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Cross-cultural perceptions of the role of L2 English in the learning of L3 French

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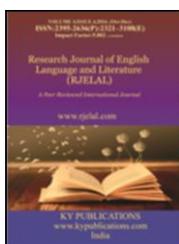
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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the different perceptions adhered by two groups of participants L1 Spanish and L1 Turkish natives who both had learnt English as an L2 up to two proficiency levels lower-intermediate (LIs) and advanced (Adv) prior to learning L3 French. More precisely, The main goal is to examine whether the language of communication (i.e. the L1) or the L2 that is also a means of communication, but mainly a medium of instruction is more 'privileged' to be the source of transfer when learning L3 French. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, both groups were asked to rate and justify how helpful the learning of L2 English before L3 French was, and how similar French and English are. Results revealed that though both groups have nearly the same amount of exposure to L2 English, i.e. the same frequency of use as a means of communication and also as a medium of instruction, they hold different perceptions towards how helpful learning English before learning L3 French is. Turkish subjects consider L2 English to be very helpful while the Spanish subjects consider L1 Spanish to have been much more helpful. Such findings are in marked disagreement with the traditional L3 model, the L2 status factor model (Bardel and Falk, 2007) which always privileges the L2 as the only source of transfer/effect in the learning of an L3, simply because the most recently learnt/used language before the L3 'blocks' any direct access to the linguistics system of the L1.

Key words: L2, L3, the language of communication, the L2 status factor



1. Introduction: The L2 status factor model

The L2 status factor model tested in this study argues that the second acquired language (henceforth L2) will be the most dominant source of transfer in the learning of a third language (henceforth L3), simply because the most recently learnt/used language before the L3 'blocks' any direct access to the linguistic system of the native/first language (hereafter L1). This model has been originally proposed by Bardel and Falk (2007) who examined the placement of sentential negation in main finite clauses in relation to main (thematic) verbs and auxiliary verbs (including copula). The target L3s are two 'verb-second' (V2) languages

(respectively, Dutch and Swedish) in which all finite verbs (both main and auxiliary) precede negation and which itself precedes the remnant VP, as illustrated in the examples below (adopted from Bardel and Falk, 2007).

1. Ginger *sprekt niet*
'Ginger speaks not'
Ginger doesn't speak

Dutch

2. Ginger heft niet gesproken
'Ginger hasn't spoken'
Ginger has not spoken.
3. Ginger pratar inte.
'Ginger speaks not'.

Ginger doesn't speak

Swedish

4. Ginger har inte prata.

'Ginger has not spoken'.

The L1s and L2s in this study are either verb-second V2 (such as German) or non-verb second (non-V2) where the sentential negator precedes main verbs but follows auxiliaries (e.g. English), or precedes all finite verbs (e.g. Albanian, Italian and Spanish). Nine participants took part in this study distributed across two groups; Group (a) consists of native speakers of Non-V2 L1 and V2 L2, while group (b) consists of native speakers of V2 L1 but non-V2 L2.

The results showed that group (a) produced target-like negated structures i.e. they placed negation after the thematic verb. Group (b), in contrast, produced pre-verbal negation, especially with non-thematic verbs. What could be noticed from such findings is in both cases, L2 was the only source of influence. In light of that, Bardel and Falk argue that syntactic properties of the L3 grammar are more likely to be affected by L2 syntactic features than by those of the L1. They further argue that typological similarity was not a key factor either because if it were the case, they would expect group (a) to be influenced by their L2 while group (b) would be influenced by their L1, but that was not the scenario attained. Hence, Bardel and Falk concluded that the most recently acquired language (i.e. the L2) is a "filter" that blocks direct access to the L1 morpho-syntactic features, even when linguistic typology and relatedness relationships exist between L1 and L3.

Recently, Falk and Bardel (2011) carried out a second study to further test the tenability of the L2 'status factor' hypothesis. They investigated learners' knowledge of the placement of object pronouns in L3 German by two groups of L3 learners, a group with L1 English and L2 French, and a second group with L1 French and L2 English. However, unlike Falk and Bardel (2007) who tested beginners, in this study, they investigated L3A of learners with an intermediate L3 proficiency level. The cross-linguistic distribution across the three languages under investigation is presented in the table below.

Table 1The placements of object pronouns across English, German and French (adopted from Falk and Bardel, 2011)

Clause type	English	French	German.
Main clause	[verb pronoun]	[pronoun verb]	[verb pronoun]
Subordinate clause	[verb pronoun]	[pronoun verb]	[pronoun verb]

As shown above, both English and German are structurally similar regarding main clauses whereas French is different. As for subordinate clauses, however, German and French are structurally similar while English is different. Using a 'time-controlled' grammaticality judgment task and a correction task (GJCT), the study showed that in main and subordinate clauses, participants whose L2 is French seem to accept object pronouns in pre-verbal positions, whereas those whose L2 is English prefer pronouns in post-verbal positions. Falk and Bardel concluded that the performance of both groups was influenced by their L2, regardless of the structural similarity between their L1/L2 and the L3. That was taken to be supportive of the L2 'status factor' hypothesis. Several other L2 and even L3 studies supported this hypothesis (e.g. Heidrick, 2006; Leung, 2005b, Jaensch, 2009a).

2. The scope of the study and Research Questions

This paper investigates the different perceptions of two groups (L1 Spanish/L1 Turkish natives) of the role of L2 English in the learning of L3 French. Both groups have learnt L2 English up to the same proficiency levels (lower-intermediate (LI) or Advanced (Adv)). Thus, the research question addressed in this study is:

Is L2 (a language of communication and a medium of instruction), or L1 (the native language and also a means of communication) which is perceived by learners to be the most helpful/influential when learning L3 French?

3. The study

3.1. Participants

22 Spanish and 16 Turkish natives took part in this study. All participants recruited were beginners L3 French learners, following a test using an online Oxford French Placement Test and a bio-data questionnaire and were divided into two-subgroups according to their L2 proficiency (lower-intermediate (LIs) and advanced (Adv)), following an English Oxford Placement Test. Participants had nearly the same length of immersion/instructions in L2 English. 10 French native speakers served as the control group of this study.

Table 2 English proficiency groups (OEPT) means divided by L1 and L2

L1	L2 proficiency level	N	Mean	Range	S.D
Spanish	Advanced	13	50.15	48-54	2.115
	Lower-intermediate	9	32.78	31-39	2.774
Turkish	Advanced	10	49.9	48-53	1.969
	Lower-intermediate	6	33	31-37	2.28

An independent samples t-test was carried out for each L1 group (Spanish and Turkish) divided by their L2 proficiency (LI and Adv) and results showed highly significant differences between the two L2 proficiency groups within each L1 group; Spanish [t=16.693, df=20, p=.001] and Turkish [t=15.691, df=14, p=.001]. No participants with an upper intermediate L2 level were recruited in this study so as to get two clearly distinct groups for L2 English proficiency.

3.2. Methodology: A semi-closed questionnaire consisted of closed questions (rating questions) and open-ended questions. The use of a "...qualitative research aims to broaden the repertoire of possible interpretations of human experience. Thus, the rich data obtained about the participant's experience can widen the scope of our understanding and can add data-driven (rather than speculative) depth to the analysis of a phenomenon" (Dörnyei, 2007:40).

The closed questions were as follows:

Q1: How helpful was learning English as a second language when you came to learn French as a third language?

Q2: How similar/different are English and French?

In order to answer the above questions, participants were provided with a scale as a single line with two

edges (e.g. very easy-very difficult) and were asked to mark the scale at some point on the continuum according to their point of view. Below is an example of the closed (rating) questions:

How helpful was learning English when you came to learn French?

Veryhelpful_____Not at all helpful

In scoring the scalar answers, the researcher divided the scale into seven equally space boxes, where each box referred to a specific degree. For example, questions asking about the similarity level between languages would be scored as shown below.

Box 1: Very helpful

Box 2: Helpful

Box 3: Slightly helpful

Box 4: Neutral (neither helpful nor not helpful)

Box 5: Slightly not helpful

Box 6: Not helpful

Box 7: Not at all helpful

The open-ended questions asked participants to briefly justify their rating choices for the above four questions.

3.3. Results

Q1: How helpful was learning English as a second language when you came to learn French as a third language?

Results of the Spanish group showed that the majority considered English not to have helped them in learning French. Results were distributed as follows: two participants rated English as *slightly not helpful* (9.1%), five rated it *not helpful* (22.7%) and 15 rated *not at all helpful* (68.2%). When asked about their justifications, most of the participants said that Spanish is much closer to French than English to French. This is why they consider Spanish to have helped them much more than English when they started learning French.

Unlike the Spanish group, however, many Turkish participants considered English to have helped them in learning L3 French. Their responses were as follows. Three out of 16 (18.75%) rated it as *very helpful*, four out of 16 (25%) rated it as being *helpful*, four rated it as being *slightly helpful* (25%) while the other five participants (31.25%) rated it as *not helpful*. When asked to justify their responses, those who rated English as either very

helpful or helpful said that English shares many features with French this is why learning it before French helped them, whereas those who rated it as being just slightly helpful or not helpful mentioned that though there are similarities between English and French, they are quite few this is why English did not help much in learning French. Again, what is noticeable is that for the Spanish group, English is very different from French, compared to Spanish. That is why they find it not helpful, whereas for the Turkish group, English is relatively similar to French; this is why they seem to find it quite helpful when learning L3 French. A comparison between the responses of the Spanish group and the Turkish group is displayed in Figure 1 below:

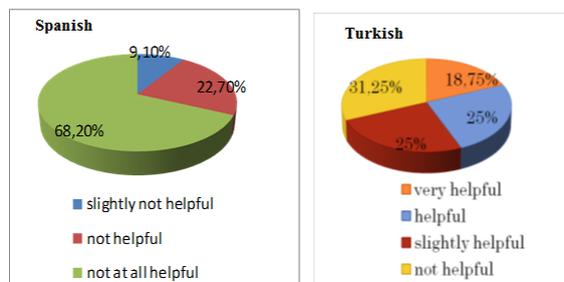


Figure 1. Spanish vs Turkish natives' responses to question 1

Q1: Justifications

The Spanish group

All Spanish participants say that Spanish is structurally much closer to French than English to French. Thus, Spanish seems to have helped them much more than English when they started learning French.

The Turkish group

Those who rated English as either very helpful or helpful said that English shares many features with French. Thus, learning English before French helped them, whereas those who rated it as being just slightly helpful or not helpful mentioned that the similarities between English and French are quite few. This is why; English did not help them much when learning French.

Q2: How similar/different are English and French?

When asked about the similarity between French and English the majority of the Spanish group rated them as being slightly different (22.7%), different

(39.05 %), or very different (18.2%). Responses of the Turkish group revealed that unlike the Spanish group who saw the two languages as being different, overall more than half of the Turkish group rated the two languages as similar (56.25%), 25% rated them as slightly similar while only 12.5% and 6.25% rated them as slightly different and different, respectively.

What is noticeable here is that while the Turkish group considers English and French as relatively similar languages, the Spanish group considers these two languages to be different. One possible justification for this difference is that for the Spanish group whose L1 is typologically very similar to French, English is different from French compared to Spanish, whereas for the Turkish group neither L1 Turkish nor L2 English is typologically very similar to French; both Turkish/English are similar to French but also different vis-à-vis certain properties.

A comparison between the responses of the Spanish and the Turkish groups in question 2 is displayed in Figure 2 below.

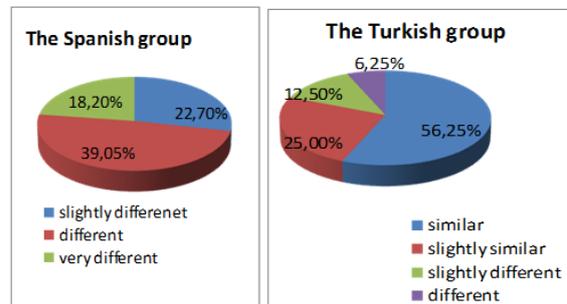


Figure 2. Spanish vs Turkish natives' responses to question 2

Q2: Justifications

The Spanish group

Almost all Spanish participants argue that English is different from French, because for them Spanish is much more similar to French than English to French.

The Turkish group

Those who rate English as either similar or slightly similar consider that there are many similarities between English and French (at the lexical and syntactic levels). In contrast, those who rate them as either slightly different or different argue that there are many differences between English and French (at the lexical and syntactic levels).

4. Summary of Results and Discussion

According to the L2 status factor model, L2 English should be the main source of influence, and should be, therefore, perceived by both groups as having been the most helpful when they had started learning L3 French. Both groups are expected to have similar responses and similar perceptions towards L2 English according to this model. The responses of both groups, on the contrary, showed much discrepancy.

For the Spanish group, English is perceived to be typologically/structurally very different from English. This is why; they considered it not to have helped them much when learning L3 French. Spanish is perceived to be much more proximate to French than English and was therefore much more helpful when learning L3 French than L2 English.

For the Turkish group, in contrast, English is perceived as being structurally similar to French. Learning L2 English seems to have helped them in the learning of L3 French. Turkish is perceived to be typologically/structurally different from French. This is why; English is perceived to be much closer and much more helpful than Turkish when learning L3 French.

Such results cannot be supportive of the L2 status factor model which always privileges L2 as the main source of influence when learning an L3.

5. Conclusion¹

To sum up, this study has investigated the perception of two groups on the role of L2 English in the learning of L3 French. L1 Spanish natives whose L1 is a Romance language just like French and also shares with several structural features and L1 Turkish natives whose L1 is structurally different from French. Results revealed that while the Spanish perceived English to be structurally different from French and therefore has not helped them much in learning L3 French, compared to Spanish, The Turkish responses were comparably very different.

¹Noteworthy, this is part of a larger study which used other instruments and tested other research questions (For further details, see Ben Abbes, 2016). In addition, L2 proficiency did not affect the results described above; this is why this factor was not discussed further in this paper.

This group considered French and English to be relatively similar and therefore learning English prior to French has helped them. Such results are not in line with the L2 status model which always favours L2 as the predominant source of influence/help when learning a third language.

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