CROSS-LINGUISTIC INTERFERENCE OF FRENCH TO ENGLISH IN INDONESIAN STUDENTS OF FRENCH DEPARTMENT OF UNNES

Ahmad Yulianto
French Department
Semarang State University

Abstract

Despite the fact that English is the first foreign language learnt by French Department’s students of UNNES, this language doesn’t seem to enjoy the place it is supposed to have. Students of French Department of UNNES have mostly learned both English and French since they were in high school. However, it doesn’t mean that they understand English as well as they understand French. Regardless lexical and grammatical similarity between these two languages, mastering English is quite problematic to most students. This paper is adopted from the study attempting to investigate how currently-learned foreign language (French) influences, or not to say overrides, previously-learned one (English). Two groups of 28 students were analyzed in terms of their English lexical, grammatical abilities and pronunciation. The results indicate that French (L3) has a great influence on English (L2) of learners who have had more exposure to French (L3). The results also suggest that French exposure (L3) seems to have influenced learners’ ability to use their knowledge of L3 in order to overcome lexical difficulties in L2. It is disadvantageous to some degree since English and French share numerous lexically similar words which are totally different in use. In addition, it was also found that most students fail to pronounce English words correctly especially when these words also exist in French.

Keywords: cross-linguistic interference, lexical, second language (L2) and third language (L3)

Introduction

French is the second foreign language learned in Indonesia, along with Japanese, Arabic, German and Chinese. Unlike English which is a primary subject at school, in most high schools French is only taught in a certain program namely Kelas Bahasa (Language Program). Indeed French is given in Science Program but it is relatively few.

Over the years in the teaching of English at Foreign Languages and Literatures Department (Jurusan Bahasa dan Sastra Asing) of Semarang State University, a thought-provoking problem seems to have arisen in French Language Education Section (Prodi Pendidikan Bahasa Perancis). No such a problem appears to have happened to the Arabic, Japanese and Chinese Department’s students. Most French Department’ students make pronunciation mistakes for words which have similar corresponding words in French. For instance: ‘impossible’ is pronounced as [ɛposable] instead of [imposibәl]; noun plural form like in the word ‘sentences’ is pronounced [sãtã] instead of [sentensis]; and ‘government’ is mistaken for [gouvernement].
Problems also arise in terms of tenses especially when using the Simple Present Tense and the Present Continuous Tense which are not rigorously defined in French. When asked “What are you doing?”, most students would answer “I study English” instead of “I am studying English.” These are just a few examples of noticeable mistakes made by French Department’ students.

Historically most French Department’ students come from Language Program (Kelas Bahasa) where they learned French. Considering these facts, it can be said that most French Department’ students have been sufficiently exposed to foreign languages including English and French. They have learned English for at least 6 years and French approximately 3 years. Regardless the learning method utilized at school and how these students acquired their English and French, interference between these two languages occurs.

Studies have shown that both the learner’s native and non-native languages can be the sources of interference when acquiring a new language (Cenoz, 2001; Hammarberg, 2001; Möhle, 1989; Ringbom, 1987, 2001). Although a variety of factors have been identified which seem to determine the extent to which and the way in which the learner’s native and non-native languages influence the acquisition of an additional language, there is still no clear understanding of the importance each factor has in the acquisition process. While some researchers have identified L2 proficiency and L2 exposure as playing a role in determining how a non-native language influences third language (L3) acquisition (Hammarberg, 2001; Ringbom, 1987; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998), it appears that no study has specifically assessed the role these two factors play.

This study aims to discover how French (as currently-learned language) influence the comprehension of English (as previously-learned language). To be more specific, it attempts to answer these following questions: (1) How far does French concept of lexicon interfere with English one? (2) How far does French concept of tenses influence English one? In this case the discussion is limited to the Simple Present Tense, the Present Progressive Tense, the Present Perfect Tense and To Be since they are mostly misunderstood and confused by French department students. (3) How far does French’s pronunciation influence English pronunciation? It is hypothesized that the more proficient the students are in French and the more exposure they have had to it, the greater influence of French on English comprehension. Simply put, the better their French is, the worse their English will be.

**Methodology**

**Subjects of the Study**

Twenty eight students of French Department enrolled in two English classes were involved in this study. Most of them are in their 5th semester and few in the 8th semester.

**Procedure**

The participants were first asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their language learning history. It was expected that this questionnaire would reveal the order of their
foreign language learning. Is it through English French Order or the other way around French English Order?

Secondly, they were required to do a pronunciation test in which they read English words and passages. This process was recorded and the data collected were then analyzed to discover whether the incorrect pronunciation was due to French (L3) influence or not. It was expected that this test would reveal the extent of interference in phonological aspect.

Thirdly, they had to fill out a vocabulary-similarity awareness test. In this test the participants were provided with French words. They had to find the English corresponding words. This test served to find out whether the participants were aware of English – French similarity in terms of vocabulary. This is important since we aim to measure French influence on English comprehension.

Fourthly, they were asked to translate simple sentences from French to English. The sentences to be translated contain vocabulary and structure found in these two languages.

Theoretical Background

Cross Linguistic Interference is usually described as the negative influence of a learner’s other languages on the target language. Interference is a deviation which takes places orally or in written forms. It is by nature a common phenomenon in foreign language learning (Trekova: 320).

Interference may involve an interaction of mother tongue (L1) to foreign language (L2); previously-learned foreign language to the following one; or the more acquired foreign language to the less acquired one.

Interference generally takes place when a learner’s knowledge in the language being learned is limited. It occurs in all linguistic aspects such as phonetic, morphologic, lexical and syntaxes. Phonetic interference refers to a situation when a language learner uses a sound of another language when he or she is learning a certain language (Hamers: 178).

While lexical interference is when a bilingual person unconsciously uses a word from another language, grammatical interference takes place when a speaker unconsciously uses another language’s structure.

Many researches have shown that a bilingual or even polyglot experience cross linguistic interference. It varies according language acquisition age, language mastery and similarity level of the languages being learned (Proverbio, Roberta, Alberto: 1).

Considering that many people in the world speak more than one language, cross linguistic interference happens not only from L1 to L2 but also L2 to L3. (Dewaele, Williams & Hammerberg, 1998).

In their researches Williams & Hammerberg found out that recency factor plays an important role. Moreover, they explained that L2 is automatically activated if the speaker has just used it recently. Therefore, access to L2 database in the learner’s mind is also open. As such, cross linguistic interference may result from the most recent used or the most often used language of the learner (Williams & Hammerberg, 2001: 23).
Tremblay stated that proficiency and exposure to L2 determine L3 acquisition (Hammarberg, 2001; Ringbom, 1987; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998).

According to Cenoz in *Multilingual Acquisition*, (Cenoz, 1997) multilingual acquisition is a complex process since it involves various factors such as languages being learned, environment and the order of language learning (Cenoz, 1997: 278).

In the L2 acquisition there are only two possibilities: L1 and L2 are acquired in a series or simultaneously. L3 acquisition involves four possible orders i.e.: 1) these 3 languages are acquired in a series one after the other (L1→L2→L3); 2) L1 is acquired first then L2 and L3 learned all at once (L1→Lx/Ly/Lz); 3) L1 and L2 acquisitions take place at the same time before L3 is acquired (Lx/Ly→L3); and 4) learners acquire these 3 languages all at once. (Lx/Ly/Lz) (Cenoz, 2000). The diagram below depicts the interaction of L1, L2, and L3.

![Multilingual Acquisition Diagram](image_url)

It appears that Indonesian learners undergo a bit different process of language acquisition. Yet, it is still related to the afore-mentioned sequences particularly no 3. Mother tongue (Javanese) and Indonesian language are mostly acquired simultaneously while foreign language(s) like English, French, Arabic, German and Japanese are learned in a series. However, it is also possible that first foreign and second foreign are learned together.

Regardless the disadvantages it may cause, interference may bring a positive effect as well. Multilingual learners often have better meta-linguistic awareness which can help them internalize new grammatical structures more easily. Learning vocabulary might also be easier at times because of the word roots shared across typologically similar languages.

**Discussion of the Findings**

**Language Learning History**

The questionnaire on language learning history shows the subjects studied are polyglot. Twenty six out of 28 participants have acquired/learned 4 languages namely Javanese, Indonesian, English and French. Javanese and Indonesian are generally acquired almost simultaneously while English is the first foreign language learned and French the second. It is also interesting to note that only 4 out of 28 participants do not come from Language Program (*Kelas Bahasa*). Two other participants stated that they have only acquired/learned 3 languages: Indonesian, English and French.
Twenty two participants claimed that they started to learn English in Junior High School while 6 learned English for the first time in Elementary School. Twenty four participants stated that they have been learning French since Senior High School. Only 4 claimed that they got to know French in college. Eighteen participants still use English in their daily life although it is done in a passive way like watching TV, listening to music and looking for references while the rest prefer to do it in Bahasa Indonesia.

It is interesting to note, however, that only 10 participants stated that they use French outside the class. Ten is registered at Yahoo.fr and 2 like listening to French songs.

Twenty participants stated their linguistic concept of Bahasa Indonesia inhibits their foreign language comprehension. Furthermore, 20 participants stated that they sometimes find it confusing learning English and French at the same time and the other 8 stated that they do not know.

After all, most participants stated that learning French and English at the same time now as they are in college is sometimes confusing.

**Vocabulary Similarity Awareness**

Vocabulary Similarity Awareness test revealed that all participants were familiar with the words asked. Yet, they were not sure with their correct pronunciation and use.

French influence was easily recognized when the participants took the wrong choice of English words provided. Apparently they relied simply on orthographic knowledge and recognition. For example : They chose pain (Eng) instead of bread (Eng) for French corresponding le pain.

**Tenses Comprehension Test**

As to Tenses Comprehension test, the result was quite surprising. The test administration seems to influence the result. When the test of English Tenses was given first, all participants did not have difficulties using the Simple Present Tense. Twenty one out of 28) knew how to use the Present Continuous Tense correctly. All participants knew how to use To Be correctly. Yet, almost all of them still made mistakes in using the Present Perfect Tense.

Nevertheless, when they were assigned to translate loose and simple French sentences into English, the result was totally different. Twenty five participants made mistakes. All participants failed to decide whether to use the Simple Present Tense, Present Continuous Tense or Present Perfect Tense when they were asked to translate a sentence in Le présent. It also occurred to the sentence in Le passé composé. Most participants were confused to translate it either into the Simple Past Tense or the Present Perfect Tense. The Use of Avoir and Être also influenced them in the English translation. J’ai 28 ans (literally I have 28 years of age) was translated into I have 28 years old instead of I am 28 years old. It is understandable since in French we use avoir (literally ‘to have’) and être (literally ‘To Be’) to express what is known as To Be in English.
Pronunciation Test

The pronunciation test shows that despite Indonesian phonological influence, French pronunciation seems to have embedded in the participants’ mind. This following table shows English sounds which the participants cannot pronounce well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French Corresponding Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>{Æ} in … (apple, that)</td>
<td>Sound {Æ} is unknown in French. Besides, letter a in French is pronounced normally like a in Bahasa Indonesia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{əU} in … (ago, low)</td>
<td>This sound doesn’t exist in French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{əU} in … now</td>
<td>This sound doesn’t exist in French. Participants tend to pronounce it like … {no}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{eI} in … fate, great</td>
<td>Pronounced like {I} in … (sit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{Iə} in … beer, cheer</td>
<td>Pronounced like simple {i} in … (see)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{θ} in … thin, nothing</td>
<td>Participants find it difficult to pronounce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{θʃ} in … just, edge</td>
<td>Participants identify it as French θ which is totally different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{r} in … radio, brother</td>
<td>It is often mistaken for French deep r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{ŋ} in … (sing)</td>
<td>Nasal sound exists in French and applies when i, e, a, o followed by n or m. Participants tend to take it for granted everytime they come across English words.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

The fact that French (L3) is the main source of Cross Linguistic Interference in French Department’ students of UNNES can be explained by various factors. Firstly, the students’ French proficiency level and exposure may have been quite high so that their English is diminishing gradually. This seems to confirm what Williams & Hammerberg reiterated as Recency Factor.

Since the participants have already been learning their L3 for at least five semesters or more at the time of the study, it is possible that French (L3) has been deeply embedded. This is, in turn, taking over the place that English one had.

Secondly, the students were not able to take advantage of French – English similarities in vocabulary and structure. Loan translation occurs here.

Thirdly, the students made morph-syntactic error when dealing with the tenses of French and English at the same time. They have difficulties using different concept of tenses of French and English.
Finally, in spite of the fact that being adult learners, the students’ articulation organ has been established, the result suggests they are strongly influenced by French phonetic sound. This makes them difficult to pronounce correctly sounds which do not exist in French. More worryingly, they tend to pronounce French-orthographically similar English words the way they do in French.

Although these results have shed a light on French – English Cross Linguistic Interference, it should be kept in mind that this study emphasizes lexically, phonologically and grammatically only. It does not investigate the relation of between the learners’ French overall proficiency and their English competence which is worth studying somehow. Perhaps, it would also be interesting to compare French Department students’ proficiency in English and their counterparts from Japanese, Arabic, and Chinese Department since they are also learning foreign language(s) besides English. And lastly, it is very unlikely that these results apply to other setting as Grosjean (1998) put it that environmental setting also determines which foreign languages known will be activated by learners.

References


References
