

The use of the mother tongue in teaching French as a foreign language

L'utilisation de la langue maternelle dans l'enseignement du français langue étrangère

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Abstract

This study examines the problem of the use of the mother tongue in the teaching of foreign languages, in particular its influence on the learning of French as a foreign language, with a particular focus on oral interference among pupils in the fifth year of primary school. We analyse both the advantages and the limitations of integrating the mother tongue into the teaching and learning of French. The teacher faces multiple obstacles when trying to improve the understanding and acquisition of French through the mother tongue. This recourse influences both the way in which a foreign language is learned and the way in which it is taught, thus playing a mediating role in language learning situations.

Keywords: mother tongue- teaching- learning- French as a foreign language- utility

Résumé

Dans cette recherche, nous avons essayé d'aborder la question de l'utilisation de la langue maternelle dans l'apprentissage du français langue étrangère. et les interférences rencontrées dans la parole chez les élèves de cinquième année primaire : Nous analysons également les avantages et les inconvénients de l'utilisation de la langue maternelle. Puisque c'est à ce niveau que l'enseignant trouve de nombreuses difficultés afin de faciliter l'apprentissage et d'atteindre une meilleure compréhension il fera recours à la langue maternelle qui a une influence sur la façon d'apprendre et d'enseigner une langue étrangère. Cette dernière joue un rôle de facilitateur de situations d'apprentissage du français langue étrangère.

Mots- clés : la langue maternelle- l'enseignement- l'apprentissage-le français comme langue étrangère- l'utilité

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Introduction

In the course of their careers, foreign language teachers inevitably find themselves confronted with the issue of the integration and role of the learners' mother tongue in the process of acquiring a new language. This recurring question invites teachers to reflect in depth, both professionally and personally, even introspectively. In search of precise, informed answers, teachers are often forced to reconsider their teaching methods and consider readjustments. The mother tongue, far from being a mere support, plays a decisive role in consolidating previous knowledge and developing the skills needed to master a foreign language effectively. Its role is therefore indisputable. However, a paradox remains regarding its use in foreign language teaching, where the primary objective is to help learners appropriate a language.

This study will attempt to examine the following aspects:

- To what extent can the use of the mother tongue among pupils in the fifth year of primary school promote learning?

- The mastery of learners' linguistic skills in their mother tongue could promote a better understanding of French as a foreign language and provide teachers with simplified access to the information needed for teaching?

1-Teaching French in Algeria:

During the colonial period, as was the case in other regions, French was employed as the language of instruction in Algeria. French was taught to Algerians as their mother tongue, employing methodologies and curricula analogous to those utilized in France for French-speaking populations. Following the attainment of independence, the Algerian political establishment's primary objective in relation to language was to elevate Arabic to its rightful status as the national and official language of the Algerian Republic in all areas, primarily through the process of Arabization. Consequently, French was relegated to the status of a foreign or second language. French is no longer a compulsory subject in Algerian schools, particularly at the basic education level (primary, middle, and high school). Science classes are taught in Arabic, and the number of weekly teaching hours has fluctuated, ranging from three-quarters of the curriculum to just a few hours. Nevertheless, French has retained its status as a language of culture, modernity and openness to the world within Algerian society. As Y. Derradji notes, 71.07% of parents prefer French as their children's first foreign language, with 28.72% preferring English. At the present time, there are calls for English to be designated as the primary foreign language (Derradji, 2009). The teaching of French in the junior cycle French is introduced in the third year of primary education in Algeria, following a two-year course in classical Arabic (the official language). In the junior cycle, French is taught as a subject for four years, with a weekly allocation of five hours devoted to its study. The teaching objectives are designed to cultivate pupils' command of the language so that they can communicate orally (listening/speaking) and in writing (reading/writing) in educational contexts suited to their cognitive development. This approach aims to achieve the ultimate goal of integration, whereby pupils can produce oral or written expressions adapted to specific communication situations based on oral or visual stimuli (text, image)

2. Functions of mother tongue in foreign language teaching

The mother tongue is employed by teachers in a variety of ways, fulfilling a number of functions, including:

2.1. Mother tongue at the service of communication

The use of the mother tongue in education is a key factor in improving understanding and facilitating student comprehension. This concept is known as the 'facilitator schema', as proposed by F. Cicurel. This approach acknowledges the pivotal role of the teacher as the most knowledgeable figure in the classroom, responsible for effectively conveying information to students to facilitate knowledge acquisition. In the context of a Year 5 language class, where students are still developing their cognitive and linguistic abilities, the strategic use of the mother tongue becomes even more significant.

By using the mother tongue, the teacher can effectively manage classroom dynamics, creating an environment in which students feel safe and engaged. This approach enables the teacher to maintain discipline and deal with behavioral issues in a way that is easily understood by young learners. Furthermore, the use of their mother tongue helps the teacher to build a personal rapport with the students.

2.2. Mother tongue at the service of learning

The use of the mother tongue in the teaching of French as a foreign language is an essential tool for ensuring effective knowledge transfer and providing comprehensive support to learners at every stage of the learning process. One of the principal functions is the resolution of misunderstandings. When students encounter difficulties in comprehending the concepts conveyed in French, teachers often resort to the mother tongue to translate and elucidate, thereby facilitating enhanced comprehension. Furthermore, some educators opt to provide explanations directly in the native language when they anticipate that doing so in French might result in confusion, thereby saving time and maintaining the lesson's momentum. When introducing new material in French, if it becomes evident that students are still struggling, the mother tongue is employed to reinforce and consolidate their comprehension, thereby ensuring that no gaps remain in their understanding. Furthermore, the mother tongue is of great value for conveying instructions, particularly when learners have difficulty following them in French; translating these instructions allows for more seamless task execution and minimizes confusion. By strategically incorporating the mother tongue, teachers enhance the overall learning experience, making it more accessible and efficient for students, especially at lower proficiency levels (Mottaz, 2015).

3. Motivations for using the mother tongue

The use of the mother tongue in language classes plays a pivotal role in enhancing the learning experience by addressing various instructional needs and learner-specific challenges. Its usage is not uniform but varies depending on the teacher's pedagogical approach, the nature of classroom activities, and, most importantly, the learners' proficiency levels. Among beginner-

level students, such as 5th graders, reliance on the mother tongue is generally higher, as it helps them navigate the complexities of learning a new language. As learners advance, particularly in languages like French, their growing linguistic autonomy reduces the need for mother tongue support, allowing them to immerse more fully in the target language.

The reasons for integrating the mother tongue into language teaching are diverse. First, it acts as a crucial tool for simplifying difficult concepts or instructions, thereby streamlining the learning process and ensuring that students grasp key ideas without unnecessary confusion. Second, allowing the use of the mother tongue builds learners' confidence, making them more comfortable and willing to participate actively in class, which creates a more positive and inclusive learning environment. Third, drawing comparisons between the mother tongue and the target language enhances students' understanding of linguistic structures, making it easier to comprehend new grammar rules or vocabulary.

In addition, the mother tongue is instrumental in clarifying cultural concepts that might otherwise be difficult to convey solely in the target language. By linking new cultural elements to familiar ones from their own culture, students can engage more deeply with the material. Moreover, using the mother tongue reduces the anxiety often associated with learning a new language, enabling learners to focus more effectively on the content rather than the stress of unfamiliarity. It also fosters communication among peers, especially when students share the same native language, facilitating discussions about challenges and encouraging mutual support.

Another critical function of the mother tongue is preventing misunderstandings, particularly in sensitive or complex situations, where clear communication is essential. It serves as a linguistic bridge, ensuring that students fully understand critical points without ambiguity. Furthermore, maintaining a connection to one's cultural heritage through the use of the mother tongue not only boosts self-esteem but also encourages students to actively engage in the learning process. This connection enriches classroom interactions, leading to better collaboration, increased participation, and stronger social integration among learners. Ultimately, incorporating the mother tongue in language teaching fosters a more meaningful and holistic learning experience, supporting both linguistic development and cultural identity (García & Sylvan, 2011).

4. Language, learning and communication

4.1.Mother tongue in the service of learning and communication

The notion of "Mother Tongue in the Service of Learning and Communication" underscores the pivotal role that a person's native language plays in facilitating both the learning process and effective communication. Research suggests that leveraging one's mother tongue in educational settings can enhance comprehension, retention, and overall academic achievement (Cummins, 2001). Moreover, embracing the mother tongue in educational contexts

promotes a sense of identity, cultural pride, and linguistic diversity, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable learning environment (Thomas & Collier, 2002). By recognizing and valuing the importance of the mother tongue, educators can foster a supportive learning environment that empowers students to engage actively in their education while preserving and celebrating their linguistic heritage.

In French as a foreign language instruction, the mother tongue proves invaluable, particularly when elucidating challenging words or expressions. Here, the teacher deploys the mother tongue to verify comprehension and enhance communication. Consequently, the mother tongue plays a substantial role in expression activities at beginner or intermediate levels, compensating for learners' limited linguistic backgrounds in French. It acts as a remedial tool to address comprehension gaps between learners and teachers, while also expediting instruction delivery in courses where learners exhibit greater proficiency.

4.2. The place and role of the use of the mother tongue in teaching/learning French as a foreign language

The use of the mother tongue is a complex linguistic phenomenon which manifests itself, voluntarily or involuntarily, when the teacher mobilizes linguistic codes other than those of the target language, in this case French, for a specific purpose, often linked to conceptual clarification or the management of classroom interactions. In language teaching research, opinions on this practice are divided. Some theorists see it as a valuable metalinguistic tool that can enhance intercultural understanding and facilitate the acquisition of the linguistic structures of a foreign language. Others, however, point to the risk of cognitive interference and the fossilization of errors, thus compromising the immersion necessary for optimal acquisition of the target language. Early learners need to use their mother tongue because they do not yet have the skills and knowledge to communicate and express themselves without fear of being judged. The first thing to do is to allow interaction and verbal exchange with teachers: Communicating in one's mother tongue is reassuring because it is generally the language one knows best and has acquired naturally from an early age' (Cook, 2001).

We now turn our attention to the attitude that foreign language teachers might wisely adopt with regard to the place of their learners' mother tongue in foreign language lessons. This involves an in-depth analysis of pedagogical strategies likely to enhance the value of the mother tongue while promoting the effective acquisition of the target language. The teacher uses the first language to ensure that learners understand, to refute or confirm hypotheses and to check their interpretation (Cummins, 2007)

The foreign language teacher is part of an approach to support his learners, aiming to facilitate access to understanding, assess their progress and, if necessary, overcome obstacles encountered in the learning process. This approach is part of a desire to support students in their language journey, allowing them to grasp the meaning of the content taught. The fact that the teacher uses the mother tongue of his or her beginner learners and also lets them use it creates a climate of trust in which they can feel comfortable and free from pressure. They will be able to gradually increase their use of the target language as they see fit and so the teacher acts for a better efficiency in their learning of the foreign language. However, the use of mother tongue in a foreign language class is considered by some teachers and didactics as an obstacle

that negatively influences the acquisition of a foreign language

Although the reference to mother tongue is recognized as crucial in the methodological foundations, its use is generally prohibited in foreign language classes, to counter the unfortunate tendency of learners to use their mother tongue. Indeed, the exclusive use of mother tongue in foreign language teaching can hinder the acquisition of an appropriate lexical and syntactic system, which compromises the mastery of the target language. Thus, as learners become accustomed to the use of the target language, they reduce their ability to use the target language, which slows down the acquisition of the target language (Grosjean, 1982).

There is no doubt that mother tongue plays an important role in French as a foreign language. However, excessive use of the language can be a real obstacle to learning, preventing the assimilation of linguistic structures and mastery of the target language.

10. Method and tools

10.1. Presentation of the questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed and administered to 15 fifth grade teachers in various educational institutions in the Laghouat region. The questionnaire was designed to be simple and understandable, in order to collect relevant responses for further analysis. The questionnaire was structured in three categories :

- Questions 1-3: Addressed learner proficiency levels and encountered difficulties in French as a foreign language.
- Questions 4-5: Explored Mother Tongue usage.
- Questions 6-8: Examined barriers between the mother tongue and French as a foreign language, along with the mother tongue's influences on learning French.

10.2. Results and discussion

Question 1: Do you tolerate the use of the mother tongue in the classroom?

yes ☐

No ☐

	Number of teachers	Percentage %
yes	9	60%
no	6	40%
total	15	100 %

Table 01 the percentage of current use of the mother tongue

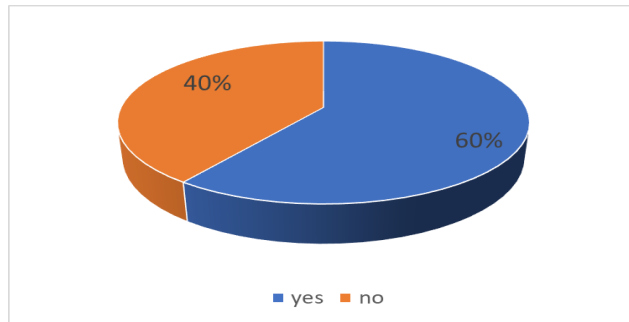


Figure 01 the percentage of current use of the mother tongue

Question 2: When you do your course, what are the difficulties you encounter?

Difficulties	Number of responses	Percentage%
Lack of baggage linguistic	9	45%
Reading	5	25%
Pronunciation	4	20%
Comprehension	13	65%
writing	3	15%
Speaking	3	15%
Other	11	55%

Table02 Distribution of teachers by gender

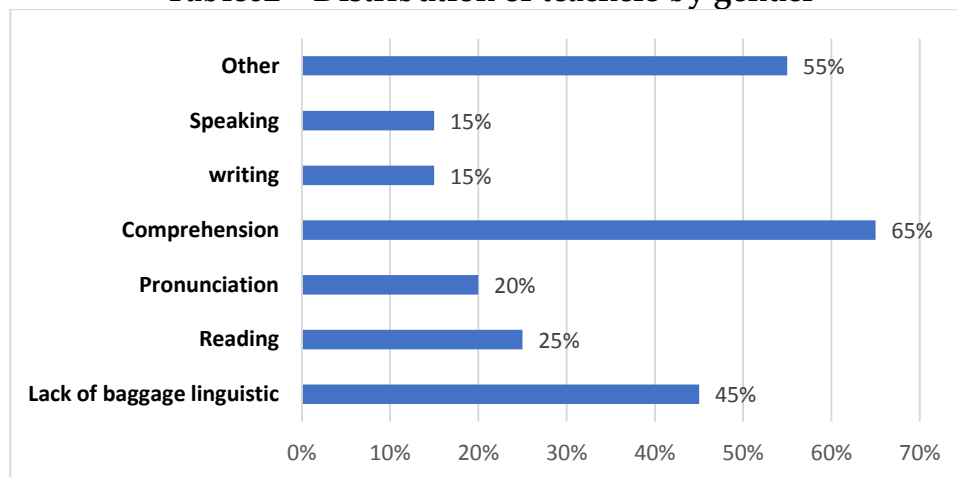


Figure 02 The difficulties encountered

From Table 02, we can see that misunderstanding the instructions and the teacher's speech is the main difficulty encountered in teaching French as a foreign language, mentioned by 65% of the teachers. Secondly, the lack of knowledge of the language is mentioned by 45% of the teachers. This is followed by the problem of reading, cited by 25% of the teachers, and then writing and speaking, each cited by 15% of the teachers. Finally, 55% of teachers mentioned other difficulties, such as textbooks not being available to all pupils. We have noticed that the main difficulties are the lack of linguistic background and the problem of comprehension. This is probably due to the lack of motivation and the lack of lexical background, which leads the teacher to use the mother tongue.

Question 3: In your course, how do you describe learners' use of the Arabic language?

Essential

Facilitator

Corruptor

Negligible

Essential	Number of teachers	Frequency%
Essential	3	20%
Facilitator	7	4%
Corruptor	0	0%
Negligible	5	33%
Total	15	100%

Table03 The role of mother tongue in learner learning

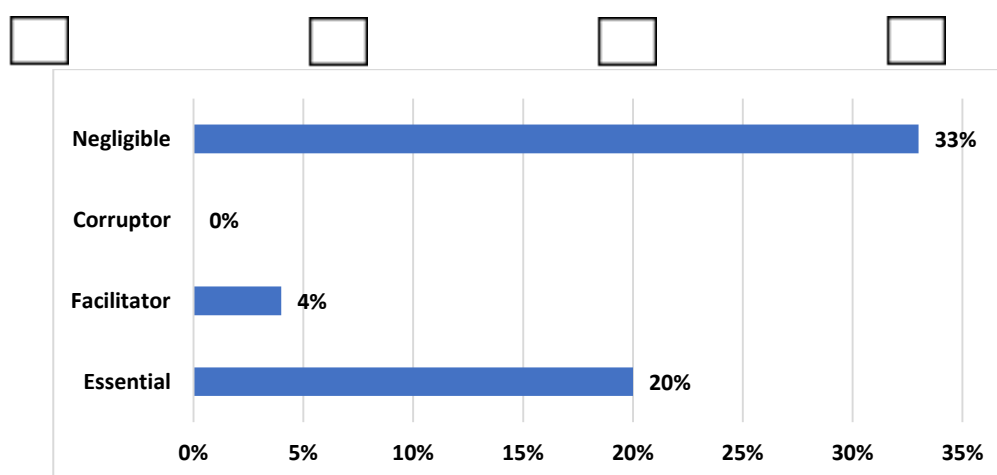


Figure 03 The role of mother tongue in learner learning

According to the results of Table 3, 7 out of 15 teachers (47%) believe that their mother tongue is a factor facilitating the teaching of French as a foreign language, 5 other teachers (33%) consider

that the role of the first language is negligible when learning a new language.

We found that a significant percentage of teachers who agreed to use their mother tongue did so. This explains why a learner's mother tongue can be a source of learning disabilities rather than a barrier to learning.

Question 4 : In which activity do you use the mother tongue?

- oral expression.
- reading comprehension.
- language points.

The activity	Number of teachers	Frequency%
Oral expression	9	60%
Reading comprehension	3	20%
Language points	3	20%

Table04 The use of the mother tongue in different activities

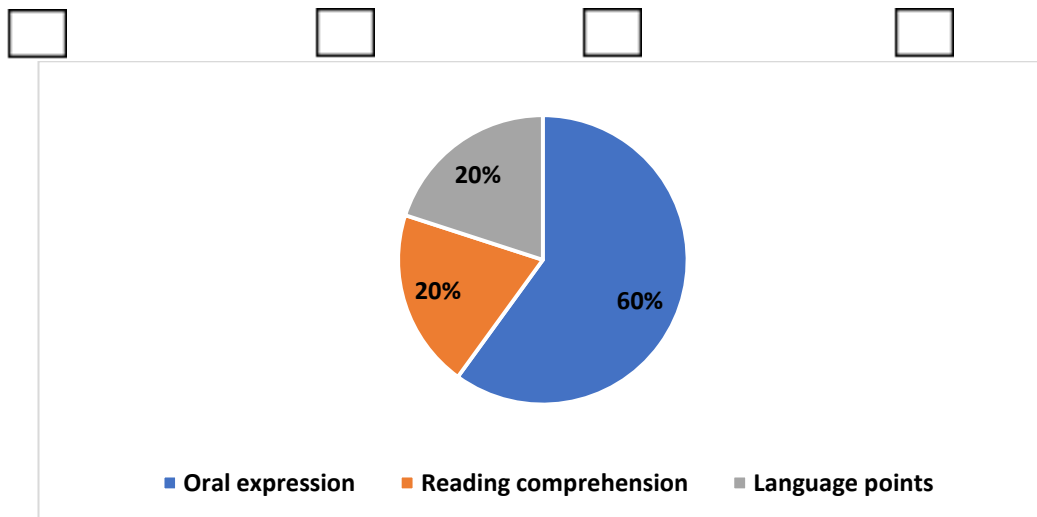


Figure 04 The use of the mother tongue in different activities

The answers obtained show that 50% of teachers use mother tongue in the oral expression course while 35% of them use it during the written comprehension session while 15% use it in the language points activity

Question 5: What is often the best way to explain a word or instruction?

picture Gestures Dictionaries Mother tongue

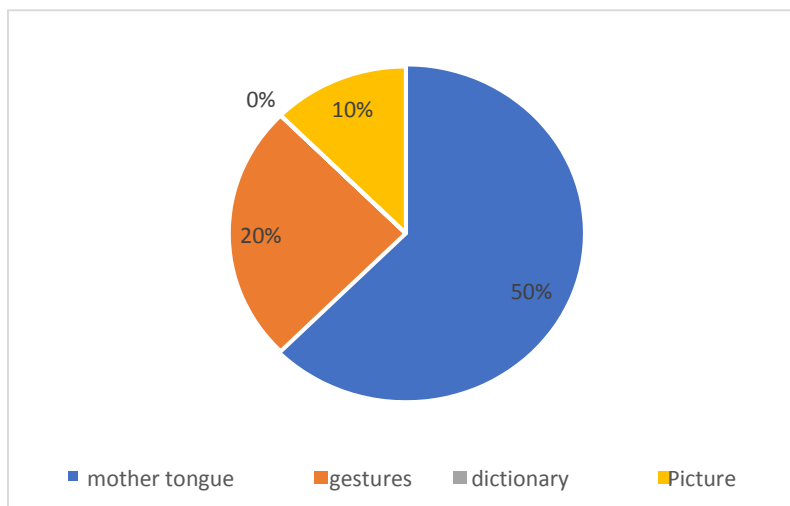


Figure 05 : Different means used by teachers

Analysis

We find that (50%) of teachers use the mother tongue when presenting the courses. While the rest of the teachers use the mother tongue but also refer to other strategies such as gestures and image. We also note that teachers do not use dictionaries to explain their courses.

Comment:

The majority of teachers therefore believe that the mother tongue is one of the most effective ways to relax the atmosphere in the classroom, arouse the student's interest and encourage him to immerse himself in the course.

Question 6 Do you think that the use of this language is an obstacle to learning French?

If so, what should be done to help learners free themselves from the mother tongue in their French as a foreign language learning process?

	Number of teachers	Frequency %
yes	11	73%
No	4	27%
Total	15	100%

Table05 The negative effect of mother tongue on learners' learning

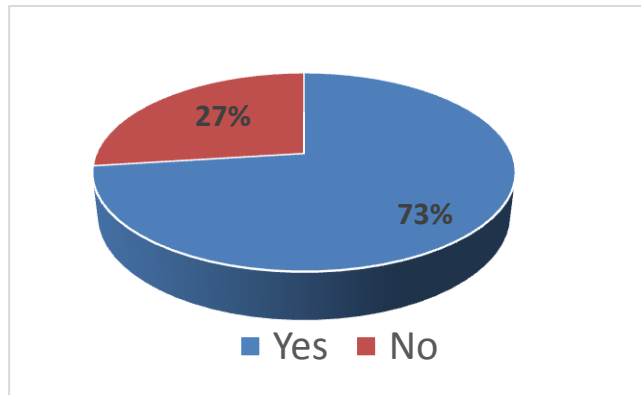


Figure 06 The negative effect of mother tongue on learners' learning

Table5 shows that 73% of teachers believe that the use of their mother tongue is a barrier to learners' learning, while 27% of teachers believe otherwise.

Based on the answers received, we propose to create classes adapted to the teaching of languages in an organizational framework, to reduce their number, simplify textbooks and improve French timetables to help learners move away from their mother tongue. Because I am used to speaking French, my teacher uses gestures and mimics. To enable learners to understand the use of information and communication technologies.

Question 7: Do you think that the use of mother tongue is effective in teaching French at primary level?

yes

no

	Number of teachers	Frequency %
Yes	9	60%
No	6	40%
Total	15	100%

Table06 l'efficacité de l'utilisation de la langue maternelle

The survey results indicate that 60% of respondents consider the use of mother tongue as an effective method of teaching French as a foreign language, while 40% of respondents consider it an ineffective approach.

Question 8: Can the use of mother tongue influence the learning of French as a foreign language? Justify your answer

Yes ☐ No ☐
☐ ☐

	yes	no	Total
number	9	6	15
percentage%	60	40	100

Table 07 Influence of mother tongue

Through Table 07 we note that the majority of teachers consider the use of the mother tongue may influence the learning of French if the use of this language used excessively in this case-there can hinder the learning of a foreign language for several reasons:

"If the use of the mother tongue is permanent, it can have a negative influence because the learner will not improve, but if it is sometimes done, it can help the learner.

In my opinion, he should be encouraged to speak French and not in his mother tongue except in extreme cases."

"It is important to know the student's mother tongue because it is a recognition of their identity and particularity. In addition, the mother tongue is a facilitator for acquisition. Moreover, the mother tongue is a facilitator for the acquisition of a second language. The more a child knows a language or two, the easier it is for them to learn a new one."

"Influence positively or negatively: - positive influence in moderate use that serves to facilitate understanding of the course (convey the message).

- negative influence in case of excessive use which makes the learner dependent on this language (otherwise the message does not pass).

Conclusion

To conclude our research, we affirm that the use of the mother tongue in Algeria, particularly at primary level, is an undeniable reality in the teaching of French. Teachers frequently use their mother tongue, a practice that reflects the linguistic diversity of Algeria, where several languages coexist in constant interaction.

The mother tongue seems to be an indispensable tool, often used as a key resource to overcome difficulties, especially comprehension difficulties. The results of our survey suggest that the influence of the mother tongue can be beneficial in some cases, while in others it can contribute to habitual learning errors due to linguistic interference.

Many teachers use the mother tongue as a mediating tool to explain complex concepts, provide clarification or facilitate understanding. This is particularly important for beginners who need clear explanations and instructions to grasp the basic ideas. Using the mother tongue helps to speed up comprehension and reduce frustration, thus speeding up the learning process. However, an over-reliance on the mother tongue can also hinder the development of French language skills by limiting learners' exposure to and practice of the language. It is important to stress that this pedagogical approach does not involve the teacher translating and explaining every detail. Rather, it is used strategically as a means of supporting learners, encouraging participation and avoiding any form of passivity.

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