MOTHER TONGUE INFLUENCE AS CATALYST FOR MOTIVATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: YORUBA AND FRENCH

Eunice Modupe FABIYI
Department of French, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria
eunicemodupe1970@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper investigates mother tongue influence as a catalyst for motivation in foreign language learning within the multilingual Nigerian context, where learners often study foreign language such as French alongside indigenous languages and English. Traditional views in applied linguistics have largely framed the first language (L1) as a source of interference. However, emerging perspectives highlights its facilitative and motivational factors. We were motivated to write on this topic based on our experiences in the teaching profession where we discovered that students do face a lot of difficulties in their bid to learn French language. These difficulties could be lexical, phonological, syntactical etc because of the differences in the structures of the languages they have first learnt and target language, and when mother tongue is used to explain some concepts or some issues, the students understand better. The paper hinges on contrastive analysis theory which is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities between the first language and the target language based on the assumptions that the similarities facilitate learning while the differences cause problems. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, data were gathered from sixty (60) diploma students of French at Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. Their ages range between 17 to 25 and they were both males and females. The syntactical aspects of French were tested from the two groups that constituted our population. Quantitative analysis guided the analysis of the data. Findings reveal that strategic integration of the mother tongue promotes positive transfer, enhances comprehension, lowers anxiety, strengthens learner identity, and increases motivation towards foreign language learning. Rather than hindering acquisition, L1 competence serves as a scaffold that accelerates linguistic development. The paper therefore advocates a balanced pedagogical model that leverages learners' linguistic repertoires to improve engagement and achievement. The paper concludes that the mother tongue functions as a motivational catalyst that supports more effective foreign language learning in multilingual educational settings.

Keywords: mother tongue, foreign language, contrastive analysis theory, French and Yoruba.

Introduction

The process of learning a foreign language rarely occurs in isolation from the learner's prior linguistic knowledge. Every learner approaches a new language with an already developed mother tongue that shapes perception, interpretation and communication. Despite this reality, earlier language teaching traditions often promoted the separation of the target language from the first language (L1) based on the assumption that the mother tongue primarily causes interference and errors. Such perspective encouraged monolingual instructional practices that minimized or prohibited the use of learner's native languages in the classroom. Increasingly, however, developments in linguistics and applied linguistics suggest that this exclusionary stance overlooks the constructive and motivational functions

that the mother tongue can perform in foreign language learning.

From a cognitive perspective, previously acquired linguistic knowledge provides a foundation upon which new systems are built. Learners naturally draw on familiar grammatical structures, vocabularies and discourse patterns to interpret unfamiliar forms. Beyond structural transfer, the mother tongue also carries affective and identity-related significance. It represents competence, confidence and cultural belonging, when these resources are acknowledged rather than suppressed, learners may experience reduced anxiety, greater participation and stronger motivation to engage with the target language, in this sense, the mother tongue can operate not merely as a background influence but as a facilitating force that stimulates learning.

This consideration is especially relevant in multilingual settings such as Nigeria, where most learners navigate multiple languages daily, including indigenous languages, English and foreign languages like French. For such learners, language learning is inherently interconnected rather than compartmentalized, ignoring the mother tongue may therefore limit valuable linguistic and psychological resources that could otherwise enhance comprehension and engagement.

In Nigeria, especially in Higher Institutions of learning, most teachers believe that the use of mother tongue should be minimized and they feel guilty if they use it in French teaching. It is the general assumption that French should be learned through French just as we learn our mother tongue using our mother tongue.

From the negative point of view which is purely pedagogical, Timor **(**2012:7) mentions that students do not benefit when teachers rely on using their students' MT, particularly when the FL teacher is the sole linguistic model and main source of FL input.

But, the positive influence of the L1 use in classrooms around the world has been established. A learner's L1 is an important determinant of Second Language Acquisition. Teacher use of the MT cannot present a threat to FL acquisition because learners already have a language basis from their MT. Because of this basis, learners are more socially developed and have more short-term memory capacity and more maturity when they become acquainted with the FL (Cook, 2002). Therefore, there is no competition between their MT and FL.

Also, belief in the 20th century was that the MT and the FL make distinct systems in the brain. However, evidence from neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics demonstrates that languages are not stored in isolation in the brain but form an integrated system. Research shows that bilinguals experience parallel activation of their languages across lexical, phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic levels, indicating that these components are interwoven within shared neural networks (Kroll et al., 2014; van Heuven et al., 2008; Declerck et al., 2020). Also, Kroll, J. F., Dussias, P. E., & Bice, K. (2014) claim: "all of the languages that are known and used become part of the same language system."

Therefore, foreign language teaching should reflect the underlying cognitive processes of bilingual learners and should not artificially separate the first language from the target language, as evidence shows that cross-linguistic transfer and code-switching constitute normal psycholinguistic processes in bilingual cognition (García & Wei, 2014; Cummins, 2021; Kormos, 2020).

Again, the process of foreign language acquisition involves cognitive, social, and emotional factors that are inseparable and equally related to the MT and the FL.

Mattioli (2004) submits that L1 use in the classroom relates to the fostering of a positive affective environment. Lasagabaster, 2017; Wang, 2019; García & Wei, 2014 advocate the pedagogical use of the learners' first language in the classroom, arguing that it enhances comprehension, fosters a supportive learning environment, and affirms learners' linguistic identities.

It is against this backdrop, this paper reconceptualizes mother tongue influence as a catalyst for foreign language learning. By viewing the L1 as a resource rather than a barrier, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on more inclusive and effective approaches to foreign language pedagogy in multilingual contexts.

Literature Review

French Language

French language commands great prestige among other foreign languages of the world and this makes it one of the European languages introduced to the Nigeria educational system long ago. It is being taught in Primary, Secondary and Tertiary institutions. On the 14th December 1996 in a speech at the Nigerian Institute for International Affairs, the late Nigerian Head of State, General Sani Abacha said *"Nigeria is resolutely launching a programme of national language training that will in a short order, permit our country to become thoroughly bilingual".* General Abacha's pronouncements and decisions finally led to the recognition of French as a second official language and make it compulsory in schools. Therefore, the third edition of the National Policy on Education, published in 1998 states on page 9 thus:

> *For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in schools.*

Mother Tongue

Many scholars have given definitions of mother tongue through the years based on common usage, the emotional relation of the speakers towards the language and even its dominance in relation to the environment. Crystal (2008) defines mother tongue/native language as "*the first language acquired naturally in childhood and the primary language of identification and communication*". Also, Cook (2016) opines that L1 remains an active cognitive system and should be viewed as a resource in second /foreign language learning rather than interference. Other submission on mother tongue are:

a. Based on origin: the language(s) one learned first (the language(s) in which one has established the first long-lasting verbal contacts). (Grosjean (2010)
b. Based on internal identification: the language(s) one identifies with / as a speaker of; (Romaine (2000); Cenoz & Gorter (2011))
c. Based on external identification: the language(s) one is identified with / as a speaker of, by others. (UNESCO (2003); Baker (2011))
d. Based on competence: the language(s) one knows best. (Cummins (2000); Pavlenko (2008))
e. Based on function: the language(s) one uses most (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2003); Garcia (2009))
f. The role of mother mother tongue in teaching and learning of foreign language has been discussed in literature where the influence of MT is proved both positive and negative.

Foreign Language

A foreign language can be understood as an additional linguistic system acquired mainly through instruction and motivated by educational, social or economic purposes. The Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics defines a foreign language as "*a language learned for communication outside one's native speech community and typically taught in formal settings".* Cook (2016) explains that "*foreign language learning occurs in contexts where the target language is not the language of daily communication and is mainly instructional".* Saville et al (2017) adds "*that foreign language learning usually takes place where the target language has no major societal role, resulting in limited input outside the classroom"*

5.0. Contrastive Analysis Theory.

To foreground our discussion in this paper, we have employed contrastive analysis theory. Obviously, learning a foreign language will be associated with many kinds of learning problems. It could be with its sound system, vocabulary, structure etc. this is understandable since the student learning the foreign language has spoken his own native language, which had been deeply implanted in him as part of his habit. Very often, he transfers his habit into the target language he learns, which perhaps will cause errors. Thus, the linguists tried to find out the causes of the problems and proposed methods to be applied in language teaching to minimize the problems. One of the methods suggested is contrastive analysis.

According to Rustipa (2011: 17), contrastive analysis is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities between the first language and the target language based on the assumptions that: the similarities facilitate learning while differences cause problems. Via contrastive analysis, problems can be predicted and considered in the curriculum. Rustipa (2011: 17) says further that Contrastive Analysis was extensively used in the 1960s and early 1970s as a method of explaining why some features of a Target Language were more difficult to acquire than others. According to behaviorist theories, language learning was a question of habit formation, and this could be reinforced by existing habits. this was confirmed in Slobin (1996: 89) "*In brief, each native language has trained its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences when talking about them. This training is carried out in childhood and is exceptionally resistant to restructuring in second language acquisition*." Therefore, the difficulty in mastering certain structures in a second language depended on the difference between the learners' mother language and the language they were trying to learn.

According to James (1980:7), the theoretical foundations for what became known as the contrastive Analysis Hypothesis were formulated in Lado's Linguistics across cultures (1957: vii) It was discovered in the preface to Lado's seminal work Linguistics across Cultures that: "*The plan of the book rests on the assumption that we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student."* Lado claimed that "those elements which are similar to the learners' native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult." While this was not a novel suggestion, Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and to suggest a systemic set of technical procedures for the contrastive study of languages. This involved describing the languages (using structuralists' linguistics), comparing them and predicting learning

difficulties. Thus, the languages comparison is aimed at assisting language learning and teaching. Fries (1945: 9) in James (1980:8) also adds that "*the most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner"*

Summarily, the goals of Contrastive Analysis can be stated as follows:

- To make foreign language teaching more effective,
- To find out the differences between the first language and the target language based on the assumptions that:

a. Foreign language learning is based on mother tongue.
b. Similarities facilitate learning (positive transfer),
c. Differences cause problems (negative transfer / interference)
d. Via contrastive analysis, problems can be predicted and considered in the curriculum.

Methodology

The study is a descriptive study with 60 participants of Diploma students of Adeyemi Federal University of Education Ondo. The participants were divided into two groups, group A and B. All are speakers of Yoruba and they are all beginners of French language. Their ages range from 17 to 25 and they were both males and females. The females were 42 in number while males were 18. We observed that the female gender dominated the population. The medium of instruction for group A was bilingual (Yoruba and French) while the medium of instruction for group B was monolingual (French). The research tool was a questionnaire divided into two parts. The first part consisted of the personal information of the participants while the second part consisted ten different questions on prepositions, possessive adjectives and indefinite adjectives. The questionnaire was a close ended type in the second part i.e the students were asked to pick from the options provided (multiple choice). Their results were analyzed quantitatively (presented in percentages) and the comparison between the two groups of students was conducted with reference to all questions.

Statement of the Problem

Learning a foreign language such as French can be both exciting and frustrating for Yoruba-speaking students. Many learners find it difficult to connect unfamiliar French structures to what they already know from Yoruba, which affects their confidence and interest. Research by Fabiyi and Ojo (2018) shows that the mother tongue can play a motivational role when it is used to explain difficult concepts in French classrooms, helping learners understand better and stay engaged. However, despite this insight, teachers and learners still struggle with how much and when to use Yoruba without creating over-dependence or reducing exposure to French.

Recent studies on multilingual and translanguaging practices suggest that strategic use of learners' first language can positively influence motivation and engagement in foreign language classrooms (Wang et al., 2025). Research has shown that motivational dynamics among multilingual learners are complex and shaped by learners' language repertoires and classroom experiences (Göksu & Louis, 2025). Other work indicates that translanguaging strategies correlate with higher levels of learner motivation and improved academic performance (Tandih, 2025). Moreover, recent investigations into learner identity and multilingualism reveal that pride in multilingual competence contributes to stronger motivational orientations in language learning (Sulis, 2025). Bibliometric research also

highlights expanding interest in motivation research for SLA, emphasizing the evolving nature of motivation studies in diverse learning contexts (Wu, 2022)."

Objective of the study.

General Objective:

To examine how the mother tongue functions as a catalyst that enhances learner's motivation and effectiveness in foreign language learning.

Specific Objectives are:

1. evaluate the pedagogical benefits of integrating the mother tongue into foreign language instruction in multilingual settings such as Nigeria.
2. Propose practical strategies for leveraging L1 resources to improve foreign language outcomes.

Hypotheses of the study.

The following alternative hypotheses are postulated for this study:

(1). There is a significant difference between the performance of the two groups of students used in the study.

(2). There is a significant difference in the rate of learners' confidence, understanding and classroom participation between the students in the two groups.

Presentation and Analysis of Results.

Table 1

No	Sentences	Correct sentences	Group A		Group B		
			Correct No/%	Incorrect No/%	Correct No/%	Incorrect No/%	Total
1.	Je vais------- Etats unis.	Je vais **aux** Etats Unis.	**25(83%)**	**5(17)**	**13(43)**	**17(57)**	**60(100)**
2.	Kola est allé ------France.	Kola est allé **en** France	**20(67)**	**10(33)**	**9(30)**	**21(70)**	**60(100)**
3.	Nous sommes allé(e)s ------- --- hôpital.	Nous sommes allé(e)s **à l'** hôpital	**22(73)**	**08(27)**	**14(47)**	**16(53)**	**60(100)**
4.	Marie aime -- ---- mari	Marie aime **son** mari.	**17(57)**	**13(43)**	**10(33)**	**20(67)**	**60(100)**
5.	Jean aime --- femme.	Jean aime **sa** femme	**15(50)**	**15(50)**	**07(23)**	**23(77)**	**60(100)**
6.	J'aime ------- mari	J'aime **mon** mari	**18(60)**	**12(40)**	**08(27)**	**22(73)**	**60(100)**
7.	---garçon est intélligent.	**Ce** garçon est intélligent.	**23(77)**	**07(23)**	**14(47)**	**16(53)**	**60(100)**
8.	---maison est belle.	**Cette** maison est belle.	**25(83)**	**05(17)**	**17(57)**	**13(43)**	**(100)**
9.	----- oiseau chante une belle chanson.	**Cet** oiseau chante une belle chanson.	**15(50)**	**15(50)**	**9(30)**	**21(70)**	**60(100)**
10	----- enfant est méchant	**Cet** enfant est méchant	**13(43)**	**17(57)**	**10(33)**	**20(67)**	**60(100)**

If we carefully observe the above table, the results presented shows that the students in group A performed better than the students in group B. Out of 30 students tested in group A, 25 (85%) picked the correct answer while in group B 13(43%) of the respondents got question one right. For question 2, in group A, 20(67%) participants chose the right answer while only 9(30%) picked the correct answer in group B. As regards question 3, 22(73%) students got it right in group A and 14(47%) got it wrong in group B. 17(57%) respondents subscribed for the right option in group A for question 4 while only 10(33%) respondents in group B subscribed for the correct answer. As touching question 5, 15(50%) of the respondents gave the correct option but only 7(23%) could give the correct option in group B. 18(60%) of the population in group A chose the proper answer for question 6 while just 8(27%) of the population in group B chose the proper answer. Concerning question 7, 23(77%) picked the favourable answer while 14(47%) picked the favourable answer. As regards question 8, 25(83%) of the population responded positively in group A while in group B 17(57%) responded positively. For question 9, 15(50%) of the population chose the right option in group A while in group B, only 9(30%) of the students picked the correct option. For the question 10 which is the last one, in group A, 13(43%) students selected the right option while 10(33%) of the population in group B chose the correct option.

Discussion of Findings

The article talks on the mother tongue as a motivation for foreign language learning. The aim is to examine whether the use of mother tongue could help students to understand better the French language. This was done by conducting a study among diploma students who have been learning French language for eight months. The findings revealed that the use of mother tongue in foreign language learning is very important and it could help students to understand any concept in foreign language better. From the study carried out, students in group A where mother tongue was used performed better than the other group which their medium of instruction was purely French. So, the use of mother tongue facilitates understanding. For instance the explanation given on the three areas tested in mother tongue assisted the students in group A to perform better than students in group B. For instance, the preposition (à) in French varies but that of Yoruba remains invariable:

Mo lọ **si** Eko------- Je suis allé(e) **à** Lagos.

O lọ si ọjà-------- Il est allé **au** marché

Mo lọ **si** ilu Oyinbo----- Je suis allé(e) **aux** Etats –Unis.

Wọn lọ **si** ilu Faranse------ Elles sont allées **en** France

There is no preposition with contracted articles in Yorùbá but it exists in French. Giving the explanation in mother tongue and showing the areas of differences as stated in contrastive analysis theory enhances the performance of students in group A.

As regards possessive adjectif in Yorùbá, it comes after the nouns and there is no agreement at the level of gender and number like that of French. Let us see the example below:

Ọkọ **mi**---- **mon** mari.
Ìyàwó **mi**---- **ma** femme.
Ilée **mi** ------ **ma** maison.
Ìwé **mi** ----- **mon** cahier.
Ọkọ **rẹ** ---- **son** mari.
Ìyàwó **rẹ** ----- **sa** femme.

We only present the singular aspect which always cause problems for the

learners. We can see the differences between the usage of possessive adjectif in English and Yorùbá. The students in group A understand it better than the students in group B because the differences were explained to them both in French and in their mother tongue.

The demonstrative adjectives in French vary in gender and in number in contrary to what is happening in Yorùbá. The explanation given to students in group A in their mother tongue helped them to understand it better than students in the other group. This really enhances their performance in the exercise. Let us look at the examples in the variation of that of French and non variation in that of Yorùbá:

Ìwé **yìí**---- **ce** livre
Ilé **yìí** ----- **cette** maison.
Ọmọ **yìí** ---- **cet** enfant.
Àwọn ọmọ **yìí** --- ces enfants.

In Yorùbá the demonstrative adjective is placed after the noun and it doesn't vary both in gender and in number but we can see that the opposite is the case in French. Therefore, this study supports Cook (2001) criterion of efficiency, indicating that some topics can be taught more effectively through comparisons to the MT.

Conclusion

The study has examined the role of the mother tongue as a catalytic factor in foreign language learning and has challenged the long-standing assumption that the first language should be excluded from the language classroom. Rather than functioning solely as a source of interference, the mother tongue has been shown to provide important cognitive, linguistic and affective support that can enhance the learning process. This study has revealed that MT saves time and enhances understanding, particularly among slow learners, and also, the comparison between the two languages enhances understanding about how languages behave. From the data collected and analyzed we could see that students in group A performed better than the students in group B because of the differences in the medium of instruction. We therefore conclude that ministries of education and policy-makers should devise standard and formal guidelines for using the MT in FL classrooms since the use of MT will perhaps contribute significantly to the progress of foreign language learning and serve as a useful document and guide to foreign language learners. As earlier said, the mother tongue is the master key to foreign languages, the tool which gives us the fastest, surest, most precise and most complete means of accessing a foreign language.

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