

Exploring Language Transfer of Learning French as a Second Foreign Language under the Theory of Trilingual Acquisition

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Abstract. Chinese universities provide courses in learning French as second language to undergraduate English majors. French plays an important role in the professional courses for undergraduate English majors as a choice for second foreign language courses. Based on the trilingual acquisition theory, this study focuses on the phenomenon of language transfer in learning French as a second language from the perspective of learners. Through the research and analysis of the phenomenon of the transfer of English majors' second foreign language, the influential factors of the transfer of English majors' second foreign language are obtained. Meanwhile, through the empirical research of English majors' second-foreign language French learning, the influence of language transfer on the second foreign French learning has been summarized. In addition, the current situation and obstacles to English majors' second foreign language learning are studied and some learning suggestions are given. Finally, the research results, limitations, and prospects are listed.

Keywords: Trilingual acquisition theory, Second foreign language French learning; English majors, Language transfer.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, an increasing number of learners are engaged in multilingual learning to improve their academic ability and career competitiveness. In order to cultivate qualified "English plus French" bilingual talents, the study of students' trilingual acquisition has a strong guiding significance for English majors learning French as a third language. China has seen an increase in demand for compound foreign language talents in recent years due to the country's rapid development of its international publicity work and the ongoing enhancement of its connections with other nations. Currently, college students aspire to learn two or more foreign languages, because they can no longer keep up with China's current rate of development with only one foreign language. For Chinese students, Chinese is the mother tongue in most cases, while English is the second language and French is the third language. Under the background of multilingual learning, it is necessary to study the phenomenon of language transfer in the process of language learning under the guidance of trilingual acquisition theory.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Current Situation of Research

Recent research on trilingual acquisition has primarily concentrated on trilingual interlingual studies, lexical transfer studies, morphosyntactic transfer studies, trilingual acquisition and teaching studies. Trilingual acquisition theory is based on second language acquisition theory. To address the notion of trilingual acquisition, the study findings of second language acquisition theory must be examined.

Lingmei Zhou advocated for trilingual acquisition to be recognized as a distinct research subject and suggested broadening its research scope for a more comprehensive investigation [1]. Zhang Shuang et al. explored the similarities and differences in English and Russian grammar based on the theory of trilingual acquisition. They also discussed strategies to prevent negative transfer from

English to Russian during the learning process [2]. Ma Mingxin et al. identified the issue of language transfer among Chinese-speaking English major students learning French as a third language. They conducted numerous empirical studies and proposed appropriate solutions. This study also offered innovative concepts for implementating French instruction as a secondary foreign language [3].

He Xinyi and Huang Ying conducted a survey on first-year English major college students who were learning Spanish as a second language. Starting with Spanish phonological errors, researchers utilized comparative research methods to discover that Chinese-speaking students experienced negative transfer from their native dialects, leading to confusion between consonants "n" and "l" in their Spanish phonological learning. When acquiring a third language (L3), learners are influenced by the transfer of their first language (L1), second language (L2), and the regional language [4]. Paul de Nijs did a follow-up study on a two-year-old American child who was raised in a trilingual environment since birth, speaking Spanish, English, and French and studied how language exposure patterns and parents' language techniques impact a child's learning of three languages. The results demonstrated that the boy successfully mastered all three languages, even though he favored English, indicating that the child was growing up with full exposure to all three languages and that his living with his family, which was the main factor prompting his language development [5]. Eloi Puig-Mayenco et al. examined how does previous language experience impact adult trilingual acquisition, focusing on morphosyntactic transfer in a systematic review of transfer studies in trilingual acquisition, with offering an initial framework for behavioral studies, integrating trilingual acquisition with language transfer, and providing significant reference value [6].

Xiaoyu Yang analyzed faults in English writing made by college students who are native Chinese speakers and explored strategies to mitigate the impact of negative language transfer on English writing based on the theory of language transfer and proposed recommendations [7]. Aisong Yi researched seven factors that facilitating native language transfer, such as linguistic factors, psycholinguistic factors, psychosocial factors, individual differences, developmental factors, and input frequency. The study delved into the intricate connection between one's native language and a second language [8]. Chevalier conducted a study using two children to investigate the impact of language input and home environment on trilingual acquisition. The study involved thorough data collecting and analysis [9]. The literature review of Murphy Shirin analyzed the phenomenon of L2 transfer in third language acquisition within the broader context of cross-linguistic influence. The study of language transfer was introduced, followed by an examination of the variables involved when two or more languages intersect [10].

2.2. Significance of Research

The research mentioned above commonly integrated theory with practice and conducted numerous empirical studies to offer examples. Trilingual learning is mostly examined through the lens of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners due to its novelty. A large number of studies on trilingual acquisition in foreign nations, focusing on the development of three languages in newborns and toddlers from multilingual homes through interviews and questionnaires.

Within the framework of trilingual acquisition theory, there is an ample opportunity for additional investigation into the phenomenon of language transfer among third-language learners. The researcher will investigate language transfer in the acquisition of French as a second foreign language by English majors through an empirical study with the use of online questionnaire.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Overview of Trilingual Acquisition Theory

In this theoretical framework, the learner is acquiring a third language (L3) in addition to their native language (L1) and other languages they have already mastered or partially mastered (L2). This phenomenon is named as "trilingual acquisition." Trilingual acquisition is the process of acquiring a third language in a multilingual setting, based on second language acquisition theory, which refers to

a language or languages currently being learned in addition to the learner's mother tongue and the second language already mastered. For instance, Chinese can be referred to as the first language and the second foreign language for English major students. French is the third language being acquired, and English is the second language that has not been fully grasped yet.

The contemporary research community has extensively and profoundly studied several theoretical perspectives of SLA through empirical investigation. Trilingual acquisition theories elucidate the fundamental principles that learners follow when acquiring a third language. Language transfer in trilingual acquisition has demonstrated that Chinese, English, and French are interconnected and mutually beneficial, rather than existing in isolation. Chinese, a native language, has a specific impact on French learners studying it as a second foreign language. English, as a second language, is in the same Indo-European language family as French. Also, it has a greater influence on French learners studying it as a second foreign language.

3.2. Overview of Language Transfer Theory

Within the theoretical framework of trilingual acquisition, Chinese and English have various impacts on the acquisition of French as a third language. These impacts pertain to the concept of "language transfer." The term "transfer" originated in the realm of psychology. When two languages share similar rules, it enhances the acquisition of a second language. When the rules of two languages are significantly divergent and hinder second language learning, it is referred to as a "negative effect". Language transfer is influenced by the accurate application of acquired language habits and rules to the target language.

When English majors learn French as a second foreign language, they will experience both positive and negative transfer. English majors in Chinese universities reside in a social setting where Chinese is their native language, and English is their second language, which they have not yet fully mastered. Within the theoretical framework of trilingual acquisition, Chinese and English can influence English majors' acquisition of French as a third language, potentially resulting in language transfer.

4. Case Study

4.1. Research Design

This questionnaire aims to explore learners' cognition and experience of language transfer in the process of learning French. The researcher conducted a preliminary survey on 17 students in the second foreign language French class of Grade 2020. With a sample size of 152, the final SPSS analysis demonstrates that the questionnaire's overall quality is at an acceptable level. The questionnaire comprises 18 questions and has a total sample size of 152. It covers several issues, including learners' French learning background, the impact of positive language transfer, and ways to mitigate the consequences of negative language transfer.

4.2. Research Analysis

The initial question pertains to the background in studying French. Survey data in Figure 1 indicates that 88.82% of respondents think that English has the most significant impact on learning French as a third language, whereas 11.18% say that Chinese, their mother tongue, has the most influence.

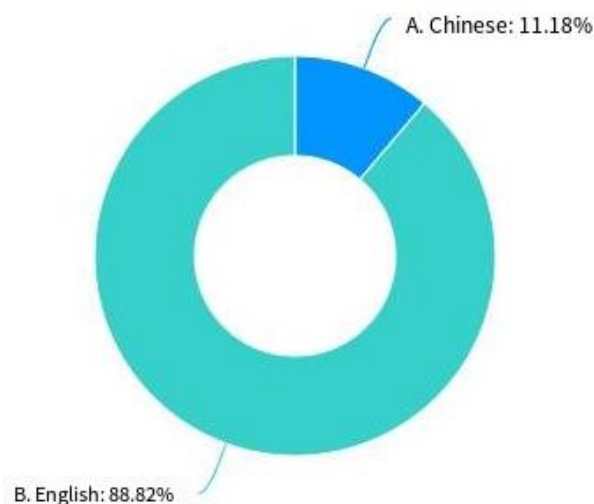


Figure 1. The impact that Chinese and English have on French acquisition

Chinese, belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family, is a logographic language and is considered an isolated language. It differs significantly from the Indo-European languages such as English and French. Chinese vocabulary is unique in that it does not involve plurals, parts of speech, or tenses. The impact of Chinese on French language learning is not as significant as that of English.

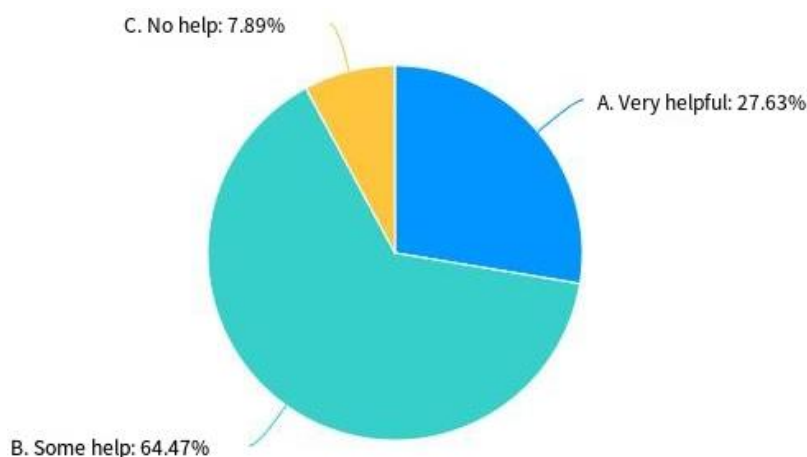


Figure 2. The extent to which English cognition helps French learning

Simultaneously, as shown in Figure 2, 27.63% of individuals believe that English cognition is very helpful for the acquisition of French, while 64.47% consider it somewhat helpful, and 7.89% find that it is of no help.

The second factor is the influence of language transfer. Using English translation to understand French words or sentences is a prevalent method in French language acquisition, with just a minority of participants are able to comprehend French directly.

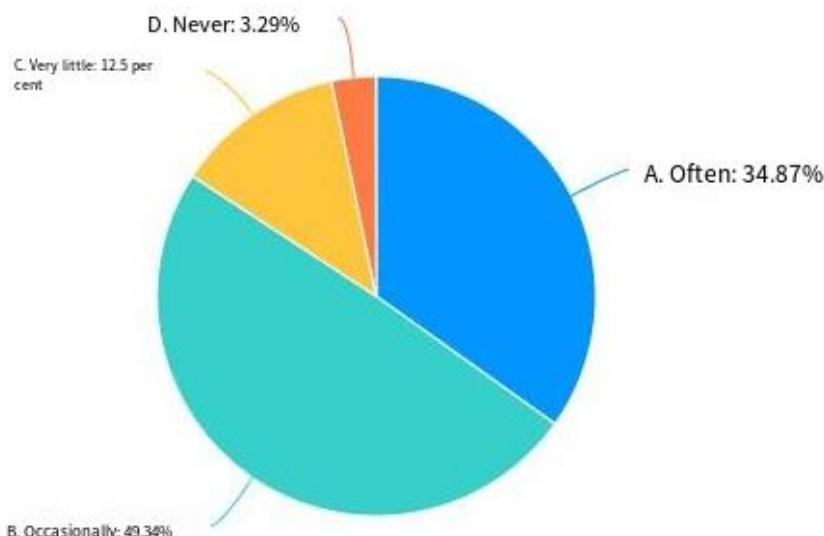


Figure 3. How often do you use English translation to understand French words or sentences

According to the collected data, in the process of French learning in Figure 3, 34.87% of participants often use English translation to understand French words or sentences. 49.34% of participants occasionally use English translation, 12.5% of participants rarely use English translation, and 3.29% of participants never use English translation. It can be seen that most people occasionally or often use English translation to understand French words or sentences in French learning.



Figure 4. Do you apply English grammar rules to French?

According to Figure 4, 71.71% of the respondents tend to apply English grammar rules to French, while 28.29% of the respondents said they do not. This indicates that the majority of respondents tend to borrow English grammar rules when learning French, probably because there are certain similarities between the two languages or learners believe that this method is more effective.



Figure 5. Do you often confuse the two similar grammatical concepts of French main adjective and English descriptive possessive pronoun?

According to Figure 5, 68.42% of the respondents often confuse the two similar grammatical concepts of French main adjective and English descriptive possessive pronoun, while 31.58% of the respondents said they would not confuse these two concepts.

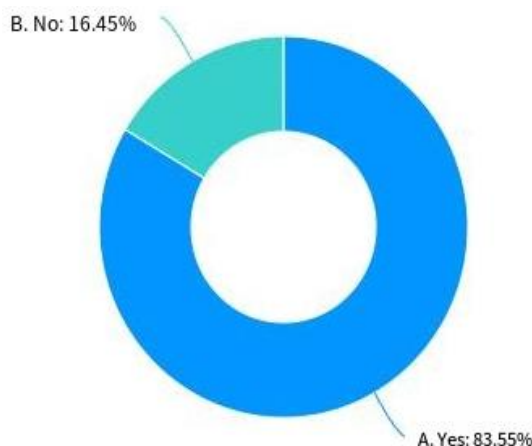


Figure 6. Do you integrate English pronunciation patterns into your French study?

Research data collected in Figure 6 show that 83.55% of respondents expressed their intention to integrate English pronunciation patterns into their French study, whilst 16.45% stated they would not do so. A significant portion of individuals will be influenced by English pronunciation tendencies when learning French, necessitating further phonetic instruction to rectify pronunciation errors.

Table 1. What common mistakes of pronunciation do beginners make when starting to learn French?

Options	Frequencies
A. English phonetic consonant [h]	52
B. The Chinese pronunciation of the character " drink "(drink)	61
C. I do not make mistakes as is shown in the first two options	39

According to Table 1, out of 152 respondents, when learning French, 52 of respondents pronounced the uvula [r] similar to the English phonetic consonant [h], 61 of them pronounced it similar to the Chinese pronunciation of the character " drink ", and 39 of them said they do not make mistakes as is shown in the first two options. This indicates that a significant proportion of people mispronounce the French uvula [r].

Table 2. Is it difficult to differentiate the sound of nouns with the -tion suffix, (e.g., information, solution)?

Vocabulary	Correct Number	Correct Rate
information solution	81	46.05%

Out of the 152 valid respondents, 46.05% claimed they could differentiate the sound of nouns with the -tion suffix and complete spelling in English and French (e.g., information, solution) as shown in Table 2. Many individuals struggle to differentiate between the pronunciation of English and French nouns ending in -tion, while having identical spellings, as indicated by the survey findings in Table 3.

Table 3. Factors causing language transfer in French learning

Options	Frequency
A. Long duration of English learning	119
B. The Chinese pronunciation of the character " drink "	73
C. Lacking French learning experiences	110
D. Short time interval between learning L1 and L2	65
E. High similarities between L1 and L2	96

The primary factor identified as causing language transfer in French learning was the long duration of English learning. Most participants attributed the phenomenon of language transfer in French learning to the prolonged learning period of English as shown in Table 3.



Figure 7. Can you distinguish the difference between the French factor front vowel [a] and the English phonetic alphabet long vowel/alpha :/ and short vowel /æ/?

According to Figure 7, more than half of individuals (61.84%) could differentiate between the French factor front vowel [a] and the English phonetic alphabet long vowel /ɑ:/ and short vowel /æ/, whereas a minority (38.16%) could not. 84.87% of those learning French can employ English idioms, while 15.13% cannot. Thus, most individuals will encounter English idioms when learning French. Responses to the question about difficulty distinguishing between French and English articles were evenly split. The data showed a lack of bias, revealing diverse opinions among participants regarding the difference between French and English article usage.

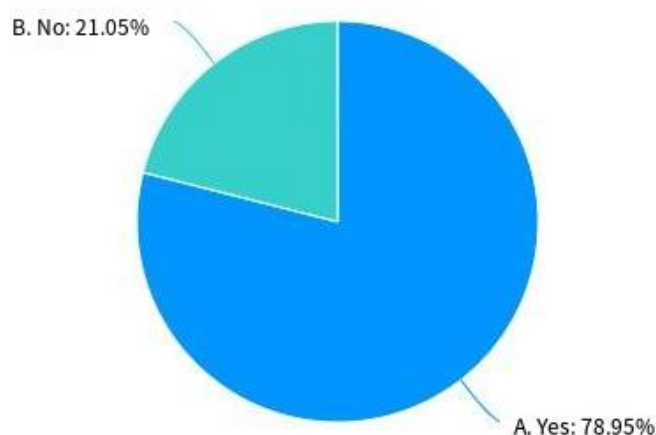


Figure 8. Do you sometimes find yourself mixing English vocabulary and expression rules into your French reading or writing?

According to Figure 8, out of 152 respondents, 78.95% admitted to unintentionally incorporating English vocabulary and grammar rules when using French, while 21.05% did not. Most respondents seem to confuse about when reading or writing in French due to English influence. They may benefit from enhancing their French language skills through study and practice to improve their proficiency and fluency.

Table 4. What are the effective strategies for lowering the impact of language transfer on French learning?

Options	Proportions
A. Spend more time learning French	84.21%
B. Strengthen French listening training	71.05%
C. Participate in French oral communication activities	72.37%
D. Avert English thinking	50.66%
E. Learn the grammatical differences between the two languages	64.47%

According to Table 4, the proportion of different options on how to reduce the impact of language transfer on French learning is as follows: 84.21% of participants spend more time learning French, 71.05% of them strengthen French listening training, 72.37% of participate in oral French communication activities, 50.66% of them avert English thinking, and 64.47% of them learn the grammatical difference between the two languages. According to the data in Table 4, increasing the time spent studying French was considered the most effective method, followed by participating in oral French communication activities and learning the grammatical differences between the two languages. Intensive French listening training is also considered to be an effective method, while the proportion of people who avoid using English thinking is relatively low. Therefore, in order to reduce the influence of language transfer on French learning, it is suggested to increase the time of French learning, combining with oral communication activities and grammatical differences.

To summarize, English has a significant influence on French learning, and the phenomenon of language transfer is widespread in French learning. Although the majority of students believe that this transfer has had a positive impact, there are still concerns about possible confusion and errors.

5. Conclusion

English majors students often learn a second foreign language in their compulsory courses. The empirical study above shows that the long duration and rich experience of learning English, as well as the high linguistic similarity of learning two languages, are considered to be the main reasons for language transfer. Research conclusions are shown as follows:

Firstly, in the process of French learning, Chinese has the minimum impact on learning French as a second foreign language, English has the greatest impact on learners in terms of grammar and pronunciation, and the positive impact of language transfer on French learning is greater than its negative impact. Secondly, there are three main factors leading to language transfer in French learning: the long duration of English learning, the lack of French learning experience and high language similarity between the two languages. Additionally, obstacles faced by second foreign language learners of English major include large differences in details between English and French, insufficient accumulation of vocabulary, and the lack of accurate mastery of French language habits and usage. Finally, when facing French learning disabilities as a second foreign language, second French learners majoring in English should improve their French pronunciation and expression ability, be good at using Internet resources and French learning apps, and learn the contrastive analysis of English and French as a second language. At the same time, they should cultivate their language sense and French language thinking.

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