

ORTHOGRAPHIC CROSSLINGUISTIC INFLUENCE ON THIRD LANGUAGE PRONUNCIATION: A CASE OF ADVANCED STUDENTS READING FOR A BA DEGREE IN ENGLISH

Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the recent rationalist, multidimensional, and multidirectional trend in explaining the notion of language transfer, now "crosslinguistic influence", as a conscious problem solving process rather than as an unconscious and mechanistic operation. It also provides support to those who believe that the role of a second language is no less important in shaping the learner's interlanguage. This is done through analysing some of the pronunciation errors of three groups of BA students of English: those that are the result of an orthographic crosslinguistic influence from French, their second standard language after Arabic.

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ملخص

تعد هذه المقالة مساهمة في الاتجاه الحديث العقلاني والمتعدد الأبعاد والاتجاهات في تفسير مفهوم التحويل اللغوي، ويعرف حاليا بمفهوم "التأثير بين اللغات". وهو اتجاه يرى أن ظاهرة التحويل اللغوي عملية شعورية تحليلية وليست عملية لاشعورية آلية. وتدعم نتائج البحث من يرى بأن دور اللغة الثانية للمتعلم لا تقل أهمية في تشكيل لغته البيئية. ويتم كل ذلك من خلال تحليل لبعض أخطاء نطق ثلاثة أفواج من طلبة الليسانس في اللغة الإنجليزية وهي الأخطاء التي تنتج تحت تأثير طريقة كتابة اللغة الفرنسية، لغتهم الأكاديمية الثانية بعد اللغة العربية.

*When the English¹ tongue we speak
Why is "break" not rhymed with "freak"?
Will you tell me why it's true
We say "sew" but likewise "few";
And the maker of a verse
Cannot cap his "horse" with "worse";
"Beard" sounds not the same as "heard";
"Cord" is different from "word".
"Cow" is "cow" but low is "low".
"Shoe" is never rhymed with "foe";
Think of "hose" and "dose" and "lose";
And think of "goose" and not of "choose";
Think of "comb", and "tomb", and "bomb"
"Doll" and "roll", "home" and "some";
And since "pay" is rhymed with "say",
Why not "paid" with "said", I "pray"?
We have "blood" and "food", and "good";
"Mould" is not pronounced like "could";
Wherefore "done" but "gone" and "lone"?
Is there any reason known?
And in short it seems to me
Sounds and letters disagree.*

Unknown author in Pennington [1]

The poem above may give a strong impression that the English language possesses a highly inconsistent orthography in representing its sound inventory. However, it includes only 16 cases in a vast lexicon that needs systematic and exhaustive probing in order to reach a firm and objective conclusion. A study undertaken on a corpus of 17000 words (Hanna, et al, [2]) revealed that no less than 84% were spelt following a regular pattern. A commonly cited percentage of regular patterns is 75%, and the impression that English is highly irregular in spelling may stem from the fact that around 400 words that are widely used and form part of the core lexicon are irregular (Crystal, [3]). This apparent irregularity has been blamed for a rather slow development of literacy skills by English children (Thorstad, [4]), for their early poor spelling standard (Spencer, [5]), and for being the major source of errors for learners of English (Cook, [6]). Many such studies based their conclusions on only L1-L2 learning contexts.

Recordings of the free speech of three groups of advanced BA students of English as a third academic language over a year at the University of Constantine, Algeria, show that, in an L2-L3 context, this apparent spelling to sound inconsistency is only one of the major sources of their pronunciation errors. A no less important source of errors is the relative consistency of the spelling of French, their second academic language after Standard Arabic. The few third-language acquisition studies available, though not in the area of the spelling influence on pronunciation, (Bartelt, [7]; Ringbom, [8]; Azevedo, [9]; Fitzgerald, [10]; Sharwood Smith, [11]) suggest that L2 seems to play an important role in shaping the strategy of learners in approaching their L3. An important contribution on the influence of spelling, but in an L1-L2 context, is that of Zampini [12].

Transfer, in the early days of Contrastive Analysis, was conceived as a unidirectional phenomenon and a one-dimensional one. Lado [13] wrote that the language learner will soon find that, “those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.” Defining transfer, in even more general terms, Jackobovits [14] wrote that it is “the hypothesis that the learning of task A will affect the subsequent learning of task B”. Although there were some hints in the early Contrastive Analysis literature as to the possibility that task B may equally well affect task C in the case of third language learning, explicit statements came much later with the event of Error Analysis and the notion of interlanguage. Corder [15] stated, “Other languages known to the learner however imperfectly may in the degree to which they resemble the target language structurally, have a facilitating effect.” This statement, partly in line with a somewhat outdated Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis at the time, was rather simplistic because similarity and difference are not always sources of easiness and difficulty respectively (Osgood, [16]). Besides, two languages may be similar or different at one linguistic level such as lexis or syntax without necessarily being so at another level such as phonology (Flege, [17]). The Latin alphabet, a common denominator between English and French, leads the BA students in this study to wrongly assume similarity in pronunciation. This plays a major role in their mispronunciation of many sounds and, most importantly, results in their failure to strengthen most of the weak syllables, ending up with a highly uneconomical and arrhythmic pronunciation.

Kellerman and Sharwood Smith [18] suggested using the term “crosslinguistic influence” instead of “transfer” because, as they claimed, it excludes certain behaviourist connotations that associated transfer with “interference” and “facilitation” in learning:

There is simply no reason to entertain value judgements concerning psycholinguistic processes that are being investigated in their own right. The teacher and the layman may view the mixing of different language systems as a regrettable fall from grace; there is no reason why the researcher should think so as well. (18:1)

It also allows covering various phenomena such as “transfer”, “interference”, “avoidance”, “borrowing”, “language attrition”, and “language loss”. Furthermore, it includes not only the influence of an L1 on an L2 but also an L2 on an L3 and vice-versa. As Corder [19] had stated, the use of only “transfer” in both a negative sense and a positive one, as the early contrastive analysts did, “may perhaps constrain one’s freedom of thinking”. Wode [20] summarised that new stand by many researchers as regard the question of transfer as follows:

It seems to be established beyond doubt: that transfer does occur in learner language², that transfer is developmental, i.e., that it is an integral part of how people learn language, that occurrence of transfer is systematic and not random, that transfer is constrained by the formal properties of the linguistic devices of the language involved, that there is variation in the use of transfer along several dimensions: individual variation among transfer-based learner utterances; situational or task specific variation in the sense that certain situations are more prone to trigger transfer based utterances than others; developmental variations as a function of the state of development of the learner’s L1 and L2. (20:174)

That stand achieved a perfect balance between two conflicting views because, as Odlin [21] put it, “viewing transfer as the single most important reality of second language acquisition is clearly risky –though no more so than viewing transfer as a negligible factor in acquisition”.

Kellerman [22] studied how second language learners conceive transferability of certain items from their mother tongue and the non-transferability of others. Their awareness of this transferability determines the choice of the items to be transferred. This conception is determined by their perception of the distance between L1 and L2, as well as their perception of what is language specific and what is shared by other languages, a phenomenon that was referred to as “psychotypology” (Kellerman, [23]). Hence, transfer occurs in two steps: The prediction of transferability which he called “projection”, and the automatic process that actually turns the projected item into an L2 representation, which he called “conversion”. If “conversion” is carried out without transiting by “projection”, transfer is unconscious and follows a behaviourist S-R mechanism. However, if “conversion” is preceded by “projection”, the transfer is

conscious and cognitive. Therefore, “if the learner is gradually finding out what he can transfer, he will also find out what he can’t.” Linguistic items are transferable following some criteria, to which Kellerman referred as “markedness”, such as frequency, semantic transparency, and coreness. Analysing the resistance of Dutch idioms (semantically less transparent than ordinary expressions) to transfer made by his students, he concluded that it was due to their belief they were language specific. He further investigated the case of polyemes such as the word “to break” in English and noticed that learners tended to follow a certain scale of transferability. It started with the core meaning (concrete meaning) items and extended to the peripheral (much more abstract) ones. Hence, a descending scale of transferability from Dutch to English of the word “break” was “he breaks his leg”, “a cup breaks”, “she broke his heart”, and “a game would break the afternoon a bit.” [23: 13]. Sharwood Smith [24] studied the cognitive aspect of language transfer in the area of lexis. He suggested that the lexical item “apple”, which equals “pomme” for the English learner of French, can be stored for transfer as a free item, i.e. available for a large number of syntactic configurations, such as in “he has my apple” and as a restricted one i.e. available only for a limited set of syntactic configuration, such as in “he is the apple of my eye”. Consequently, such a learner is very likely to produce the erroneous transfer error “donne la pomme à moi” from “give the apple to me”, but rarely or never “il est la pomme de mon oeil” from “he is the apple of my eye”. In multilingual systems, Kellerman [22] suggested, “simulations would be a more complicated business, since they would require some sort of comparator which would match the target language with the most appropriate source language.” James [25] wrote:

One could speculate therefore that someone learning his first language will probably make different types (and possibly produce more interference errors) than someone who has already learnt many languages or is even a trained linguist. (25:12-13)

In the same line of research, Sjöholm [26] found that L1 Finnish learners of English made errors in English that could not be traced to Finnish but rather to Swedish (their second language) or to English itself; while L1 Swedish learners of English made errors that reflected the interference of Swedish or English itself but not Finnish (their second language).

Error Analysis

The error analysis carried out in this study shows that a significant number of errors is due not to some seemingly inconsistent aspects of English spelling but rather to some consistent aspects of the French one, and indicates that the spelling of a second language is as important in generating interlingual pronunciation errors in learning a third language as the spelling of the third language itself in generating intralingual ones. The letters and spelling combinations are pronounced following the French spelling rules mostly when the lexical items are of Latin decent. This shows that crosslinguistic influence in this area is more of a conscious strategy than an unconscious mechanistic process. There is both an interlingual selection (which item to transfer from which language) and an intralingual one (which item to transfer from

which lexical origin). In some cases, the learners transfer even exceptions to the L2 rules to their performance of L3 pronunciation.

Subjects

59 students studying in their third year for a four year BA in English at the department of English, University of Constantine, constitute the subjects of this error analysis. The third year is the last year in the BA curriculum that includes a "module" of oral expression and listening comprehension. It is supposed that by the end of this year the students would have achieved a good level in both producing and comprehending stretches of connected English discourse in various contexts of use³. All subjects know English as a third standard language. Besides these three standard languages, most of the subjects use one dialectal variety of Algerian spoken Arabic in their everyday life.

Data

The data consist of audiotape recordings of the third year oral expression and listening comprehension sessions. The official syllabus for this year is mainly public speaking, and, so, the learners were exposed to some samples of public speaking such as a lecture, a religious speech, a political speech etc., and were supposed to discuss them, first, and, then, discuss some related topics.

Findings

French orthography is at the origin of many errors in the performance of the students and affects a number of vowels, diphthongs, and consonants. Most of the affected lexical items are of Latin descent. In the following tables are the major French spelling representations that influence their performance of the sound inventory of English and that determine to a great extent the uneconomical rhythmic pattern of their oral performance.

1. Single Vowels

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
"a"	e	any				
	ɪ	courage				
	æ	bat	a	capacity	capacité	16
	ɒ	swallow	a	quality	qualité	3
	ə	data	a	adopt	adopter	201
	ɔ:	all	a	alter	altérer	3
	ɑ:	fast	a	Karate	Karaté	1
	eɪ	late	a	capable	capable	25
"e"	eə	vary	a	Bulgaria	Bulgarie	2
	ə	camera				
	ɒ	rendezvous				
	eɪ	regime				
	ɪ	women	ə	religion	religion	8
i:	theme	e	media	média	12	

	e	error	e	America	Amérique	6
			-	develop	développe	3
	ɪə	serum	e	Algeria	Algérie	16
“i”	i	hit				
	i:	machine				
	æ	meringue				
	aɪ	site	i	vital	vital	12
	-	Christian	i	Christian	Chrétien	3
“o”	ɪ	women				
	ʊ	women				
	u:	move				
	ɒ	hot				
	ɔ:	chorus				
	ʌ	above	o	money	monnaie	137
			u	government	gouvernement	1
	ə	Europe	o	nobody	sot	197
	əʊ	home	o	also	pot	210
“u”	ɪ	busy				
	e	bury				
	u:	June				
	ʊ	put	y	influence	influence	5
	ʊə	rural	y	curious	curieux	1
	ə	upon	y	support	support	18
			ɔ	album	album	5
	ju:	useful	y	nuclear	nucléaire	6
	ʌ	hunt	y	cultivated	cultivé	5
ə			club	club	1	

Table 1: Single vowels

In French, the letter “a”, table 1, represents the anterior /a/ or to a lesser extent the posterior /ɑ/. The former is pronounced with the bulge of the tongue moving towards the middle of the oral cavity with maximum openness; whereas the latter is produced with the bulge of the tongue moving towards the back and the lips slightly less spread (De Lattre [27]). The posterior /ɑ/, once as frequent as the anterior /a/, is a dying vowel in the French language. De Lattre [27] counted only 151 occurrences of the former, 71 of which were with a circumflex accent. The stability of the letter “a”, in representing mostly the anterior French vowel /a/, contrasts sharply with the letter “a” in English, which represents many sounds as shown in table 1. There is a tendency among the learners to preferring a stable and regular pronunciation of French in this case. Many weak form words in English are strengthened because of the two letters "a" and "o", among which are "as", "at", "that", "than", "can", "of", "for" etc. Not reducing these vowels in addition to strengthening weak syllables in most polysyllabic lexical words that have to be weakened seriously affect their performance of English connected speech and result in a very uneconomical and arrhythmic pronunciation. The numbers of occurrences of /o/ and /ɑ/ instead of /ə/, amounting to 454 and 251

respectively, exclude the cases of weak form word strengthening that are too frequent to be counted. Silencing the letter “e” in the verb “develop” in table 1 and pronouncing it as /drvlop/, shows that French spelling does not only affect weakening but results also in sound eliding. Furthermore, the rather unusual substitution of the vowel /ʌ/ by the French vowel /u/ in the word “government” is due to preconceiving the English word “government” with the spelling “ou” in the French cognate “gouvernement”.

2. Diphthongs

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
“ae”	æ	haemorrhage				
	i:	Caesar				
	ɪ	gynaecology				
	-	Michael				
	eə	aeroplane				
	eɪ	sundae	aɛ	Israel	Israël ⁴	15
“ai”	æ	plaid				
	ə	villain				
	ɪ	captain				
	e	said				
	aɪ	aisle				
	eə	hairy				
	eɪ	paid	ɛ	afraid	laide	6
“au”	ə	restaurant				
	ɒ	because				
	ɔ:	cause				
	əʊ	mauve				
	eɪ	gauge				
	ɑ:	aunt	o	laughter	saut	
“ea”	ə	ocean				
	æ	whereas				
	e	bread				
	i:	sea				
	ɪ	forehead				
	ɪə	idea	ea	idea	idéa	6
“io”	aɪ	lion				
	-	action				
	ə	legion	jɔ	regionalist	régionaliste	6
“ou”	aʊ	house				
	əʊ	soul				
	ɒ	cough				
	u:	soup				
	ɜ:	journal	u	journalist	journaliste	3
	ɔ:	four	u	your	Faubourg	4
	ə	favourite	u	famous	mousse	12

	ʌ	country	u	young	youyou	6
“ui”	ui	ruin				
	juɪ	annuity				
	wɪ	distinguish				
	wi:	suite				
	ju:	nuisance	ɥ	suitable	suite	14
	ɪ	guild	ɥ	build	buisson	3

Table 2: Diphthongs

Had phonological transfer not been selective, a spelling combination such as “ui” would have been pronounced also /ɥ/ in words such as “guide” or “guitar”, but nowhere in the corpus that was analysed did such realisations occur. The learners follow both the rules and their exceptions in French. Where the rule does not apply to French they will, conversely, rather make errors when the words are of Germanic descent.

3. Vowels + Consonants

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
“am”	əʌ	Birmingham				
	æm	lamp	ã	example	crampe	3
“an”	ən	distance				
	eɪn	change				
	ɑ:n	chance				
	æŋ	anchor				
	æn	land	ã	frank	franc	1
“en”	ən	violent	ã	experience	expérience	1
	ɪn	enchain	ã	enjoy	enfant	2
	en	send	ã	sentimental	sentimental	5
“in”	ɪn	infinite	ĩ	principle	principe	35
“om”	ɒm	composition				
	əm	freedom	õ	compare	comparer	10
“on”	ən	convince	õ	control	convaincre	20
	ɒn	bond	õ	fond	ronde	10
	ʌn	none	õ	London	Londres	15
	ʌŋ	among	õ	among	mon	8
	əʊn	lonely	õ	only	onde	11
	“um”	ʌm	humble	œ	number	humble
“un”	ju:m	fume				
	ju:n	uniform	yn	unify	unifier	8
	ən	until	œ	until	Untel	7
	ʌn	lunch	õ	pronunciation	prononciation	1
			œ	hundred	lundi	32

Table 3: Vowels + Consonants

4. Diphthong + 1 Consonant

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
“ain”	ən	certain				
	ɪ	captain				
	eɪn	paint	23	saint	saint	1

Table 4: Diphthong + 1 Consonant

Here, again, there is another preconceived French spelling in the mind of the learners when uttering the word “pronunciation” in English, which is “prononciation” in French. Consequently, unlike the rest of the cases, it is the French nasal vowel /ɔ̃/ which substitutes the combination /ʌn/. Another very common case, but of intralingual errors, is generalising the spelling of the verb “to pronounce” to that of the noun and preconceiving it as “prononciation”, which leads many learners to pronounce the combination /ʌn/ as /aʊn/.

5. Triphthongs

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
“oeu”	u:	manoeuvre	3:	manoeuvre	oeuvre	1

Table 5: Triphthongs

6. Single consonants

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
“c”	s	city				
	ʃ	special				
	tʃ	concerto				
	-	indict				
	k	cry	g	second	seconde	3
“d”	t	looked				
	dʒ	soldier				
	-	handsome				
	d	standard	-	standard	standard	2
“h”	-	honest				
	h	hat	-	hypocrite	hypocrite	1
“j”	j	hallelujah				
	dʒ	jam	ʒ	job	jeune	11
“g”	g	go				
	ʒ	rouge				
	dʒ	age	ʒ	obliged	obligé	58
“p”	p	pit				
	-	pneumonia	p	psychic	psychique	1
“r”	-	hard				

	r	rat	R	Arabic	Arabe	5
"s"	ʃ	Asia				
	ʒ	measure				
	-	island				
	s	precise	z	disagree	disette	68
	z	needs	s	transmit	transmettre	27
"x"	z	xenophobe				
	gz	exact				
	kʃ	anxious				
	eks	X-ray				
	ks	six	gz	execute	exécuter	1
"y"	j	yes				
	ɜ:	myrrh				
	aɪə	tyrant				
	ɪ	analysis				
	aɪ	type	i	Rhymes	cycle	2

Table 6: Single consonants

Three observations seem to be in order here: 1. Even the exception in French for pronouncing the letter "c" is transferred into English. 2. Although there are cases of silent "d" in both French and English such as in the pair "grand-père" and "grandfather", there seems to be no "positive" influence in such a context, it is rather the "negative" one which seems to occur by silencing the letter "d" in the English word "standard". 3. The letter "s" is one of the major sources of French influence as it follows a regular pattern of pronunciation in this language. Hence, it is pronounced /z/ between two vowels and pronounced /s/ or is silenced elsewhere. The same regular pattern is used while performing in English.

7. Clusters

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
"ch"	k	chaos				
	ʃ	machine				
	dʒ	Greenwich				
	-	yacht				
	tʃ	cheese	ʃ	psychic	psychique	1
"gg"	g	egg				
	dʒ	suggest	gʒ	suggest	suggérer	8
"ss"	ʃ	mission				
	s	dress				
	z	scissors	s	possess	posséder	1
"gn"	gn	signature				
	n	gnash	ɲ	foreign	beigne	10

Table 7: Clusters

8. Consonants + vowels

Spelling	English phone(s)	Example	French substitutes	Erroneous Instance	French Example	Number of Occurrences
“ge”	dʒ	age				
	ʒ	garage				
	ge	get				
	gə	target	ʒə	target	rouget	1
“qu”	k	cheque				
	kw	quit	k	quotation	quota	1

Table 8: Consonants + vowels

Conclusion

The following conclusions may be drawn from this research work:

- Some consistent spellings and spelling combinations of the French language are as significant in misleading the learners under study as the inconsistent English spellings and spelling combinations.
- The greatest number of occurrence of such a crosslinguistic influence is in substituting the weak and very frequent English vowel /ə/ by the French strong vowel /o/ and /a/ due to the frequency of the letter "a" and "o" in both languages. This very frequent substitution greatly changes the rhythm of English from a stress timed rhythm to a syllable timed one (for the difference between the two see Roach [28]) by strengthening so many weak syllables notably the centres of weak form words.
- The learners sometimes go as far as transferring some exceptions to the rules in French pronunciation into the English one as in the case of the word “second” and its derivatives, all pronounced with /g/ instead of /k/.
- Most words that are affected by French spelling are of Latin descent, and learners sometimes confuse partial similarities with total ones between French spelling and that of English, such as the case of “pronunciation”, “government”, and “gulf” which are pronounced as if they were spelt “prononciation”, “gouvernement”, and “golf” respectively. As Gass & Selinker [29] put it, sometimes “Similarities obscure for the learner the fact that there is something to learn”.
- The study sheds some light on an unexplored aspect of an intricate phenomenon which is crosslinguistic influence in third language acquisition. This aspect is the influence of the spelling of a second language on the pronunciation of a third one.
- Ellis [30] considers that Learners’ more developed metalingual awareness of grammar could be one of the main reasons why cross-linguistic influence does not seem to be as frequent at the grammatical level. Such a metalingual awareness cannot be developed through an implicit functional approach in teaching oral expression and listening comprehension, prevailing for decades now, in which knowledge about the formal components, especially the sound to spelling consistency or inconsistency, plays second fiddle. There is a need for a focus on explicit phonological instruction and the study of English graphemics in order to limit crosslinguistic influence of the spelling of French and the intralingual influence of the English language itself, with their various degrees of consistency and inconsistency, and as an important aspect for improving the oral/aural performance of BA students.

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¹ The word "English" is written with final "e" as cited in Pennington.

² "Learner language" is synonymous to "interlanguage".

³ Contenu des modules de la licence d'enseignement de la langue anglaise (a syllabus suggested by the Ministry of Higher Education in the late seventies).

⁴ The diacritic marks over some letters in French seem to make no difference for the learners when being inspired in their performance of English.