The Coexistence of Foreign Languages: A major Impact on the Learning Process.

Case Study: L1 Students of English at Oran 2 University

التعايش بين اللغات الأجنبية: أثر كبير على عملية التعلم

طلبة السنة الأولى انجليزية جامعة وهران 2 نموذجا

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Abstract

Acquiring foreign languages has always been an attractive issue for many of our students. It is viewed as a key to an inestimable number of opportunitiesboth on the professional and personal sides. A language is a major –but not the sole- instrument of communication among humans. It generates attachment, mutual cultural understanding, cooperation and tolerance. But the learning process of any foreign language requires not only aptitudes in the four skills of listening , reading, speaking and writing but also an ability to primarily think in the new language. Resorting to translating one's ideas from the mother tongue or another already acquired foreign language is a major obstacle to an appropriate language acquisition process. This is particularly the scope of this paper which endeavours to underscore the difficulties encountered by L1 students of English who think in French and express the thought in English. A handicap that can be overcome by teaching the learners to do without translation and work more on an original production in English, whether it be written or oral.

Keywords: English as foreign language, interference, learning process, linguistic profile.

الملخص

لطالما كان اكتساب اللغات الأجنبية مشكلة جذابة للعديد من طلابنا. يُنظر إليه على أنه مفتاح لعدد لا يقدر بثمن من الفرص على الصعيدين المهني والشخصي. اللغة هي عنصر رئيسي -لكنها ليست الأساس الوحيد -للتواصل بين البشر. إنه يولد التعلق والتفاهم الثقافي المتبادل والتعاون والتسامح. لكن عملية تعلم أي لغة أجنبية لا تتطلب فقط مهارات في المهارات الأربع وهي الاستماع والقراءة والتحدث والكتابة ولكن أيضًا القدرة على التفكير في اللغة الجديدة بشكل أساسي. يمثل اللجوء إلى ترجمة الأفكار من اللغة الأم أو من لغة أجنبية أخرى مكتسبة بالفعل عقبة رئيسية أمام عملية اكتساب اللغة المناسبة. هذا هو نطاق هذه الورقة بشكل خاص الذي يسعى إلى التأكيد على الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية من المستوى الأول الذين يفكرون باللغة الفرنسية ويعبرون عن الفكر باللغة الإنجليزية. عائق يمكن التغلب عليه بتعليم المتعلمين الاستغناء عن الترجمة والعمل أكثر على إنتاج أصلي باللغة الإنجليزية، سواء كان كتابيًا أو شفهيًا.

الكلمات الدالة: اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، التدخل، عملية التعلم، الملف اللغوي.

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1. Introduction

If speaking one's mother tongue is inherent and occurs naturally as persons grow up in their environment, learning a foreign language is another matter. It is undoubtedly a valuable gain for the learner as it is generally undertaken for academic or societal ends (Bourne et al.,1998:3). It remains however more complex. Much more fascinating and intricateis learning two foreign languages or more. With English becoming a lingua franca because of science, technology and international diplomacy, an increasing number of people choose to learn ittoday(Jenkins, 2009: 200-07).Similarly at Oran 2 university, we have more and more students at the department of English. This clearly indicates an increasing interest in this foreign language; however, there seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what extent these students are aware of the hardships generated by an excessive dependence on a prior knowledge of French.

2. The Linguistic Profile of L1 Students

In the light of a long teaching experience of English, we can by and large assert that the learning and the practice of this foreign language among L1 students at the department of English at the aforementioned university remains a tricky question for both the learner and the teacher. The way a great number of learners use English in class is inaccurate, often generating a rift between the thought the student has and the words he uses to express it. This is viewed as a serious handicap to an effective learning and practice of this second foreign language for Algerian university students, an aspect that deserves a discussion of causes and solutions.

By and large, the difficulties faced by learners in class whether it be oral or written can be divided into two types. The first is related to the ignorance of the new language, something understandable if we refer to the normal process of learning any foreign language. The second is more complex. It is the direct result of the contact that exists between different languages. Here, the obstacles the students go through are of a different nature.This is primarily due to the already established presence of two other linguistic systems, the mother tongue and French and, in the majority of cases, this is going to interfere with the acquisition of the different forms of the new language. In this respect, some questions arise here which are related not only to the process of learning but also to the learner himself.

-What is the linguistic profile of an L1 student learning English?

-Which type of mistakes recur throughout the student's written and oral works?

-Are these interfering mechanisms of French (and sometimes of Arabic too) with

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English essentially syntactic or semantic? In other words, are we here in front of a student who finds difficulties with grammaticality i.e."the extent to which a 'string' of language conforms with a set of given rules" (Chapman and Routledge, 2009:1) to make correct sentences, or are we concerned with a learner who knows those rules but who does not know how to reach a meaningful sentence?

These are interesting questions to answer to try and explain a particular linguistic behaviour that characterises mainlyL1students learning English. One crucial point to take into account is that these learners had already been in contact with at least two other languages: their mother tongue and another foreign language, French. The lattercan be regarded as second language because of two main reasons: First,it is present in the child's auditory environmentquite early. A child of four years old does not speak French but hears the others speak it: on television and radio, during discussions among adults at home, outside when hearing prices of goods in markets, when people exchange phone numbers, when manipulating smartphones and other electronic devices (today children start much earlier than before), when hearing names of social amenities and administrations, and the list can be longer. This gives birth to a preliminary contact that, as the subject grows up, makes of French more a second language than a foreign language he learns at school in an academic setting as it is the case with English (Derakhshan,2015:2112-17).

The second reason is the early time the learner comes in contactwith academic French at school. The learning process starts as early as the fourth year at the primary level. What we noticed in this context is that when parents were, some years ago, asked to choose between French and English for their children at the primary school, their choice was in no way conclusive. We can thus assure that within the chronological order of the learning process, French is undoubtedly the second language at school.

English comes in the third position, though today things arechanging. In fact, the learner becomes acquainted with his language for the first time only when he is twelve or thirteen years old i.e. two years after he had begun learning French. It is evident that out of an average of fifteen students per class, there are two or three learners whose mother tongue is not Arabic and consequently, their linguistic profile does not correspond to the one we determined earlier in this paper. However, these cases remain insignificant in terms of number, something which allows us to keep the aforementioned profile as illustrative. We refer here to the students whose mother tongue is Tamazight.

3. Syntactic Vs Semantic obstacles

To tackle the aspect of the linguistic profile helps considerably understand the student and the way he uses English as second foreign language.In fact, the two

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remaining questions are closely related. The types of mistakes that recur in the student's written and oral works are mainly of syntactic and semantic natures. Let us have a look at some of the most common errors found among L1students:

1- He **held**his promise.
2- He **missed**his promise.
3- She **was out of her**.
4- He **has** 20 yearsold.
5- I will **pass** an exam tomorrow.

If we closely examine these examples it is clear that something goes wrong somewhere. A look at the student while writing them in class helps to understand quickly: students heavily rely on translation in the absence of a dictionary of English. Most of them use French-English or Arabic-English dictionaries. The thought is initially born in one of these two languages and the English words used to express it lose their ability to convey the message of the student.Instead, the listener or the reader of such sentences or phrases either encounters difficulties to get what he is supposed to understand and tries to read between the lines or ends up understanding something completely different from the original idea. As Wardhaugh puts it:"While people do usually know what language they speak, they may not alwayslay claim to be fully qualified speakers of that language" (Wardhaugh,2006: 27).Thus when the learnersays: he held his promise or he missed his promise, in fact, he wants to say he kept his promise or he broke his promise. Here the sentence, is syntactically correct. The learner knows the different parts of speech necessary to write a correct sentence and the order according to which theparts of speech should be presented i.e. subject, verb, and complement. The problem is semantic.Although syntactically correct, this statement is not meaningful. This happened because the student thought in French and wrote in English. Each word in the source language was translated exactly into its counterpart in the target or receptor language.

Initially, the sentence is:**IL a tenusapromesse.** The same applies to the second sentence: **IL a manqué à sapromesse**. He missed his promise. The interference of French with English is also clear in the following examples:

-<u>She was out of her</u> originating from the French **Elle était hors d'elle** instead of *she was very angry or she was beside herself with rage.*

<u>- He has 20 years old</u> is a word -for- word translation of **IL a 20 ans** instead of *he is 20 years old.*

-<u>I will pass an exam tomorrow</u>corresponds to the French **Je vais passer un examendemain**instead of *I will sit for an exam tomorrow*.

In the last example, the meaning is completely different. While the student's

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thought in French is to sit for an exam (the result of the exam is not known yet), his sentence in English means he will succeed in this exam.

4. The Issue of Deceptive Similarities

Another equally frequent phenomenon observed during the long teaching period is the problem of deceptive similarities between English and French equivalents (both nouns and verbs). The student is misled by the resemblance in forms, thinks this justifies their use, and the final message is consequently meaningless or completely different from the initial idea. Let us consider the following:

1- I had some caf é this morning: the learner uses the place when he wants to speak about the beverage. French **caf é** in this case corresponds to English *coffee.*

2- The teacher resumed the important points of the lecture: the student means *he summarized the important points of the lecture.*

3- I could not support that situation anymore: what is meant is *I could not bear that situation anymore.*

4- The party was amazing, so we rested until the end: the learner means*the party was amazing, so we stayed until the end.*

5- I supplied him to help me: the idea is *I begged him to help me.*

The interfering mechanisms of French (and sometimes of Arabic too) are clear at another level: the structure and orthography. Let us look at these example:

1- You have money – Have you money? **Vous avez de l'argent - Avez-vous de l'argent ?**instead of : *You have money. Do you have any money?*

The learner reproduces an exact copy of the grammatical structure of the French sentence using English words. He seems to forget that in each language"sentences are structured out of words, phrases and clauses, each of which belongs to a specific grammatical category and serves a specific grammatical function within the sentence containing it" (Atkinson et al., 1999: 247).The resulting statement is consequently incorrect.Similarly, the student uses words such as futur, superbe, magnifique, affaires andsplendideinstead of future, superb, magnificent, affairs and splendid. Finally, words like *news, means, information* and*fish* are used both in the singular and plural forms because this is possible in French (and Arabic too):

-News : Une nouvelle- des nouvelles.

- Means : Un moyen – des moyens.

- Information :Une information- des informations.

-Fish : Unpoisson –des poissons. (Fishes in English refers to species not to numbers as the student suggests).

These are nothing but a few examples of some of the most common and recurrent errors L1students frequently fall into, both in the writing and oral practice of

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English as second foreign language. This foreign language enters the linguistic system of the learner only when two other languages have long been established. The interference between these three languages is then a normal phenomenon as long as it occurs rarely. When it becomes the main tool for learning and practising the new language, this turns problematic. The learner who relies on translation neither managesto translate because this is completely another field that requires other aptitudes, nor does he acquire the new language correctly. In so doing,he tries to find a way between the two languages that he considers effective for an appropriate learning. It is deemed necessary today to urge the students to read in English from the first year, to encourage the use of English dictionaries instead of French-English or Arabic-English ones to achieve an appropriate learning outcome. In other words, students should primarily learn how to think in English.

5. Conclusion

Regardless of the purpose of their study, the learners under review seem to pay more attention to form than to content while acquiring English as a second foreign language. The observations made during the teaching years show an obvious tendency to rely on an already acquired knowledge of French. Bilingualism appears therefore to be a double-edged swordand despite the growing number of bilinguals in the world, “we are still a long way from understanding how second languages are learned, why many individuals have difficulty in reaching high levels of proficiency in a second language, or even what the best pedagogical approach might be”(Gass and Mackay, 2012:1).

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