

When Languages Interfere, What is the Solution? A Case Study of Fourth-Year Primary School Students in Bechar Province, Algeria

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Abstract :

In 2022, the Algerian government introduced the English as a Foreign Language learning programme in primary schools, starting with third-grade students as the first cohort to study English. Learning English at a young age presents challenges, primarily due to the significant differences between a student's native language and the target language. These differences can hinder the development of language skills, particularly speaking proficiency. This research paper explores the phenomenon of mother tongue interference in EFL learning, focusing on teachers' usage and learners' perceptions. Online and face-to-face interviews and non-participant classroom observations were used to address three main questions: the impact of the mother tongue on speaking skills, its effect on linguistic development, and strategies for teachers to promote English thinking. The Findings reveal that both teachers and students often resort to the mother tongue, with many teachers being unaware of language interference. The findings emphasise using diverse materials to minimise reliance on the mother tongue and foster creativity in language teaching.

Key Words: English as a Foreign Language, Primary Schools, Learning English, Language Skills, Mother Tongue Interference.

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I. Introduction

Education in Algeria begins at the age of six, with students attending primary schools for duration of five years. During this period, they studied a diverse range of subjects each year, including geography, history, mathematics, and the Arabic language. Starting in their third year of primary school, students are introduced to two additional languages: French as a second language and English as a foreign language. Notably, due to the impact of globalisation and the growing importance of English in the education sector, language instruction in elementary schools was officially introduced in September 2022.

In response to the Ministry of Education's decision to integrate English into the curriculum, the new syllabus was prepared in a mere two months. Primary school teachers were not allowed to begin working in primary schools after completing their training program. This unexpected decision left them uncertain about how to manage their classrooms, engage with students, and effectively use the new books and curriculum. Moreover, students expressed that learning two languages simultaneously was quite challenging, indicating they were unprepared for this change.

Learning English as a foreign language in primary school presents a significant challenge. One major difficulty is the influence of students' mother tongue on their English language acquisition, which affects both teachers and students. Many students feel that mastering English is difficult without relying on their native language and translation. Despite teachers' efforts to limit the use of Arabic in the classroom, students frequently revert to their first language. This dependence ultimately impacts their output and proficiency in English. Therefore, this research investigates the interference of the mother tongue in the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking skills among fourth-year primary school students, specifically examining the role of Arabic in their English studies.

This study examines the impact that Arabic has on the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It aims to explore the following objectives:

- To understand how students feel about using Arabic in the classroom and whether they believe it will help them in their EFL journey.
- To identify the factors that hinder students from developing self-confidence in their ability to learn EFL without relying on Arabic.
- To describe the effects of these factors on students' learning experiences.

Therefore, this research intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of using Arabic as a reference for learning English speaking skills among Algerian primary school students?
2. How does Arabic influence their English-speaking development linguistically?
3. What strategies do Algerian EFL teachers use to reduce Arabic use in the classroom?

A better understanding of the effects of language interference between the Algerian Arabic dialect and English as a foreign language is achieved by using multiple interpretive data collection methods. These methods include face-to-face interviews and non-participant observations, providing valuable insight into the teaching and learning of English-speaking skills within Algerian primary schools.

II. Theoretical Framework

Language learning, teaching, and target language acquisition have all been said to benefit greatly from the mother tongue. Many theories emphasise the concept of language transfer in language acquisition. Behaviourists have historically maintained that rather than the target language's complex rules, learners' challenges are from the habits they developed in their mother tongue.

The effect that arises from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other previously learnt language is known as language transfer (Odlin, 1989). Additionally, the term "language transfer" describes how a person's native tongue affects the process of acquiring a second language. It involves applying linguistic rules from the first language to the second, which can result in errors but can give language learners insightful information (Gass & Selinker, 1992). It is important to consider language transfer as a broad word that encompasses a variety of language-related influences outside of L2. The review of term transfer involves the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of target language norms and overuse (Ellis, 1994). This means that there are two main types of LT, which are:

Positive transfer: When the target language and the native language share the same form, positive transfer—which facilitates learning—may occur. For instance, "pardon" is a word that shares the same meaning in both French and English (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In other words, when the native language and the target language share the same form, positive transfer—transfer that facilitates learning—may take place. Thus, it can be said that Positive transfer occurs when prior knowledge or experience in one language improves learning or performance in another language. There are various significant elements to consider, including:

- a. The similarity between languages: Learners are more likely to see positive language transfer when there are vocabulary, grammatical, or syntactic similarities between their first and second languages. Items that are equivalent in both languages are known as cognates, and they can help with vocabulary development and comprehension.
- b. Intelligence level: Individuals with excellent cognitive talents may be more able to identify patterns and structures that are shared by their original language and the second language. This cognitive flexibility can improve positive language transfer by allowing learners to draw connections and apply prior knowledge efficiently.
- c. Level of Proficiency: Positive language transfer can also be facilitated by increased second language skills. As learners grow more familiar with the target language's structures and regulations, they will be able to recognize similarities with their original language more easily, resulting in correct and appropriate linguistic transfer.
- d. Emotional State: Motivation, self-assurance, and curiosity are examples of positive emotional states that can support successful language learning and positive transfer from the original tongue.
- e. Contextual Support: Good language transfer can be improved by giving students chances to practice and apply what they have learned in relevant circumstances.

Negative transfer (language interference): The term "interference" was first used in the exact sciences to refer to interactions that could result in either a positive or negative outcome. It originated in linguistics by academics from the Prague Linguistic Circle, who claimed that interference processes differ from the standard for connecting languages. Negative transfer refers to an error caused by a past habitual behaviour that differs from the newly taught activity. Positive transfer is expected when patterns in the LI and FL are comparable and result in a correct utterance, whereas negative transfer occurs when patterns conflict and result in errors in language output (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). Furthermore, language interference refers to the realignment of a language system caused by the entrance of foreign elements into the more highly organised domains of the language (Weinreich, 1968). Understanding the concepts and principles of language interference can help identify issues related to language development and communication. Language interference can occur at different levels, including:

- a. **Phonological interference:** Foreign accents that affect the second language include stress, rhythm, intonation, and speech sounds. This phenomenon is known as phonological interference. When a bilingual person hears and mimics sounds from one language using another, this component appears, which could lead to misunderstandings and incorrect pronunciations among speakers (Mamo, 2016).
- b. **Grammatical interference:** refers to shifts in the structure and parts of the foreign language. It is prompted by semantic and procedural

similarities and differences between the native and foreign language systems. Each language has its unique grammar. The MT influences the word order, the tenses, the use of pronouns, and many other items.

- c. **Morphological interference:** is a linguistic variation that occurs during word production or when a language's receiver absorbs information from its source. Words change during formation due to affixation, but they retain their meaning. In the context of language learning, morphological interference can lead to the transfer of features from the student's first language (L1) to their second language (L2), which can result in errors and difficulties in L2 acquisition (Muziatun, Bay, & Maryam, 2020).
- d. Syntactic interference occurs at the syntactic level of sentence representation. It is an uncommon phenomenon and can lead to difficulties in language processing for bilinguals. It can result in grammatical errors; particularly in student translations. Syntactic interference can be classified into four types: omission, addition, mis-formation, and mis-ordering (Lee, 1997).
- e. **Lexical interference:** happens when one vocabulary interferes with another, causing issues with word choice and meaning. This type refers to the borrowing of lexemes from a foreign language in bilingualism, which is expressed either by transferring a phonemic sequence from one language to another or by shifts in the structure of the meaning of the native language's lexeme or formations scaled according to the model of foreign words (Abduhamidovna, 2020).

1. Teaching-Learning English as a Foreign Language

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the term used to describe the study of English by non-native speakers in countries where English is not the dominant language. This is not to be confused with English as a Second Language—also called English as an Additional Language—which is the practice of learning English in a predominantly English-speaking country (Nordquist, 2022). Teaching and learning English as a foreign language is important for many reasons such as:

- a. **Student Learning Motivation:** EFL focuses on student learning motivation and adapts the learning process and content to the student's area of interest.
- b. **Academic and Research Competence:** EFL helps in shaping the academic and research competence of students, as it helps in reading strategies and handling professional and scientific information.
- c. **Global Communication:** English is the most widely spoken language in the world, and it is essential for global communication. EFL teaching helps non-native English speakers to communicate effectively in English, which is crucial for international business, tourism, and academic research.

- d. Cultural Awareness: EFL teaching helps learners to increase their cultural awareness and knowledge.
- e. Migration and Integration: EFL teaching assists immigrants to find employment, settle into society, continue their education, and make friends. It contributes to a healthier and more diverse society, better relationships between cultural minorities, and a better understanding of the world around us.
- f. Employment Opportunities: English is the official language of more than 50 countries, and job seekers have plenty of options for finding work abroad if they speak it.

III. Methodological Procedures

The research follows a qualitative approach, which aligns with the study's objectives, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. Qualitative methods were used, including classroom observations and interviews with teachers and inspectors. Using a qualitative approach in this study facilitated the collection of essential data to meet the research objectives and answer the questions posed.

1. Research Population

Defining the target population is an initial step in the research process. This definition sets a clear direction and delineates the scope for study design and data collection (Akman, 2023). According to Akman, the target population encompasses the entire group of individuals or objects that researchers aim to investigate and draw conclusions about. It serves as the central focus of scientific inquiry and forms the basis for research findings. Thus, the complete population selected for this research consists of teachers and students from various primary schools in Bechar province, Algeria.

1.1 Classroom Observation Sampling

A non-probability quota sampling technique was used to select participants for classroom observations, ensuring a representative distribution by defining specific groups for voluntary participation. As a result, the first data collection method involved a total of eleven schools, twenty-three EFL classrooms, and 776 students from Bechar province.

1.2 Interview Sampling

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to select participants based on their knowledge of the research topic. This technique enables the collection of quick and diverse responses. The interviewees were distinct from the teachers who were observed. Four female teachers and an inspector were interviewed; two of the teachers participated via WhatsApp, while the others were interviewed in person.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

A research interview is a conversation to gather information that involves an interviewer, who coordinates the process and asks questions, and an interviewee, who provides answers to those questions (Easwaramoorthy & Zarinpoush, 2006). A semi-structured interview format was chosen to provide interviewees with an

opportunity to express and share their opinions openly. The purpose of the interview was to:

- Compile additional information on teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in primary schools.
- Understand the perspectives of both teachers and inspectors regarding language interference and the impact of the mother tongue (MT) on learning EFL speaking skills.
- Anticipate future suggestions to minimize language transfer.

The interview schedule consists of nineteen questions directed at primary school teachers and inspectors. These questions are closely related to the research topic and include both open-ended and closed-ended formats.

2.2 Non-Participatory Classroom Observation

Classroom observation involves a careful examination of education through various data-collection methods. This process includes the observer attending lessons to watch and document the teacher's instructional techniques and the student's activities.

In this study, an observation sheet was used, which contained a series of questions to effectively gather information on the research topic and make detailed observations during classroom sessions. A total of 24 classroom observation sessions were conducted for this research. Among the questions asked in the observation sheet:

Questions for Teachers

- Does the teacher explain only in English?
- How often does the teacher explain unknown vocabulary to the students?
- Does the teacher explain in Arabic?
- Does the teacher write Arabic words in the board?
- Does the teacher use body language to explain abstract/ unfamiliar vocabulary?
- Does the teacher allow his/her pupils to use their Arabic?
- How much does the teacher use his/her mother tongue in the class?
- How does the teacher treat the pupils when they use Arabic?

Questions for Students

- Do the pupils interact with the teacher while explaining in English?
- Do the pupils construct simple sentence?
- Do they combine both Arabic and English languages?

3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method used to analyze qualitative data, often applied to texts, documents, interviews, and observation sheets. It involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (referred to as "themes") within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The researchers used a qualitative approach following thematic analysis based on the steps outlined by Clarke and Braun. The analysis began with a thorough review of the data to gain insight into students' desire for individualised feedback and

discussions with teachers. Next, the data was organised into smaller, meaningful segments through initial coding, which focused on specific research questions. Significant themes within the data were then identified and refined to ensure clarity and differentiation. Finally, the essence and relationships of each theme were clarified.

IV. Results and Findings Discussion

The results of the interview data coding will be presented using a thematic analysis approach, categorising the findings into top-level themes and sub-themes.

1. Top Level Theme: Teaching in Algerian Primary School

1.1 Sub-theme: A Good Decision: All the interviewees agree that the decision to teach and learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in primary schools is a positive step, and they believe the government has successfully implemented this decision. English is a vivid language that has become global and is in high demand at various levels of life. The teachers demonstrate creativity in this field, and students enjoy learning EFL, as it offers a fresh perspective and a joyful learning experience.

1.2 Sub-theme: A Wise Rule: The Ministry of Education has implemented a law that prohibits the use of the Mother Tongue in teaching foreign languages, specifically English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This decision is regarded as a wise move, and all interviewees have expressed their agreement. Teaching a language should be done independently; using the mother tongue can hinder students' ability to acquire the necessary knowledge. Additionally, there are numerous resources available for teachers that help them minimise the use of the Mother Tongue in their instruction.

1.3 Sub-theme: Learning EFL at a Young Age: All the interviewees shared their opinions on learning EFL starting at the age of nine. Learning a foreign language at an early age is more effective than learning it later in life. Students enjoy learning English because of its lively nature, which makes it easier for them to acquire knowledge about English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

1.4 Sub-theme: Facilitating the Learning Process: The inspector stated that a foreign language should not be taught through the medium of another language. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) using the mother tongue is not effective. There are countless ways for teachers to present ideas to students in a way that makes them easy to understand, without relying on Arabic or any dialect. However, some teachers believe that using the mother tongue can facilitate the learning process for young students learning EFL.

2. Top level theme: Language Interference

2.1 Sub-theme: The Ignorance of The Aspect: The interviewees do not understand the true meaning of language interference. Some teachers are unaware of the term. All the teachers believe that interference occurs with the French language, not with the Mother Tongue.

2.2 Sub-theme: Evaluating The Speaking Skills: All participants have agreed that the students' speaking levels range from average to good. Due to

their interest and motivation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), they consistently seek to improve and enhance their speaking skills. Furthermore, teachers use various materials to help their young learners improve their oral expression.

2.3 Sub-theme: Speaking Skills Issues: Interviews reflect a similar viewpoint, highlighting that the most common difficulties are phonological in nature. As beginners, it is clear that young pupils face numerous speaking challenges for several reasons. First, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a new concept for them, and they may not have sufficient knowledge about it. Additionally, their mother tongue significantly influences their learning process. For example, in their native language, they do not have the sound /ð/, which leads them to pronounce it as /d/.

2.4 Sub-theme: The Assessment of The Speaking Skill: Fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension are crucial aspects that teachers consider for developing their pupils' speaking skills. The interviewees agreed that assessing these aspects helps learners improve their speaking competence.

2.5 Sub-theme: The Transfer from Mother Tongue to EFL: The students are not native speakers and often use their mother tongue. Additionally, they are beginners, and the English language is still new to them. As a result, transferring from their mother tongue is a common issue.

2.6 Sub-theme: The Negative Influence of The Mother Tongue: Most of the interviewees believe that the mother tongue influences English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning. They cite factors such as limited knowledge, insufficient vocabulary, thinking in Arabic, and reliance on translation as contributing to this influence. However, a few interviewees, drawing from their experiences, argue that the mother tongue does not have an impact on learning English as a foreign language.

The findings from the classroom observation have proven the results from the teachers' interviews. Although the Arabic language includes a wide range of sounds that humans can produce, fourth-year primary school learners often struggle with speaking and producing English due to the influence of their mother tongue. For instance, pupils have difficulty pronouncing the /r/ sound correctly because it is affected by the Arabic "ر" (raa). In English, the /r/ sound is articulated by curving the tip of the tongue upwards without touching the alveolar ridge. In contrast, the Arabic "ر" requires the tip of the tongue to touch the alveolar ridge.

Additionally, students find it challenging to pronounce the /tʃ/ sound, as this particular sound does not exist in Arabic. This can lead to difficulties with words such as "chess" or "chest," where the /tʃ/ sound is essential.

However, sometimes the use of the mother tongue may help the learners develop their speaking English skills. For example, in the lecture on /θ/ and /ð/, the pupils got the right pronunciation of both sounds by using the Arabic letters "ث" and "ذ". Most of the teachers used Arabic in the class, even during the explanation of the lesson.

The students could not learn English if they did not practice it in class with their teachers. There are a lot of techniques that may help teachers simplify and clarify the instruction for the learners, such as using body language or showing them pictures. Thus, they can avoid using their mother tongue.

In general, classroom observations revealed a range of strategies and challenges. Teachers focus on explaining unfamiliar vocabulary in English, using body language for effective communication, and allowing limited use of the mother tongue for classroom management. Students display a keen interest in learning English, attempt to construct simple sentences, and sometimes mix Arabic and English due to language background limitations. While some learners find using Arabic slows their learning process, others excel by combining both languages. Common speaking errors, including grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, highlight the importance of consistent English language practice for improved speaking skills and accuracy.

V. Conclusion

In Algeria, EFL instruction in primary schools is still relatively new. Young students are driven and enthusiastic about learning a new language. They make every effort to improve their comprehension of the language skills. As is well known, speech is one of the primary abilities that must be cultivated, and mastering it requires effort. Furthermore, primary school EFL learners are accustomed to speaking only in their mother tongue, which means that their L1 has an impact on how well they can communicate. The fourth-graders in Algerian primary schools were the subject of the researchers' attention.

The information acquired helped in addressing the research questions of this study. Firstly, learning EFL speaking skills by relying on the mother language can lead to interference errors, a lack of exposure to English, the fossilisation of mistakes, negative transfer, a decline in motivation, and a lack of confidence. To avoid these problems, teachers should monitor their students' L1 usage according to their proficiency levels and provide opportunities for exposure to and practice of English to improve EFL speaking abilities.

Second, there are several different elements that can interfere with EFL students' ability to learn to speak. Grammatical interference shows up as mistakes in sentence structure and word order that are influenced by the first language, whereas phonological interference results from differences in pronunciation between the mother tongue and English sounds. Lexical interference also includes errors in vocabulary usage and word choice that come from the mother tongue. Along with the critical role that motivation plays in fostering English competence, environmental factors, such as exposure to English outside of the classroom, can have an impact on language learning. Pronunciation issues might also result from the mother tongues and English's different sound systems. Together, these elements affect language interference and have a big impact on how EFL students develop their speaking skills.

Thirdly, teachers can use different strategies to control the use of the mother language in EFL students and motivate them to think in English. These include

making the classroom an English-only setting, using various instructional techniques such as visual aids and demonstrations, and teaching students the drawbacks of depending too much on their L1. Teachers should also take a strict and consistent stand, disregarding pupils when they speak in their original tongue and reminding them repeatedly of exam criteria that frequently restrict the use of mother tongues. By putting these strategies into practice, teachers can reduce the amount of time spent speaking in L1.

Based on this finding, this research emphasises the following ways to avoid L1 interference in EFL classrooms:

- Using technology and digital materials
- Using videos, songs, and foreshadowing
- Using realia (real scenes)
- Using role play
- Using body language and gestures in explanation
- Engaging learners with native speakers in virtual communication
- Motivating the learners to explore new vocabulary
- Motivating learners to get meaning through context

For future recommendations, researchers should focus on investigating alternative and new solutions to avoid L1 interference in the development of EFL speaking skills.

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