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LINGUISTIC INTERFERENCE IN THE WRITTEN PRODUCTION OF STUDENTS LEARNING FRENCH IN SELECTED COLLEGES OF EDUCATION SOUTHWEST, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates linguistic interference in the written production of French students in a bid to address the persistent challenges arising from the influence of their first language (L1) and other acquired languages. The study adopts a descriptive survey design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches with a sample of 200 penultimate and final-year French students purposively selected from 8 Colleges of Education in Southwest, Nigeria. Data were collected through two main instruments: a 150-word essay titled Mon premier jour en classe de français and two fill-in-the-gap grammatical tests. These tasks were designed to reveal interference patterns at multilayered levels. Data analysis involved content and thematic analysis for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for quantitative data. Findings revealed that linguistic interference was pervasive across all categories examined. Orthographic errors were the most frequent, followed by grammatical, syntactic, and lexical interferences. The dominant sources of interference were Yoruba and English, with Yoruba exerting a stronger influence on morphosyntactic and phonological patterns, while English contributed significantly to lexical and semantic errors. Positive transfers were also observed, particularly where similarities between French and English facilitated correct usage. The study concluded that linguistic interference constitutes a major barrier to achieving proficiency in written French among Nigerian college students. It recommended the incorporation of targeted corrective strategies, contrastive grammar exercises, and explicit error correction into French language pedagogy. These measures will enhance learners' competence and contribute to improved outcomes in French language education in multilingual settings.

Keywords: Linguistic interference; written production; French language; multilingualism; Southwest Nigeria.

Introduction

The process of learning and acquiring new languages, especially for non-native speakers, becomes complex, given the interference of the native tongue or the language of the immediate community. Therefore, acquiring any language requires deep reflection. Whether it is a mother tongue, a national language, or a foreign language, its acquisition demands an adequate level of knowledge. Good knowledge of a language is viewed as a key factor that drives effective communication. Since any act of communication is essential for

understanding actions and intentions, it is believed that any form of error in learning while acquiring a language is a major impediment to a good knowledge of that language.

Fundamentally, in language acquisition, the tendency for errors to occur has become a major aspect of the learning process and eventual communication. According to Yufrizal (2023), these errors can be classified into two main types, based on the context in which they are identified. They are interlingual errors and intralingual errors. The ability to understand these errors has become an essential process for those in various fields of learning, such as educators, linguists, and language learners, as they offer insight into the mechanisms behind language learning and the challenges encountered by learners when acquiring a new language.

Interlingual and intralingual errors play important roles in language acquisition and the writing process. Interlingual errors highlight the challenges posed by the first language, while intralingual errors indicate the learner's developmental stages in acquiring the new language and communication process (Al-Sobhi, 2019). Understanding these errors and their areas of manifestation equips the language educator with the needed strategies for their teaching. This will help to address the specific difficulties learners face at various stages of their language learning process.

Linguistic interference, a pervasive phenomenon in language acquisition, arises when previously learned languages influence the learning process of a new language. For students in Southwest, Nigeria, who are learning the French language, linguistic interference is particularly significant given their multilingual context, which includes a mother tongue (e.g., Yoruba), a second language (English), and the target foreign language (French) (Filade et al., 2019). The complexities of this multilingualism often manifest in errors during written production, which hinder students' mastery of French as a foreign language.

It has been observed across studies (Onwe & Oguji, 2022; Ajani, 2023) that interference is a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when two or more languages come into contact. In other words, interference is a product of the interaction between at least two languages. Thus, interference is the aberrant use of components of one language in another language. According to Mackey (1976), interference is the use of elements from one language while speaking or writing in another language. He describes interference as an accident of bilingualism triggered by language contact. The learner instinctively uses the habits they have acquired in their first language when studying a second or third language.

Consequently, the patterns and manifestations of interference between native languages and the acquisition of L2 are a subject for extensive empirical analysis. The study, therefore, seeks to categorise the different manifestations of interference, identify the areas of language transfer, and assess the impact of interference in the written production of Colleges of Education students in Southwest Nigeria.

According to Dlamini (2023), interference is often described as the mutual influence that can manifest itself in lexical borrowings, formulations of new syntax, and literal translation of idiomatic expressions. The general concept is that the greater the difference between two languages, the more numerous the negative transfers become. Language interference is

particularly evident in multilingual settings, such as Nigeria, where speakers frequently switch between several languages. Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country, with over 500 indigenous languages, and the official language, English, serves as a second language for many Nigerians. The coexistence of multiple languages creates a fertile ground for language interference, where elements from the learner's mother tongue (MT) influence their second language (L2), often leading to errors in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary use (Kori-Siakpere et al., 2024).

In the Nigerian context, language interference occurs at multiple levels. This includes phonological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic interferences. The influence of a learner's first language on their English is particularly pronounced due to the distinct structural and phonological differences between Nigerian languages and English. However, when French is introduced as an additional foreign language (L3), the complexity increases further. Learners are not only influenced by their indigenous languages but also by English, which serves as the dominant medium of instruction in schools. For example, Nigerian French learners may incorrectly apply English pluralization rules (adding -s) to all French nouns, even when exceptions exist. Similarly, they may rely on English intonation patterns when speaking French, thereby altering meaning. This layered interference, where both L1 and L2 affect L3, makes it uniquely challenging for Nigerians. Scholars such as Iyiola and Araromi (2022) emphasize that this "double transfer" effect is common among multilingual learners and must be carefully addressed in pedagogy.

Linguistic interference is defined by Mackey (1962) as the use of traits from one language while speaking or writing another language. This transfer can occur at all linguistic tiers, although the phoneme seems less restricted in certain areas of grammar and vocabulary. According to Ajani (2023), the concept of interference is a subject that presents much interest, and it is of particular concern to linguists and language teachers who focus on language teaching or didactics. According to Beizhen and Naa Narkie (2024), explains that "linguistic interference" comes from the transfer of tendencies or linguistic habits acquired in a mastered language, often the mother tongue (L1), into the learning of a second language (L2), which may be a foreign language. For Onah and Marcellus (2023), linguistic interference can be voluntary or involuntary, positive (beneficial) or negative (harmful); and for Baghirova (2021), linguistic interference manifests at the phonological, syntactic, or lexical level.

Hence, the term interference refers to the reorganization of structures that results from the introduction of elements into the structure of a language, such as the phonemic system, a large part of morphology and syntax, and certain vocabulary domains. In multilingual Nigeria, linguistic interference is both a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge because it hinders accuracy, but an opportunity because it exposes the hidden processes of interlanguage development. Recognizing this dual role aligns with modern applied linguistics, which encourages teachers to move away from seeing errors as purely negative and instead view them as signs of growth.

The study is built on the framework of Contrastive Analysis theory as propounded by Robert Lado (1957), which posits that the success or difficulty in language acquisition is dependent on the analysis of the similarities and differences between L1 and L2. Contrastive analysis theory is oriented toward comparing the structures of two or more languages to find

similarities and differences between them. The analysis is predictive regarding the influence of the first language on the second language. It provides a diagnostic lens that can help instructors anticipate difficulties before they surface. For example, Yoruba speakers learning French may overgeneralize pluralization patterns, while Hausa speakers may impose Subject-Verb-Object sentence patterns that differ from French syntax. This anticipatory framework allows teachers to design targeted exercises and contrastive drills to minimize predictable errors.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design, using a mixed method involving qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze interference in students' written production. The research instrument was administered to 200 respondents who were selected based on the application of Yamane's (1967) formula. This formula was used to calculate the sample size from the population per College of Education in the 8 Colleges of Education in Southwest Nigeria. These 8 colleges were included in the study because they offer French as a course, while other colleges of education in Southwest Nigeria, that do not offer French, were excluded from the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation, and they were made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study. The 8 Colleges of Education are: Federal College of Education, Abeokuta; Oyo State College of Education, Lanlate; Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo; Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo; Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology, Omu-Ajose; Osun State College of Education, Ilesa; Osun State College of Education, Ila-Orangun; Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo. The sample size comprised 200 randomly selected penultimate year and final year NCE Yorubaphone students in the selected colleges of education. Federal College of Education, Abeokuta had 34 respondents; Oyo State College of Education, Lanlate had 23 respondents; Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo had 26 respondents; Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo had 27 respondents; Sikiru Adetona College of Science and Technology, Omu-Ajose had 27 respondents; Osun State College of Education, Ilesa had 19 respondents; Osun State College of Education, Ila-Orangun had 14 respondents; Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo had 30 respondents.

The number selected from each college was calculated using Yamane's formula for calculating sample size from a finite population. In addition, only 200 and 300 level students were selected because they have completed core foundation courses in French and are preparing for teaching practice or graduation. This made them suitable participants in this research that requires expertise based on learning experiences and language competence.

Data collection instruments are a 150-word essay titled *Mon premier jour en classe de français* and two fill-in-the-gap grammatical tests. The research adopted Mackey's (1976) framework for identifying and analysing transfer errors, emphasizing negative and positive transfer of interferences in written production. This framework, built on sociocultural variables and learner variables, guided the conclusions drawn from data gathered from the field.

Results and Discussion

Gender Distribution

The total number of respondents selected for this research is 200. The selection involved 115 (57.5%) females and 85 (42.5%) males. The gender distribution of the respondents is based on

the number of students enrolled across the selected levels. Considering the higher number of female enrolments in the departments of French, the gender distribution for females was higher.

Manifestations of Linguistic Interference in Written French

The written responses of the students revealed four main categories of linguistic interference: orthographic, grammatical, syntactic, and lexical. These categories emerged from an error analysis of the data collected, which contained both guided and free responses. The findings are presented with examples and interpretive discussions linking them to the study's objectives.

Orthographic Interference

Table 1: Subcategories and Examples of Orthographic Errors

Subtype	Example from Script	Correct Form	Comments
Omission of accents	*La langue francais*	*La langue française*	Most common orthographic error; likely due to English influence and lack of habit in marking accents.
Incorrect capitalisation	*mon premier jour enclasse…*	*Mon premier jour enclasse…*	Lowercase used instead of required uppercase at sentence-initial position.
Apostrophe omission/misuse	*cetait un jour memorable*	*c'était un jour mémorable*	Apostrophe omitted, reflecting influence from English writing habits. Additionally, there is accent omission.
Spelling errors (phonetic)	*proffesseur*	*professeur*	Doubling of consonants due to pronunciation influence.
Incorrect use of French vowels	*deja*	*Déjà*	Accent omitted; affects pronunciation and correctness.

Table 2: Frequency of Orthographic Errors

Category	Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Omission of accents	65	42%
Apostrophe errors	20	13%
Incorrect capitalisation	15	10%
Spelling errors (phonetic/orthographic)	48	31%
Double consonant/vowel errors	7	4%
Total	**155**	**100%**

Analysis

The most frequent orthographic error was the omission of accents (42%), followed by phonetic spelling errors (31%). Apostrophe misuse (13%) often occurs in contracted forms like *c'était*, reflecting Incorrect capitalisation (10%), showed failure to capitalise the first word of a sentence or proper nouns, indicating a lack of transfer of English capitalisation norms to French contexts.

The high incidence of accent omission reflects findings in Nwaokweanwa (2025), who noted that African learners of French often deprioritise diacritical marks due to typing constraints and limited exposure to written French in formal contexts. This pattern suggests that interventions should focus on sensitising students to the functional importance of accents, incorporating exercises on typing and handwriting with proper diacritics, and reinforcing the use of apostrophes in contractions. Since orthographic accuracy is foundational to written communication in French, addressing these issues could significantly improve the quality of students' written production.

Grammatical Interference

Table 3: Subcategories and Examples of Grammatical Errors

Subtype	Example from Script	Correct Form	Comments
Agreement errors	*les coursetaitinteressante*	*les coursétaientintéressants*	Noun–adjective and subject–verb agreement are not respected.
Incorrect conjugation	*nous avons chanter*	*nous avonschanté*	Infinitive used instead of past participle.
Auxiliary misuse	*j'aiallé*	*je suis allé*	Over-generalisation of *avoir* auxiliary.
Preposition misuse	*je suis allé à mange*	*je suis allé manger*	English influence in verb–preposition structure.
Missing article	*J'étaisune debutant*	*J'étaisunedebutante*	Article used incorrectly, gender mismatch.

Table 4: Frequency of Grammatical Errors

Category	Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Agreement errors	32	26%
Incorrect conjugation	40	32%
Auxiliary misuse	18	14%
Preposition misuse	25	20%
Article misuse/omission	10	8%
Total	**125**	**100%**

Analysis

Incorrect conjugation was the most frequent grammatical error (32%), often involving the use of infinitives instead of past participles (*nous avons chanter* instead of *nous avonschanté*) or confusion between tense forms. Agreement errors (26%) occurred in both noun–adjective and subject–verb relationships (*les coursetaitinteressante* instead of *les coursétaientintéressants*), reflecting the influence of English, which does not mark adjectives for gender or number. Auxiliary misuse (14%) was another notable deviation, especially in compound tenses, with many students over-generalising *avoir* where *être* was required (*j'aiallé* instead of *je suis allé*). Preposition misuse (20%) reflected literal translation from English structures (*je suis allé à mange* instead of *je suis allé manger*), while article errors (8%) often involved gender mismatches or omission.

The aberrant patterns identified here are consistent with Ajani's (2023) observations that Nigerian learners of French often struggle with morphosyntactic agreements and tense consistency due to structural differences between French and both English and indigenous Nigerian languages. This suggests that teaching should include targeted contrastive analysis exercises, especially for high-frequency verbs, and repeated practice in agreement rules to internalise French grammar structures.

Syntactic Interference

Table 5: Subcategories and Examples of Syntactic Errors

Subtype	Example from Script	Correct Form	Comments
Incorrect word order	*je aime le football*	*j'aime le football*	English SVO order transferred to French.
Misplaced adjective	*une rouge voiture*	*une voiture rouge*	English adjective position applied to French.
Literal translation	*il y a beaucoup de fun en français*	*il y a beaucoup de plaisir en français*	English word *fun* carried over.
Non-French sentence frame	*Mon premier jour enclasse de village français*	*Mon premier jour dans uneclasse de français au village*	Local language syntax applied.

Table 6: Frequency of Syntactic Errors

Category	Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Incorrect word order	22	36%
Misplaced adjective	14	23%
Literal translations	15	24%
Non-French sentence frame	10	17%
Total	**61**	**100%**

Analysis

Incorrect word order was the most frequent syntactic error (36%), typically reflecting the subject–verb–object pattern of English without necessary contractions or elisions in French (*je aime le football* instead of *j'aime le football*). Literal translations (24%) involved word-for-word transfers of English expressions, such as *il y a beaucoup de fun en français* instead of *il y a beaucoup de plaisir en français*. Misplaced adjectives (23%) were also common, as in *une rouge voiture* instead of *une voiture rouge*, showing direct English adjective placement. Non-French sentence frames (17%) often reflected indigenous Nigerian syntactic patterns, producing constructions such as *Mon premier jour enclasse de village français*.

The frequency of these errors demonstrates a strong influence of learners' existing linguistic frameworks on their French writing, confirming the interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972), which posits that second-language learners develop an interim linguistic system influenced by both their native language and the target language. Instructional strategies should therefore focus on exposing students to authentic French sentence structures through reading and writing tasks, while encouraging active correction of L1-based constructions.

Lexical Interference

Table 7: Subcategories and Examples of Lexical Errors

Subtype	Example from Script	Correct Form	Comments
False cognate	*actuellement* (for "actually")	*en fait*	Confusion due to similarity with English
Direct translation	*faire unedécision*	*prendre unedécision*	Literal transfer from English phrase
Code-switching (English)	*Ce n'est pas easy*	*Ce n'est pas facile*	Mixing of English and French
Borrowing from L1	Insertion of Yoruba words	French equivalent	Lack of vocabulary in French prompts borrowing

Table 8: Frequency of Lexical Errors

Category	Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Direct translation	22	37%
False cognate	18	31%
Code-switching (English)	9	15%
Borrowing from L1	10	17%
Total	**59**	**100%**

Analysis

Direct translation from English accounted for the highest proportion of lexical errors (37%), such as *faire unedécision* instead of *prendre unedécision*. False cognates (31%) were also prevalent, with words like *actuellement* incorrectly used to mean "actually" instead of "currently". Code-switching into English (15%) occurred when respondents lacked the French equivalent for a term (*Ce n'est pas easy* instead of *Ce n'est pas facile*). Borrowing from indigenous languages (17%) was less frequent but notable, with Yoruba or Igbo words inserted into French sentences without translation. These findings align with Nuri's (2024) argument that lexical borrowing is a natural outcome of bilingualism in multilingual societies, but in the context of language learning, it can hinder precision and fluency. To mitigate lexical interference, learners need more exposure to thematic vocabulary, targeted exercises on false cognates, and opportunities to practise paraphrasing to avoid direct translation when unsure of a term.

The analysis of respondents' written French revealed four major categories of linguistic interference: orthographic, grammatical, syntactic, and lexical. Orthographic interference emerged as the most frequent (38.9%), characterised by omissions of accents, apostrophe errors, and phonetic spelling influenced by English orthography. Grammatical interference (31.4%) included subject–verb agreement errors, incorrect verb conjugations, and auxiliary misuse, all of which reflected the influence of English structural patterns. Syntactic interference (15.3%) was particularly associated with the Yoruba system, appearing in noun phrase construction and word order that mirrored Yoruba syntax. Lexical interference (14.4%) was dominated by English direct translations and false cognate usage.

The areas of transfer analysis confirmed that English was the dominant source of interference due to its role as the medium of instruction and primary academic language, with its influence

cutting across four error categories. Yoruba influence, though less frequent, was strongly evident in sentence structure and idiomatic expression transfer.

The impact of these interference patterns on written production was significant. They reduced grammatical accuracy, occasionally caused semantic ambiguity, and weakened communicative effectiveness. While many sentences retained basic comprehensibility, the interference often resulted in awkward or unidiomatic constructions that undermined the stylistic quality expected in formal French writing.

The ranking of source languages placed English at the highest level of influence, followed by Yoruba. This ranking reflects the dual linguistic environment of Yoruba–English bilinguals in South-West Nigeria, where English shapes formal academic expression and Yoruba remains a constant presence in informal and home communication.

Finally, examples from respondents' scripts vividly illustrated these patterns, showing how errors appear in authentic students' work. It also reveals how they can be corrected to reflect standard French usage. These samples demonstrate that while some errors are mechanical and easily corrected (e.g., omission of accents), others are deeply rooted in the learners' linguistic background and require targeted pedagogical intervention.

Conclusion

This study brings to light the understanding of in-depth contrastive linguistics through the application of Contrastive Analysis theory of language as postulated by Lado (1957) to Nigeria's multilingual environment. It shows how structural and content differences between Yoruba and French can determine areas of learners' difficulty. While the theory has been applied across different language situations, this work takes it further by situating the contrastive theory within a multilingual and multicultural educational environment.

The findings from this research revealed that linguistic interference in orthography, grammar, syntax, and lexicon is not random; rather, it follows predictable patterns tied to the students' linguistic backgrounds. English and Yoruba, the students' dominant language and mother tongue, exert a dual-layered influence that shapes how French is acquired, processed, and produced. Unlike L1 or even L2 acquisition, L3 learning is influenced by multiple language systems simultaneously, leading to what is called a multi-directional transfer. Moreso, the impact of linguistic interference extends beyond grammar to affect students' academic confidence, self-expression, and learning outcomes. Persistent errors not only lower writing scores but also discourage active participation in French language learning. These findings support the need for pedagogical approaches that do more than correcting errors; rather, they must equip learners with metalinguistic awareness and the ability to recognise, monitor, and adjust for interference.

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