The metaphors/similes are confusing!" (Leah)

As stated above, in students' comments to and about the author, we can see how their own identities were transforming through the activity, especially with regards to reading skills, and some, such as Alison, Tracy, and Emily, were beginning to take on the role of critic. Engaged in the reading to varying degrees, the students had clear opinions about the author's style and the content of the book. It is important to note here that the actual questions asked and comments made during the online discussion (featured below) were not nearly as bold as the hypothetical ones listed above.

*Author as Native Speaker*

Perhaps the most compelling comments relate to the idea of the author as a native French speaker. Students repeatedly mentioned this perception of the author in their questionnaire comments about the online discussion, usually to explain their anxiety about making grammatical mistakes in their messages to him. Moreover, their views of Gagnol as an idealized native speaker reveal the multi-dimensional quality of their own self-concepts, particularly as they saw themselves as non-native speakers and learners of French. In the final questionnaire, when students were asked to comment on their feelings about the online discussion, their responses clearly illustrate this dichotomy between native and non-native speaker.

> "Before I thought that there would be no way of having an intelligent conversation with a native speaker, let alone a conversation with an author about his work." (Patricia)
> "I felt like I would be embarrassed because my French was so horrible." (Colleen)
> "I felt very awkward because I didn't want to ask any stupid, elementary-like question simply because that's all my French would allow me to do." (Colleen)
> "It was a little awkward preparing to talk to someone from France and trying not to sound dumb." (Hailey)
> "I didn't want to sound stupid to either an author or a native speaker." (Audrey)
> "I was a little nervous because I wanted my French grammar to be really good for M. Gagnol because he is a writer." (Kristin)

In preparing for the online discussion, where the professor provided assistance in composing their questions and comments, many students clearly felt uncomfortable

with the idea of addressing a native speaker-author. They wanted to impress him with their language skills and insightful questions, and more importantly, they most certainly did not want to offend him or appear incompetent with their grammatical mistakes and superficial questions, not only because he was an author, but also because he was a native speaker of French.

The comments above convey a self-concept that is disempowering, deficient, and lacking self-confidence, a view of the non-native speaker that is common and well documented in applied linguistics research. Firth and Wagner argue that the learner is indeed often viewed in second language acquisition research as "a defective communicator, limited by an underdeveloped communicative competence" (285). Norton highlights these "feelings of inadequacy and poor self-confidence" in language learners and argues that they are linked to issues of power relations in society (123). In the current study, it is argued that socially and culturally constructed roles (of language learners as students and non-native speakers in relation to a person of more power in the role of author and native speaker) do indeed influence the learner's self image.

The context of the asynchronous online discussion played an interesting role in the construction of identities in this study. Students had ample time behind the scenes to think of appropriate topics and to create the actual questions in French. They could consult their teacher or their peers, and thus, they were able to avoid a potentially embarrassing experience of committing a linguistic or social gaffe when encountering the author in real time. Moreover, although the notion of learner anxiety is indeed demonstrated in the data, this factor would possibly have been more prevalent if the discussion had taken place in real time (synchronous), where students would post questions spontaneously and receive answers almost immediately. In fact, communicating in real time with the author could have prevented students from fully engaging in the content of their questions because of their fears and the strong desire to save face and "have good French." The professor of the course emphasized during an interview that the asynchronous context allowed more time for both the author and the students to "produce more polished and thoughtful communication," which also surely reduced the "stress level" on both ends.

Interestingly, another dynamic came into play at this point as students learned that the author and their professor were friends. In response to the same question asking about their feelings prior to the online discussion, some mentioned that knowing this made them more comfortable ("I was comfortable because I knew he would be cool since he was the professor's friend" [Ryan]), whereas another student explained that this added another element of uneasiness ("I was hesitant because the author is the professor's friend and I didn't want to offend his friend and in turn, offend him" [Ben]). These comments illustrate not only a complex web of interrelated identities, but they also reveal culturally-based notions of friendship and the responsibilities and assumptions that lie within.

*Author as Ordinary Person*

After the author replied to their comments and questions, about half the students reported that their impressions of him had changed. Many students stated that they now saw him as some sort of "real" person.

> "He seemed to be a modest guy and not so intimidating as I would have thought an author of such a book would be." (Emily)
> "It showed me that he is a real person, not just an abstract idea, not just a name. He is someone that I can actually communicate with." (Patricia)
> "He became more real, not just some distant picture or biography in the back of the book." (Kristin)

When asked if they found the online discussion useful, students overwhelmingly responded favorably (97% replied "Yes") and offered the following comments:

> "It was cool to speak real French to a French person." (Ryan)
> "Because I have never communicated with a real French person before." (Heather)
> "I really liked how we all got to ask questions, get answers, and read each other's questions and answers." (Chelsea)

All of these comments highlight the approachable, real quality of this author, as opposed to the traditional view of an author as "some distant picture or biography on the back of a book" or "just a name." This view is in sharp contrast to the first emergent theme of the stereotyped, foreign author.

Some of the comments from the online discussion help to illustrate students' transformed views of the author, such as one student's question asking how the author and the professor became friends, and the following question about the personal life of the author and the symbolism in the book:

> "Dites-moi s'il vous plaît à propos de votre vie maintenant. Est-ce que vous êtes marié? Est-ce que vous avez des chiens ou des chats? Qu'est-ce que vous aimez faire comme passe-temps? Et l'autre question est: Je veux savoir pourquoi vous avez appelé M'sieur "M'sieur" au lieu d'un nom propre? Merci bien pour votre temps, et j'aime votre livre! C'est originale…☺"

As with the previous two themes of the author as stereotype and native speaker, within these comments we can again gain insight into how the learners view themselves. At this point, the native speaker-author aura seems to have faded, and the learner expresses an identity as a real participant in a social, and literary, community.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study has helped shed light on the construct of identity in language learning. The results suggest that this type of literacy activity has enormous potential for enhancing learners' linguistic, social, cultural and self-awareness on multiple levels and for contributing to the construction of new social identities. Although the activity itself, where learners communicate directly with the author, is not feasible in most educational contexts, this study underscores the importance of providing learners ample access to diverse forms of authentic discourse in which they can engage in a variety of ways. The exposure to and participation in the social practices of the target language provide learners with opportunities to "negotiate the self" and to reflect not only on the ways in which language is used but also on themselves as members of a broader learning community.

## Notes

[1] These were pedagogical decisions made by the instructor and were not part of the design of the research study.
[2] Having already piloted this activity during a previous semester using synchronous computer-mediated communication, the professor decided to use the asynchronous format to obviate the complicated logistics of negotiating a six-hour time difference between France and the U.S. and to minimize stress for the author in having to reply to numerous posts simultaneously.
[3] The exact basis for the stereotyped identity of the French author is unknown. This would be a fascinating direction for further research in order to better understand learners' impressions and how this affects their learning.
[4] Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants.

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## Appendix A
## Questionnaire #1

**READING EXPERIENCE**

1. How do you view yourself as a reader **in your native language?**

I enjoy reading in my free time.

____Strongly agree
____Agree
____So-so
____Disagree
____Strongly disagree

I consider myself an avid reader.

____Strongly agree
____Agree
____So-so
____Disagree
____Strongly disagree

2. How do you view yourself as a reader **in French?**

I really enjoy reading in French.

____Strongly agree
____Agree
____So-so
____Disagree
____Strongly disagree

3. Please describe your experience with reading in French before enrolling in this course.

Mention any books (besides textbooks), short stories, Internet readings, etc. that come to mind.

| Required for classes | Independent reading |
|---|---|
| | |

4. My experience with reading in French in the past has been

____very positive

____positive

____so-so

____rather negative

____negative

5. Please explain your answer to #4.

6. When you read in French, what is the *process* like? What types of strategies do you normally use to understand the text? Please explain in as much detail as possible, giving examples where applicable.

**EXPECTATIONS**

[The answer scale on questions 1-8 below is the same 5-point Likert-type scale as question #1. It was removed to economize space.]

1. I expect the reading of *M'sieur* to be time-consuming.

____Strongly agree

____Agree

____So-so

____Disagree

____Strongly disagree

2. I expect the reading of *M'sieur* to be easy.
3. I expect the reading of *M'sieur* to be interesting.
4. I expect the reading of *M'sieur* to be fun.
5. I expect to learn to read faster.
6. I expect to learn more about French culture.
7. Any other expectations?
8. I like to talk about what I'm reading with other classmates and the instructor.

9. Please complete these sentences.

   I view French authors as_____.

   I view French books as _____.

## Appendix B
## Questionnaire #2

1. Please describe your experience with reading *M'sieur* so far.

2. How do you view the author?

3. How do you view yourself as a reader?

4. Describe your reading strategies and how they have changed since you started reading.

5. Do you feel 'into' the reading? ____ yes ____ sort of ____ no
   Why?

6. Have your expectations changed since the beginning of the novel?

7. If there was one thing you could ask/tell the author of the book, what would it be? Be honest!

## Appendix C
## Questionnaire #3

**BOOK**

1. Did the reading experience meet your expectations? Was it more difficult, more interesting, etc. than you expected it to be? Please explain.

2. Did the story itself meet your expectations? ____ Yes ____No
Please explain.

3. I now feel like a better reader in French than when I started the novel.

____Strongly agree
____Agree
____So-so
____Disagree
____Strongly disagree

4. I am glad we read an entire book rather than a variety of short stories by various authors.

____Strongly agree
____Agree
____So-so
____Disagree
____Strongly disagree

**ONLINE DISCUSSION**

1. How did you feel about the idea of an online discussion with the author prior to the session?

2. How much time did you spend preparing for the session (in and/or outside of class)?

3. How did you feel during the discussion with the author? Please explain in as much detail as possible.

4. What were your impressions of the author during/after the discussion? Please explain.

5. Did the discussion change your impression of the author? ____yes ____no
   If so, how?

6. Did you find the discussion experience useful or rewarding? ____yes ____no
   Please explain.

7. Did the discussion enhance your understanding or appreciation for the book itself?
   ____yes ____no Please explain!

8. Any other comments to add?