

Awareness of cross-lexical differences among advanced second-language learners of French

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Résumé : Cet article décrit une étude comprenant 30 apprenants de français langue seconde. Deux groupes de niveau sont concernés: un premier groupe, composé de 15 apprenants, est en première année à l'université, et le second, composé de 15 sujets, est en quatrième année. Il répond à un double objectif: examiner la façon dont les apprenants avancés de français sont conscients du phénomène linguistique des faux-amis et comment ils les abordent dans un exercice de traduction anglais-français, et éclairer le rôle de l'enseignement de langue seconde dans le domaine de former le comportement d'évitement de l'apprenant. Leur performance dans l'exercice de traduction anglais-français est comparée en termes quantitatifs. Les résultats confirment l'hypothèse que les apprenants en quatrième année affronteront le phénomène des faux-amis d'une façon plus compétente que les étudiants en première année. L'article se conclut en suggérant que la prédilection parmi ceux en première année pour éviter de traduire des éléments lexicaux peut être attribuée aux facteurs associés à l'enseignement.

Mots-clés : Apprenants avancés de français, faux-amis, exercice de traduction anglais-français, distance entre langues, stratégies d'évitement, transfert de la formation

Summary: This article describes a study involving 30 second-language learners of French attending an Irish university: 15 students from first year and 15 students from fourth year. The aim is twofold: (a) to investigate the extent to which advanced university learners of French are aware of the linguistic phenomenon of 'false friends' and how they cope with them in a translation-based language exercise and (b) to examine the role of formal second-language teaching in the shaping of L2 learner avoidance behaviour. Their performance on an English-French translation-based language task is compared in quantitative terms. The results support the underlying hypothesis of the study that the fourth-year learners will cope with the phenomenon of false friends more competently than the first-year learners. The article concludes by suggesting that the first-year learners' preference for avoiding translating difficult lexical items such as false friends can be attributed to factors related to teaching.

Keywords: advanced learners of French, false friends, translation-based language exercise, language distance, avoidance, transfer of training

Introduction

The starting point for the study was the observation that advanced learners of French are frequently made aware of the false friend phenomenon. As a graduate of the same university programme from which the students come, I remember being repeatedly told about mother-tongue interference and false friends. The emphasis was placed on the negative effects of interference from English (the mother tongue) on French (the target language). Although negative transfer was perceived to be manifest at all levels of language, my attention was focused in particular on lexis, on what is known as 'false friend error' (James, 1998: 15). It was felt that these deceptive cognates were especially problematic for second-language learners in a translation-based task in so far as they could cause confusion, embarrassment and even discouragement in completing the exercise. Thus, I was constantly reminded of their existence in an attempt to avoid or minimise this type of lexical error.

Previous Research

In keeping with the established practice among researchers, the terms transfer and cross-linguistic influence will be used interchangeably as theory-neutral cover terms to refer to the phenomenon (Odlin, 2005). Transfer in language learning has been widely researched since it is a crucial variable that affects the learning of a second or foreign language (see, for example, Arabski, 2006; Jarvis, 2000; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2010; Odlin, 1989, 2003; Ringbom, 2007). Language transfer is not equally visible in all areas of language use but in Kellerman's words "there are enormous quantities of evidence for the influence of the L1 on IL when it comes to lexis" (1984: 115).

One of the earliest and most widely recognised constraints on transfer is the relationship or degree of congruence between the source language and the recipient language. This factor has variously been called language distance, typological proximity, psychotypology and cross-linguistic similarity, and its importance has been recognised since the 1970s (Kellerman, 1977; Ringbom, 1978). It has also been investigated in a number of recent studies (Jarvis, 2000; Kellerman, 1995; Ringbom, 2007). The general finding is that, even though transfer does occur between languages that are quite different - the extent of transfer is highest in most areas of language use when the source and recipient languages are perceived to be very similar by the L2 user (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2010).

Kellerman stated in his seminal 1977 paper that cross-linguistic similarity relates to what the learner perceives to be similar between the target language and another language, usually the L1. Perceived similarity is not the same as 'objective' cross-linguistic similarity. According to Ringbom (2007), previous attempts to define objective cross-linguistic similarity have not made a visible impact on SLA research. Cross-linguistic similarity is most obviously perceived on the basis of formally similar or identical individual items or words. In lexis, formal similarity to an existing L1 word is perceived first, in that getting the word form precedes getting the word meaning. If formal similarity can be established, it provides the basis for a subsequent assumption of an associated translation equivalent (Zimmermann, 1987). Formal correspondences arouse hopes of semantic or functional equivalence. Such hopes are often fulfilled in related languages. However, Ringbom (2006: 36) points out, "while most perceived similarities will facilitate learning, there are also instances where similarity can lead to errors, as in false friends".

In his study of lexical transfer, Ringbom (2001) observes that lexical transfer errors can relate both to form and meaning, and can be classified into five distinctive categories: language switches; coinages (hybrids and blends); deceptive cognates; calques; semantic extensions. According to Ringbom (2001) deceptive cognates (described as either totally or partially deceptive and known as false friends) are manifested in form transfer based on a formal similarity between the two languages:

“What happens here is that the linguistic form of the word is very much in the foreground: the learner activates, or is influenced by, a formally similar L1 word or L2 word instead of the intended one.” (Ringbom, 2001: 60).

A second factor identified in the literature to be important in determining the likelihood of language transfer is proficiency. Many transfer-related studies have suggested that L1 influence decreases as L2 proficiency increases.¹ These results confirm the “transfer-as-strategy perspective, since learners often draw on their L1 to fill a lexical or syntactic gap when they lack the linguistic means of expression in the L2” (Murphy, 2003: 7). The strategies used by learners in these circumstances have been described in several studies, among them Faerch and Kasper (1984), who claim that there are two main types of compensatory strategies used: achievement and avoidance strategies. Seven different types of avoidance strategies have been identified in the literature (see, for example, Corder 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1983; Tarone, Cohen & Dumas). There has been much debate among researchers as to what constitutes a communication strategy. Among the various definitions which have been offered by researchers, the notion of problematicity or problem-solving has often been invoked as a definitional criterion. For example, Kasper & Kellerman (1997: 1) describe communication strategies as “being used to tackle or overcome linguistic problems encountered during interaction involving non-native speakers”.

Study Description

Research Hypotheses

The first hypothesis predicts that the fourth-year students will deal with the phenomenon of false friends more competently than the first-year students. The notion of competence has two interrelated dimensions: first, a greater awareness of the problematic nature of false friends and how they can lead to lexical L1-based transfer errors; second, a greater awareness of the relationship between English and French. Accordingly, it is hypothesised that the more proficient learners will be more aware of the problematic nature of false friends than the first-year learners, in particular how they can lead to lexical L1-based transfer errors in a translation task. It is, therefore, reasonable to presume that this type of error will be more prevalent among the first-year learners. This presumption is based on the expectation that when less proficient learners apply a strategy of transfer in order to solve a TL lexical problem in the translation task, their willingness to transfer from their L1 (English) to their TL (French) will be based on the assumption that the lexical structures of these two languages are more similar than is in fact the case.²

On the basis of their previous linguistic knowledge, they will assume that, given the large number of cognates shared by these languages, it is possible to exchange lexical items from English into French. Their misperception of the nature of the relationship between these languages will manifest itself as lexical L1-based errors. Conversely, it is predicted

that given their greater L2 lexical knowledge and awareness of the relationship between English and French, the fourth-year learners will not be confused or led astray by the presence of these deceptive cognates in the L2 translation task.

The second hypothesis will focus on the extent to which the two learner groups rely on avoidance strategies. It is predicted that the less proficient learners will be more likely to compensate for gaps in their L2 lexical knowledge by relying on avoidance strategies than the fourth-year learners. This view is consistent with Blum-Kulka & Levenston (1983: 123) who use the term ‘apparent avoidance’ to describe the process whereby L2 language learners use avoidance strategies as a means of solving communication problems due to lack of vocabulary or insufficient linguistic knowledge.

This hypothesis is also shaped by what has been written about the phenomenon of ‘transfer of training’. The term was coined by Selinker (1972) to refer to a process whereby a learner’s difficulty with a TL item or structure may be attributed to the training procedure. To illustrate this process he cites the difficulty that Serbo-Croatian learners have in their L2 English with the gender distinction in the third person singular pronouns *he/she*, preferring to use *he* everywhere. According to Selinker (1972: 218), “textbooks and teachers almost always present drills with *he* and never with *she*”. This would be a case where apparently learners have transferred their training in the use of *he* into their interlanguage grammars. Given their problematic nature and the background to the present study, it is likely that a teacher who sees cognates as a source of error will warn students about the dangers of using them and how they can often “produce ludicrous or otherwise memorable effects in learner language” (Ringbom, 2007: 75).

Participants

The participants in this study were 30 advanced learners, university students who were studying French as one of two subjects for their BA degree. Their first language was English. They had all studied French for five years at secondary school. In addition, they had all achieved at least a Grade C in Higher Level French in the Leaving Certificate Examination.³ They had all followed courses in French language and had taken the first-year course entitled *Introduction to Language Study* as part of their undergraduate degree programme. They were organised into two groups: 15 students from first year and 15 students from fourth year.

Data Elicitation Task

The study was designed to highlight linguistic awareness of false friends in a translation-based language exercise. The translation task administered to the 30 advanced learners was entitled “Tackling Linguistic Problems”. It contained four sections and each section had ten items, which were in turn subdivided into (a) and (b), making 80 items in all to be translated. These items contained lexical traps for the learners in so far as two formally similar but semantically different phrases were juxtaposed in (a) and (b) of each item. They were specifically designed to elicit how these English-speaking university learners of French would react to the phenomenon of false friends in a translation-based language exercise.

Section 1 asked students to translate a number of French phrases into English. Apart from the first item, all items in Section 1 contained deceptive cognates which were either

partially equivalent or totally non-equivalent from a conceptual point of view. An example of a deceptive cognate which is partially equivalent from a conceptual point of view is item 5 (i.e. (a) *les civilisations anciennes*, (b) *l'ancien président*). The partial equivalence of the French deceptive cognate in 5 (b), *ancien*, is due to diverging polysemy in French and English. This means that although both languages distinguish the same meanings, one language expresses them by the one and the same polysemous item whereas the other makes use of two different items. Similarly, learners may have experienced problems translating the deceptive cognate in item 7 (b) (i.e. *l'arme du crime*) which is totally non-equivalent from a semantic point of view (i.e. *the murder weapon*).

In Section 2 students were asked to translate sentences from French into English. This section was designed to test their awareness of false friends in a situation where meaning is context-dependent. Item 5 (a) and (b) may have misled or confused the learners into thinking that the French *anniversaire de mariage* could be translated into English using the expression *anniversary of marriage* based on the F. *anniversaire* in 5 (b). The F. *anniversaire* has two translation equivalents in English, namely *anniversary* and *birthday*.

Section 3 asked students to translate a number of sentences from English into French. The first four items in this section deal with translational equivalence from a collocational point of view. Collocational meaning can be defined as the meaning of a word as far as it is determined by the preferential or exclusive company it keeps. Item 8 may have posed problems for learners in so far as the English word *bus* can be used either on its own to refer to a moving vehicle or in the collocation: *bus trip*. By contrast, French has two different words: *bus/autobus* and *car/autocar* for E. *bus*.

In the final section, learners were asked to translate phrases from English into French. The deceptive cognates in this section were particularly tricky for learners because they were designed to test their L2 lexical knowledge. For example, item 1 (b) was likely to lead to errors in learners' written translations unless they knew that it is not necessary to translate E. *charge* as part of the phrase: *an additional charge*. This was in contradistinction to 1 (a), where it was necessary to include E. *week* in the translation of the English phrase *an additional week* as *une semaine supplémentaire*.

Data Analysis

The scoring of the learners' written translations proceeded in three steps. In the first instance, acceptable responses for the items in each section were taken from the *Dictionnaire des faux amis* (1988) and *NTC's Dictionary of French Faux Pas* (1994). Their acceptability was then submitted to the scrutiny of a native French speaker and the researcher, an Anglophone. The percentage of inter-related agreement was 98.75%.⁴ This list was subsequently used to score the learners' written translations. They were classified according to three categories: correct, avoided and incorrect. Responses that corresponded with those on the list of acceptable responses were scored as correct. When the learners left gaps or blanks beside the lexical item to be translated, they were considered to belong to the avoided response category. The final category was the incorrect responses, which were classified according to four headings: interlingual, intralingual, underspecification and miscellaneous. These categories will be explained in greater detail later.

The data were inputted into SPSS 15.0 for statistical analysis. The differences observed were checked for statistical significance using t-tests.

Findings and Discussion

Descriptive and inferential statistics presented are derived from a comparative analysis of the performance of the two groups of learners in the four sections of the translation task.

Table 1 Total Number of Correct Responses in Translation Task (n=30)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	36.00	6.54	.000
4	52.33	4.98	

Table 1 indicates that the mean score for correct responses achieved by the fourth-year group was higher than for the first-year group.

Table 2 Total Number of Avoided Responses in Translation Task (n=30)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	13.87	9.37	.011
4	5.60	7.22	

Table 2 shows that the first-year group had a higher average mean score for avoided responses than the fourth-year group.

Table 3 Total Number of Incorrect Responses in Translation Task (n=30)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	29.13	6.93	.003
4	21.80	5.13	

Table 3 demonstrates that the first-year group had on average more incorrect responses than the fourth-year group.

The results would suggest that the fourth-year learners showed a marked improvement in performance across all three response categories. Comparison of means using independent sample t-tests showed significant differences between the learner groups at $p < .05$, as displayed in Tables 1, 2 and 3. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 1 which predicts that the fourth-year students will deal with the phenomenon of false friends more competently than the first-year students.

As already mentioned in the article, the incorrect responses elicited by the first- and fourth-year learners in the translation task were classified under four headings: interlingual, intralingual, underspecification and miscellaneous. An interlingual error was operationally defined as any error in French which could be attributed to the structure of English. Examples from the data include E. *the actual government* for F. *le gouvernement actuel*, F. *un grand mensonge* for E. *a big lie*. The second category concerned intralingual errors, which were defined as any error that could be attributed to the overgeneralisation of L2 rules. For example, the use of the French word *antiquier* instead of *antiquaire* (i.e. antique dealer) based on the overgeneralisation of the suffix *ier* from the French word *banquier* (i.e. banker). The third type was underspecification,

which could be attributed to underspecification in meaning. An example from the data is the use of E. *the bottom of the statue* for F. *la base de la statue*. The final error category was miscellaneous. A miscellaneous error was defined as any error which could not be attributed to any of the other three error categories. Nonsense words were also included in this category. Examples include F. *bus cours* for E. *a bus trip*, E. *a berth on a ship* for F. *une cabine d'essayage*.

Table 4 Total Number of Interlingual Errors in Translation Task (n=30)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	20.87	4.85	1.25
4	14.67	3.24	.84

Table 4 shows that lexical L1-based transfer errors were more prevalent among the first-year learner group than the fourth-year group. Comparison of means using independent sample t-tests showed significant differences between the learner groups at $p < .05$. This finding clearly supports Hypothesis I concerning the prevalence of lexical L1-based transfer errors among the first-year learner group.

Table 5 Total Number of Intralingual Errors in Translation Task (n=30)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	1.20	.86	.22
4	.60	.63	.16

Table 5 demonstrates that the first-year group had on average twice as many intralingual errors as the fourth-year group.

Table 6 Total Number of Underspecification Errors in Translation Task (n=30)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	2.40	2.06	.53
4	4.87	2.90	.75

Table 6 shows that the mean score for underspecification errors was higher for fourth-year learners than for first-year learners.

Table 7 Total Number of Miscellaneous Errors in Translation Task (n=30)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	5.40	4.45	1.15
4	1.47	1.30	.34

Table 7 indicates that there were significantly more miscellaneous errors in the translation equivalents offered by the first-year group than by the fourth-year group.

Another observation from Table 2 is that the results support Hypothesis II, which predicts that the first-year group will rely more heavily on avoidance strategies than the fourth-year learners. The first-year students clearly exhibit greater levels of reliance on avoidance as a means of solving communication problems due to lack of L2 vocabulary or linguistic knowledge. It is also plausible to suggest that the avoidance behaviour of these advanced L2 learners was shaped by their language teachers' attitudes to the problematic nature of deceptive cognates. Given the background to the present study, it is conceivable that a teacher who sees cognates as a source of error because of the presence of false friends will warn students about the dangers of using them. Hence, learners are more likely to avoid them in L2 production.

Conclusions and Some Didactic Implications

This cross-sectional analysis of lexical transfer echoes Kellerman's (1984: 121) viewpoint in the sense that "advanced learners are affected by cross-linguistic influence in different ways from beginners, but simply because they know more and their knowledge opens up new susceptible areas". The results confirm the underlying hypothesis of the study that the fourth-year learners will cope with the phenomenon of false friends more competently than the first-year learners. The pattern of L2 avoidance behaviour among the first-year learners raises an important point in relation to the teaching of vocabulary to advanced students. Foreign language teachers need to adopt a measured approach to the teaching of deceptive cognates, especially among more advanced learners who have already developed their own individual learning strategies and may profit from at least some supplementary information on deceptive cognates and on the differences in register and frequency in the use of cognates (Ringbom, 2007). This is necessary to avoid the situation where deceptive cognates assume an importance in the learners' and teachers' minds that is out of proportion to their significance.

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Notes

¹ Jarvis (2000, p. 247) provides an overview of conflicting findings of transfer studies in relation to whether transfer increases (e.g. Hyltenstam, 1984), decreases (e.g. Taylor, 1975), stays the same (e.g. Poulisse, 1990) or fluctuates (Jarvis, 1998) with IL (interlanguage) development.

² The definition of transfer is borrowed from Kellerman & Sharwood Smith (1986: 1) as “those processes that lead to incorporation of elements from one language to another”.

³ The Leaving Certificate is the final second-level examination required for entry to third-level education in Ireland.

⁴ The difference concerned one item, 3 (b) in Section 3. Upon reflection, it was decided to add the aforementioned response to the list of acceptable responses.