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# The use of English by Polish students during French lessons

Użycie języka angielskiego przez polskich uczniów podczas kursu języka francuskiego

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## Abstract

Most studies concerning interference focus on the role of the native language (L1) in second language (L2) acquisition or production. However, an analysis of this aspect [interference] reveals that learners tend to use other languages that have previously been acquired (i.e. L2, L3,...) as sources for building forms in the target language (i.e. L3, L4,...) (Dewaele, 1998; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998). The aim of this paper is to examine the actual role of English during the French course, and this involves presenting the results of a study conducted among a group of Polish students who learnt French in a language school. The study was carried out to obtain information about the way in which participants use their competence in English (all of them acquired English at a B2 or higher level) to speak/learn French. The article will include examples of French words/expressions which are based on the use of English.

Key words: the acquisition of French as L3, interference, the role of English during the French course.

## Abstrakt

Większość badań dotyczących zjawiska interferencji koncentruje się na procesie przyswajania i produkcji zachodzącym pomiędzy językiem ojczystym a nauczanym językiem obcym. Jednakże kursanci czerpią wiedzę

także z innych poprzednio przyswojonych języków (np. J2, J3,...) po to, by budować poprawne formy w języku docelowym (np. J3, J4,...) (Dewaele, 1998; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998). Celem niniejszego artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytanie jaką rolę pełni język angielski podczas kursu języka francuskiego. W artykule zostaną przedstawione wyniki badania pilotażowego przeprowadzonego w grupie polskich studentów uczących się języka francuskiego w szkole językowej. Badanie ma na celu sprawdzenie wpływu znajomości języka angielskiego na proces nauki języka francuskiego (jako J3) i na wypowiedzi w języku francuskim. Artykuł zawiera również przykłady użycia języka francuskiego wynikające z interferencji z języka angielskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: nauka języka francuskiego jako J3, interferencja, rola języka angielskiego w akwizycji języka francuskiego.

## Background

Nowadays our reality is mainly dominated by new technologies and the possibility of getting information. It has been said that the process of globalization is spreading fast, even in poorer countries. The world is changing and so are our lives.

Before the period of transformation in Poland (1989), the knowledge of English was not obligatory to get a job or achieve success. Higher education, i.e. a university degree was enough to have a job. After 1989, the act of changing from the People's Republic of Poland to the Polish Third Republic took place. During the next 20 years' time Poland joined NATO (1999) and the European Union (2004). All the changes in the political system have left their imprint on the field of foreign and second language learning. Good command of English has become a distinctive factor in major recruitment processes — an obligatory qualification for people dreaming of a well-paid job and those who want to succeed. Furthermore, according to the new ordinance of The Ministry of National Education, as of the 2013/2014 academic year all students are obliged to take an exam in English not only after high school (ma-

tura exam) but also at the end of primary school and lower secondary school<sup>1</sup>. It is not surprising, then, that a command of English is treated as a norm today.

The analysis of the labour market pushes the young generation to improve or develop their abilities, skills and knowledge. Many of them start to learn one or a greater number of foreign languages. Therefore, this paper aims at presenting the influence of English on French as a third language from the perspective of Polish students and their needs.

The aim of the study

The subject of language learning strategies (LLS) and interference from the mother tongue to the second acquired language and vice-versa seems to be a thoroughly discussed issue in the field of second language production and acquisition. Researchers still examine the influence between L1→L2 and L2→L1 as the concepts of interference and strategy remain ambiguous (Guion, 2005; Fledge, 1991, 2005; Lord, 2008). However, light is now being shed on another concept, also connected with LLS, that is the actual role of L2 fluency in learning L3. Researchers who focus on this phenomenon (Cenoz, 2003; Dewaele, 1998; Hammarberg, 2001; Letica & Mardešić, 2007; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998) faced the challenge of revisiting and reinvestigating an account of previous research findings and are trying to find the answers to the following questions: firstly, in which areas of language system and, secondly, to what extent does cross-linguistic influence (CLI) take place in third or additional language acquisition (L3/Ln Acquisition).

Inspired by the works on the influence of previously acquired languages on the target one, I decided to conduct a study on a group of Polish students who had already been learning English when they started to learn French. I attempt to find out whether their fluency in English serves as a “scaffolding” or rather whether it is an obstacle to create proper forms

1 Rozporządzenie MEN z dnia 20 sierpnia 2010 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie warunków i sposobu oceniania, klasyfikowania i promowania uczniów i słuchaczy oraz przeprowadzania egzaminów i sprawdzianów w szkołach publicznych oraz z Uzasadnienia podpisu (Dz. U. Nr 156, poz. 1046).

in French. I would also like to establish the actual role of English in the French class.

#### Subjects in the study group

The study was conducted during the winter term of the academic year 2013/2014 among a group of Polish students in a language school. The course included 58 hours of French in the form of two 80-minute lessons twice a week, from October 2013 to February 2014. The study group consisted of 8 participants aged 18-36, who at the beginning of the study were classified as *pré-intermédiaire* (according to CEFR, A2 level). During the study, participants completed the material equivalent to the A2 level. The whole course includes 116 hours of French and lasts 2 semesters. The objectives of the course included acquisition and development of language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as the basic use of lexico-grammatical structures typical of French.

Before conducting the planned study, the level of English was verified according to either Cambridge certificates held by students or the students' participation in a school-based or an academic course of English. Half of the participants had acquired English at a C1 level, one of them was proficient (C2 level) in this language and the remaining three represented a B2+ level.

Motivation for learning French was also checked. In a questionnaire, the participants had four possible answers. The first two were connected with their expectations of a better job and earnings thanks to the knowledge of French. The third one was correlated with their work or study environment; here they had to decide if the decision to learn French had been their own choice or whether they were forced to participate in the course by their superiors. The fourth referred to learning French for pleasure. The results show that almost everyone (seven answers out of eight participants) derived pleasure from learning French. Half of them claimed that they wished to have a better job and higher earnings. No one from that group claimed to have been forced to participate in the course.

## Method and research tools

The data has been assembled with the use of qualitative methods, such as a questionnaire and a personal interview, created by the author. An important part of the results has also been collected by means of tests which were prepared by the author at the end of every lesson and then at the end of a unit. The qualitative methods were applied to obtain information about students' motivation, needs and future aims. The answers show how the participants used their fluency in English to learn French, and with regard to which areas of the language system they found their knowledge of English helpful.

The process of learning a foreign language varied according to participants. Since the actual role of English fluency in French acquisition was to be established, I decided to employ action research. This kind of research is characterized by the diagnosis of a situation in which the researcher finds himself or herself in; he/she also tries to identify any problems, resolve them and improve the process of learning. According to Stringer, participatory action research is a very effective method due to the connections between the study on the one hand, and participants' way of life and their work on the other (1996: 16). A similar point of view was presented when the use of this method was only in its beginning. Its creator, Lewin, wrote in his book: "The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946, reproduced in Lewin, 1948: 202-203). Interestingly, although this quotation dates back to the times since when plenty of new methods have appeared, the idea still seems to be valuable (Harmer, 2008; Łuniewska, 2012).

## Results and discussion

At the end of the first semester, the analysis of the data was made. I grouped all of the results into four categories: phonological interference, orthographic interference, lexical interference and grammatical interference.

Phonological interference is mainly manifested in speaking and re-reading. In French it is indicated usually by recourse to word stress, intonation and speech sounds typical of the language:

<b>French word</b>	<b>French pronunciation</b>	<b>The students' pronunciation (generalization)</b>
absent	[apsã]	[*æbsənt]
direct	[diREkt]	[*daɪ'rekt]
horrible	[ɔɾibl]	[*'hɔ:əb/ɔ:əbl]
important	[ĔpɔRtã]	[*ɪm'pɔ:tnt/ɪm'pɔ:tã]
le fruit	[fRɥi]	[*fru:t]
la radio	[Radjo]	[*'reɪdɪəu]

Table 1.

The correct pronunciation of French words and the attempts of students.

The examples above show that if a French word looks like an English one, students have a tendency to pronounce it according to the acquired rules of English pronunciation. . Sometimes, students are aware of the differences in pronunciation and create forms which are a combination of English and French rules. When combining two systems of pronunciation the students mixed the sounds and applied English pronunciation to French words, still bearing in mind some of the French sounds, as in the words “horrible” and “important”.

Orthographic interference is mainly manifested in writing. There are four French accents for vowels and one accent for consonants. Therefore, it is essential to put accents in their proper places — an incorrect or missing accent is a spelling mistake just as an incorrect or missing letter would be (Lawless, 2014: 1). The participants followed English words patterns and very often forgot about this rule in French and wrote: *age*, *cinema*, *coïncidence*, *education*, *role*, *piece* instead of *âge* (circumflex), *cinéma* (acute accent), *coïncidence* (dieresis or umlaut), *éducation* (acute accent), *rôle* (circumflex) and *pièce* (grave accent). They often forgot that in French there is a need to use an adjective corresponding both to gender (feminine, masculine) and number (singular, plural). For example:

Il est **grand** et **beau**./He is **tall** and **handsome**.

Ils sont **grands** et **beaux**./ They are **tall** and **handsome**.

Elle est **grande** et **belle**./ She is **tall** and **beautiful**.

Elles sont **grandes** et **belles**./ They are **tall** and **beautiful**.

Spelling mistakes also occurred, the most frequent ones being: *comfortable, modest, popular, rich, carrot, class, family, music, tiger* instead of *confortable, modeste, populaire riche, la carotte, la classe, la famille, la musique, le tigre*.

Lexical interference is manifested in speaking and writing. Users of French borrow English words' meaning, which is not the same, and put it into a French word:

<b>French word</b>	<b>French meaning (CORRECT)</b>	<b>Intended meaning (NOT CORRECT)</b>
Marché	market	march
Messe	Mass	mess
minut	midnight	minute
Neveu	nephew	never
Thé	tea	the
Travailler	to work	to travel
Rester	stay on	to rest

Table 2.

Lexical interference of English to French words.

In all of the above examples, the transfer is negative because the word forms in French are very similar or identical to those in English, but “the similarity of form is actually superficial: such pairs of words are known as false friends/faux amis or false cognates (words in two different languages which are wrongly assumed to originate from a common root)” (Choroleeva, 2009: 7).

Grammar interference occurs in writing when L2 influences L3, for example in the use of pronouns and determiners and of word order. In French there are forms such as: *bouteille de vin, carafe de vin, changer de place, changer de train, coûte par heure, coûte par kilomètre*, whereas in English

these expressions have the following forms — *bottle of wine, carafe of wine, change place (seat), change trains, cost per hour, cost per kilometer*. However, modifications to word order are also visible. In French, most adjectives go after the word they modify. Such word order is not typical of English, so as in the examples:

<b>French order</b>	<b>English order</b>
bus direct	direct bus
carte Visa	Visa card
chambre plus spacieuse	more spacious room
club de musique française	club with French music
connexion internet	internet connection
restaurant français	French restaurant

Table 3.

The difference in word order in French and in English.

French and English do not belong to the same language group. Sometimes this feature seems to help students, sometimes it is an obstacle to creating proper forms in French. When asked about the cause of the above-mentioned situation, the study participants pointed at interference as the reason for the mistakes they made in French.

At the end of the study, students filled in a questionnaire in which I asked them in what way they used their fluency in English to learn French. Regarding phonological interference, four out of eight participants said that English rules were not useful in French pronunciation, one of eight was not sure of the answer, and the remaining three claimed that English rules were of help. If we analyze orthographic inference, five students definitely rejected English as a source of proper forms in French, one said that he did not know whether English influenced this area of the French language and two of them claimed that the English language was useful for them in that respect. Concerning lexical inference, the majority of students (six out of eight) claimed that they benefited because of the knowledge of English words, one respondent was undecided, and one person stated that English was a barrier. With regard to grammar inference, surprisingly, the

students' answers were similar. Six of them based their target structures on their English equivalents, one was not able to say whether English helped him and one claimed that English was an obstacle for him. The last question was: Do you use your fluency in English to learn French? Six of eight participants said "yes", one of them was not sure and chose "I do not know". Only one person from that group ticked the answer "no". What seems surprising is the firmness in the selection of the answers by the study participants. Students who found English to be an obstacle to creating proper forms in French, or those who were not able to determine whether their English affected their French in a positive or negative way, marked just two answers ("no" or "don't know") with regard to all the possible questions.

## Conclusion

The results of the study show that students tend to use two languages during their French lessons — both French and English. The majority of them claim that they benefit from their fluency in English and that it helps them express their ideas in French. They are aware that English and French do not belong to the same linguistic group; however, this does not seem to be an obstacle for them to use the rules of the English language to create the target forms in French.

The use of English provides students with an opportunity to refer to their linguistic means (which are already known) and they rely on them while learning French. It is worth mentioning that despite the positive consequences of using English during lessons of French, it is demanded that students strive to eliminate excessive use of L2 during L3 classes and try to substitute English with French.

It seems to be justified to conduct similar studies with a representative number of participants to verify whether the assumptions and the results presented in this study are true when a larger group of people is considered, as the occurrence of English during French lessons still remains a controversial issue. The use of L2 in L3 classes has both its advantages and disadvantages; hence it is worth paying more attention to this field of study and carrying out further research.

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