



The Role of English as a Second Language in Learning French as a Third Language: Learners' Perceptions

Neda Maenza

Department of Foreign Languages. Singidunum University (Belgrade, Serbia) ✉ 

Tijana Gajić

Department of Foreign Languages. Singidunum University (Belgrade, Serbia) ✉ 

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/dill.101561>

Recibido: 10 de marzo de 2025 • Revisado: 23 de mayo de 2025 • Aceptado: 4 de diciembre de 2025

Abstract: This study investigates learners' perceptions of the influence of English as a first foreign language (L2) on the acquisition of French as a second foreign language (L3) among students in Serbia. Drawing on both cognitive and typological perspectives, the research examines how proficiency in English impacts French learning, identifying both facilitative and obstructive effects. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining theoretical analysis with a survey of 250 high school and university students. Results indicate that English proficiency aids comprehension of written and spoken French, particularly in vocabulary acquisition, due to lexical similarities between the two languages. However, significant negative interference was observed in students' oral expression, where English hindered their ability to achieve fluency in French. The study found no statistically significant correlation between the duration of studying French and the degree of positive or negative transfer from English. These findings underscore the complexity of cross-linguistic influences in multilingual education, highlighting the need for tailored pedagogical strategies. Recommendations include enhancing oral communication skills, leveraging cross-linguistic similarities in vocabulary instruction, and fostering metalinguistic awareness to mitigate interference. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between L2 and L3 learning, providing practical implications for language educators.

Keywords: Cross-linguistic influence; third language acquisition (L3); English as a second language (L2); French as a third language (L3); learners' perceptions.

ES El papel del inglés como segundo idioma en el aprendizaje del francés como tercer idioma: percepciones del alumnado

Resumen: Este estudio investiga la influencia del inglés como primera lengua extranjera (L2) en la adquisición del francés como segunda lengua extranjera (L3) entre los estudiantes de Serbia. Basándose en perspectivas tanto cognitivas como tipológicas, la investigación examina cómo el dominio del inglés afecta el aprendizaje del francés, identificando efectos tanto facilitadores como obstructivos. Se utilizó un enfoque de métodos mixtos, combinando análisis teóricos y una encuesta a 250 estudiantes de secundaria y universitarios. Los resultados indican que el dominio del inglés ayuda a la comprensión del francés hablado y escrito, sobre todo en la adquisición de vocabulario, debido a las semejanzas léxicas entre los dos idiomas. Sin embargo, se observó una interferencia negativa significativa en la expresión oral de los estudiantes, donde el inglés estorbó su capacidad para lograr fluidez en francés. El estudio no encontró correlación estadísticamente significativa entre la duración del estudio del francés y el grado de transferencia positiva o negativa del inglés. Estos hallazgos subrayan la complejidad de las influencias interlingüísticas en la educación multilingüe y resaltan la necesidad de estrategias pedagógicas personalizadas. Las recomendaciones incluyen mejorar las habilidades de comunicación oral, aprovechar las similitudes interlingüísticas en la enseñanza del vocabulario y fomentar la conciencia metalingüística para mitigar las interferencias. Esta investigación contribuye a una comprensión más profunda de la interacción entre el aprendizaje de L2 y L3 y proporciona implicaciones prácticas para los profesores de idiomas.

Palabras Clave: Influencia interlingüística; adquisición de una tercera lengua (L3); inglés como segunda lengua (L2); aprendizaje del idioma francés; interferencia del lenguaje.

FR Le rôle de l'anglais comme langue seconde dans l'apprentissage du français comme langue troisième: perceptions des apprenants

Résumé : Cette étude examine les perceptions des apprenants concernant l'influence de l'anglais en tant que première langue étrangère (L2) sur l'acquisition du français en tant que seconde langue étrangère (L3) chez les étudiants en Serbie. En s'appuyant sur des perspectives à la fois cognitives et typologiques, la recherche analyse comment la maîtrise de l'anglais influence l'apprentissage du français, en identifiant à la fois des effets facilitateurs et des effets obstructifs. Une approche méthodologique mixte a été adoptée, combinant une analyse théorique avec une enquête menée auprès de 250 lycéens et étudiants universitaires. Les résultats indiquent que la maîtrise de l'anglais favorise la compréhension du français écrit et oral, notamment dans l'acquisition du vocabulaire, en raison des similitudes lexicales entre les deux langues. Cependant, une interférence négative significative a été observée dans l'expression orale des étudiants, où l'anglais a entravé leur capacité à atteindre la fluidité en français. L'étude n'a révélé aucune corrélation statistiquement significative entre la durée de l'apprentissage du français et le degré de transfert positif ou négatif de l'anglais. Ces résultats soulignent la complexité des influences interlinguistiques dans l'éducation multilingue, mettant en évidence la nécessité de stratégies pédagogiques adaptées. Les recommandations incluent le renforcement des compétences en communication orale, l'exploitation des similitudes interlinguistiques dans l'enseignement du vocabulaire, et le développement de la conscience métalinguistique afin de réduire les interférences. Cette recherche contribue à une meilleure compréhension de l'interaction entre l'apprentissage de la L2 et de la L3, offrant des implications pratiques pour les enseignants de langues.

Mots-clés : Influence interlinguistique ; acquisition de la troisième langue (L3) ; anglais comme langue seconde (L2) ; apprentissage du français (L3) ; Interférence linguistique

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical Framework. 2.1. Factors involved in cross-linguistic influence. 2.2. English as a bridge to Romance languages. 3. Empirical Study. 3.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses. 3.2. Methodology. 3.2.1. Research Participants and Sampling. 3.2.2. Research Methods. 3.2.3. Data Collection Tools. 3.2.4. Data Collection and Analysis. 4. Results Analysis and Discussion. 4.1. Positive Impact of L2 English on Learning L3 French. 4.2. Negative Impact of L2 English on Learning L3 French. 4.3. Summary of Hypotheses and Research Questions 5. Conclusion. 6. Bibliography. 7. Appendices.

Cómo citar: Maenza, N., Gajić, T. (2026). The Role of English as a Second Language in Learning French as a Third Language: Learners' Perceptions. *Didáctica. Lengua y Literatura*, 38, 129-141.

Declaración de contribución de autoría

Neda Maenza: conceptualisation, methodology, research, resources, validation, writing (first draft), formal analysis, writing (review and edition).

Tijana Gajić: visualisation, writing (original draft), management of the project, supervision.

1. Introduction

Acquiring foreign languages is a fundamental component of education at all levels, and it significantly contributes to cognitive development and enhances problem-solving and creativity (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, n.d.). English, as the most widely taught foreign language, is typically introduced early in the educational process, whereas the study of a second foreign language, such as French, often begins later (Ignjačević, 2006). Achieving communicative competence in French as a third language (L3) allows learners to engage in effective written and spoken communication, comprehend information, and interact meaningfully in personal, academic, and professional contexts. However, in educational environments where English already occupies a dominant role as the first foreign language (L2), the question arises as to how this prior linguistic knowledge influences the acquisition of French.

This study investigates how and to what extent proficiency in English (L2) affects the learning of French as an L3. Special attention is given to both structural similarities between the two languages and the cognitive mechanisms involved in cross-linguistic transfer. The research aims to explore the dual nature of this influence, i.e. whether English facilitates or interferes with the development of French language skills among multilingual learners.

To address this research problem, the objectives of the study are organized along three key dimensions. First, the theoretical objective is to analyse, through a review of relevant literature, how prior knowledge of English impacts the learning and teaching of French. This includes identifying both the facilitating and inhibiting factors encountered by learners in the local educational context. Second, the cognitive objective is to investigate, based on students' reflections and experiences collected via a survey, the specific difficulties and challenges they face when learning French under the influence of previously acquired English. Finally, the practical objective is to derive pedagogical implications from the survey results and to propose effective methods, strategies, and examples of best practices. These recommendations are intended to help teachers view learners' knowledge of English not as a hindrance, but as a valuable resource in the process of acquiring French.

In summary, the overarching goal of this study is to examine students' perceptions of the extent to which English, as their first foreign language, supports or hinders their acquisition of French, and to provide insights that may inform and improve multilingual language education practices.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Factors involved in cross-linguistic influence

Applied linguistics research has shown that multilingual individuals frequently experience cross-linguistic influence among their non-native languages. Metalinguistic awareness, defined as the ability to reflect upon and manipulate linguistic structures, plays a crucial role in third language acquisition by allowing learners to notice cross-linguistic similarities and manage potential interference (Bialystok, 2001; Jessner, 2006, 2014). This phenomenon is influenced by cognitive factors such as proficiency levels and the age of acquisition (Tomoschuk et al., 2021).

Multilingualism can thus be viewed as a natural stage in linguistic development (Hammarberg, 2010). While second language (L2) learners typically draw on their first language (L1), third language (L3) learners draw on both L1 and L2 (Puig-Mayenco et al., 2020; Westergaard et al., 2017). This dual influence makes L3 acquisition a valuable field for examining transfer effects that are not as evident in L1 or L2 acquisition, including how previously learned languages facilitate or hinder the learning of an additional language.

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) occurs when knowledge of one language affects the learning or processing of another (De Angelis, 2007). This influence may be positive, facilitating learning when the languages involved share structural similarities, or negative, resulting in interference when structural differences exist (De Angelis, 2018; MacWhinney, 2005). While considerable research has examined L1-L2 interactions (Cabrelli et al., 2018), the dynamics of L3 acquisition, particularly the relative contributions of L1 and L2, are less understood (Angelovska & Hahn, 2023; Cabrelli et al., 2023; Luan et al., 2024; Puig-Mayenco et al., 2020; Stadt et al., 2018).

Two key factors identified in L3 acquisition are the order in which background languages were acquired and learners' proficiency in those languages. According to Bardel and Falk (2012), the L2 Status Factor Hypothesis suggests that learners are more likely to activate their L2, rather than their L1, in L3 learning. This is because L2 and L3 are often acquired in similar formal settings and under similar cognitive conditions (Bardel & Falk, 2007; Falk & Bardel, 2010). Bardel and Falk (2012) also argue that while L1 is processed via procedural memory, L2 and L3 are stored in declarative memory, which may affect how these languages are accessed and used during additional language learning. Higher proficiency in a background language increases the likelihood and effectiveness of transfer.

Another important variable is language typology. According to the Typological Primacy Model (Rothman, 2011), the language that is typologically closest to the target L3, regardless of whether it is L1 or L2, is most likely to exert influence. Studies by Singleton and O'Laoire (2006, 2009) found that lexical similarity plays a key role: in their research, English, despite being a Germanic language, served as the main source of cross-linguistic influence for learners acquiring French as an L3, due to its lexical overlap with French.

Bérubé and Marinova-Todd (2012) further support this view, showing that learners' English proficiency, particularly in reading and speaking, strongly predicted their French proficiency, even when accounting for factors such as reading habits in French and knowledge of English word structure.

These findings highlight the complexity of L3 acquisition and the challenge of disentangling the effects of language typology and acquisition order. Some studies suggest that typological proximity is the main driver of transfer (Rothman, 2011), while others argue for the greater influence of acquisition order (Cabrelli et al., 2020; Cenoz et al., 2001). The mixed evidence indicates the need for further comparative research.

2.2. English as a bridge to Romance languages

A few important studies (Capucho, 2011; Grzega, 2005; Melo-Pfeifer, 2014) have explored experimental approaches that connect different language families. However, these studies are still limited in number and mostly take place in higher education. They often focus on the idea that English, already known to learners and often seen as a Germanic language with strong French influence (Grzega, 2005, p. 3), can serve as a bridge between different language families (Hemming et al., 2011).

Although English is typically categorized as a Germanic language, it shares many features with Romance languages, due to historical contact with French and Latin. Given its strong historical ties to French and Latin, and its substantial number of borrowed terms, English has even been described as a kind of *failed* or *diverted* Romance language (Klein, 2008). As such, it can serve as a useful bridge for learners approaching a Romance language like French. This is especially relevant in Europe, where many learners are more proficient in English than in any Romance language.

Research by Grzega (2005) and the EuroCom project (www.eurocomcenter.com) demonstrates that English includes a significant number of Romance-derived elements, making it an effective transfer language even for learners with little prior exposure to Romance languages. Grzega (2005) suggests that English holds significant potential for facilitating the learning of Romance languages. English speakers, in particular, have access to a vast range of resources, especially in terms of vocabulary, which can make acquiring Romance languages easier than learning other Germanic languages such as German or Swedish (McCann et al., 2002).

For instance, approximately 90% of international vocabulary originates from Latin, much of which has survived in both Romance languages and English. Studies have identified over 400 words shared between

English and multiple Romance languages, including 147 core words found in at least nine Romance languages and 260 additional words present in five to eight of them (Klein, 2008).

Furthermore, English can help learners recognize phonetic patterns and word forms across languages. For example, the Spanish *ll* often corresponds to *cl*, *ch*, *pl*, or *fl* in English and French, as in *llamas* and *flames* (Klein, 2008). Despite differences in pronunciation, English spelling preserves many Romance features, making it easier to identify shared vocabulary. Nasal sounds, which are specific to French and Portuguese, may be an exception. Basic sentence structures, such as subject + verb + object, are also largely consistent between English and Romance languages, as are conditional and relative clauses (Klein, 2008).

Morphological similarities further support transfer. English shares a wide range of Latin and Greek prefixes and suffixes, known as *euromorphemes*, which are highly productive in both English and Romance languages (Klein, 2008). These help learners interpret unfamiliar words, especially new formations, and technical terms. English thus plays a leading role in the spread of these elements across Europe.

While English may not offer as deep a connection to French as another Romance language would, it could provide sufficient common ground, especially in vocabulary, basic syntax, and morphology, to act as a practical and accessible bridge for learners acquiring French as an L3 (Castagne, 2008; Robert, 2013).

3. Empirical study

3.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Grounded in the theoretical framework and prior studies on cross-linguistic influence (CLI) and third language (L3) acquisition, this study aims to investigate how learners perceive the influence of English (L2) on their learning of French (L3), with a specific focus on both facilitative and interfering effects across various language domains. The research questions aim to investigate learners' metalinguistic awareness and their subjective experiences of transfer from English to French, in both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills, as well as grammar.

Research Questions:

RQ1. In which linguistic areas do learners perceive English as facilitating the learning of French?

RQ2. In which linguistic areas do learners perceive English as hindering the learning of French?

Research Hypotheses. Based on the reviewed literature and the structure of the questionnaire used in this study, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Learners will perceive that their knowledge of English (L2) facilitates their comprehension of French (L3) in receptive skills (reading and listening).

(cf. Bérubé & Marinova-Todd, 2012; Rothman, 2011; Singleton & O'Laoire, 2009)

H2. Learners will perceive that English (L2) interferes with their ability to produce French (L3), particularly in speaking and writing.

(cf. Bardel & Falk, 2012; De Angelis, 2007; Puig-Mayenco et al., 2020)

H3. Learners will perceive mixed effects of English (L2) on French (L3) grammar, with both facilitative and hindering influences reported.

(cf. Cenoz et al., 2001; Cabrelli et al., 2020)

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Research Participants and Sampling

This study was conducted with a purposive sample of 250 participants from the Republic of Serbia. The selection criteria included the following: (1) participants had to be currently studying French as a third language (L3), having previously acquired Serbian as their first language (L1) and English as their second language (L2); (2) English had to be acquired through formal education; and (3) participants had to have at least five years of prior experience with English language instruction. This ensured a homogeneous level of English proficiency among participants, even though proficiency was not directly assessed through standardized tests.

All participants were enrolled in formal educational institutions where both English and French are part of the curriculum. The majority of the participants ($n = 186$; 74.4%) stemmed from two high schools in Kragujevac (First and Second Kragujevac High Schools), whereas 25.6% ($n = 64$) were university students enrolled at Singidunum University in Belgrade. The high school students were aged 15–18 years, and the university students were aged 19–23 years. Information about participants' sex was not collected in this study.

Regarding language proficiency, all participants were native speakers of Serbian (L1). Their English (L2) proficiency ranged from B1 to C1 on the CEFR scale (assessed through institutional placement tests and self-reports), with the majority at B2 level. Their French (L3) proficiency ranged from A1 to B1, reflecting their status as ongoing learners within formal curricula. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample distribution by the first independent variable.

Table 1. Structure of respondents by type of educational institution attended

French Language Learning	n	%
In high school	186	74.4
At university	64	25.6
Total	250	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the authors

When considering the second independent variable, which refers to the number of years spent learning French as a third language (L3), the distribution of the participants is presented in Table 2. Forty respondents (16.0%) reported having learned French for less than four years, 161 participants (64.4%) had studied it for four to less than eight years, and 49 respondents (19.6%) had been learning French for eight years or more.

Table 2. Structure of respondents by years spent learning French

Years of French Language Learning	n	%
Less than 4 years	40	16.0
4 to less than 8 years	161	64.4
8 years or more	49	19.6
Total	250	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the authors

3.2.2. Research Methods

This study combined theoretical and empirical approaches. Content analysis was applied to the literature review in order to synthesize previous findings and support the formulation of research questions and hypotheses.

The empirical part of the research was based on a survey method, using a structured questionnaire designed to explore students' perceptions regarding the influence of English (L2) on their learning of French as a third language (L3). A descriptive research design was used to collect, process, and interpret quantitative data related to learners' perceptions. As Maksimović and Osmanović (2020, p. 12) note, "quantitative information provides credibility to research projects." Given the nature of the data collection and the analysis techniques employed, this study is empirical in nature and based on a quantitative research paradigm.

3.2.3. Data Collection Tools

For the purposes of this research, a specifically designed survey instrument titled "Questionnaire on Students' Attitudes Towards Challenges in Learning French Due to the Influence of English" was used (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was created and administered in Serbian, which is the participants' first language (L1), to ensure clear comprehension and accurate responses.

The instrument consisted of two sections, both composed entirely of closed-ended questions.

The first section addressed the independent variables of the study and included general demographic and background information: the number of years students had been studying French and their current level of education (high school or university), all within formal educational institutions where both English and French are part of the curriculum.

The second section focused on the dependent variable, i.e., students' perceptions of the ways in which their knowledge of English as a second language (L2) either facilitates or interferes with their acquisition of French as a third language (L3). This section included two multiple-choice questions: the first examined the facilitating influence of English (e.g., on reading, listening, writing, pronunciation, or grammar), while the second assessed the hindering effects of English in similar areas.

In both questions, participants were allowed to select more than one option, enabling them to reflect the multifaceted nature of cross-linguistic influence based on their individual experiences.

The questionnaire was anonymous, and participation was entirely voluntary. Although the questionnaire consisted exclusively of closed-ended questions, this design allowed for systematic collection and quantitative analysis of perceived facilitative and hindering effects of English on French learning. The responses were quantitatively analysed to identify patterns and trends in students' perceptions of cross-linguistic influence.

3.2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire created with Google Forms. The survey was distributed electronically to students during regular class sessions, in coordination with their language teachers. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Upon completion, the responses were exported as a spreadsheet, organized in Google Sheets, and prepared for statistical analysis.

All data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0 (IBM Corp. Released 2011. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0 Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.). The study employed both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of the sample, including frequencies (f) and percentages (%), which are presented in tables and graphs. The relationships between independent and dependent variables were examined using cross-tabulation techniques (Crosstabs), with a particular focus on the influence of the number of years spent learning French on perceived transfer effects. "This process of cross-tabulating variables provides deeper insight into the data" (Maksimović & Osmanović, 2020, p. 79). For inferential analysis, non-parametric tests were applied, specifically, Pearson's chi-square test and Fisher's exact test, to assess the statistical significance of the observed associations.

Although the questionnaire consisted exclusively of closed-ended questions, the patterns in respondents' answers enabled the identification of trends and associations in their perceptions. The results are presented and interpreted through a combination of narrative explanation, statistical tables, and graphical representations.

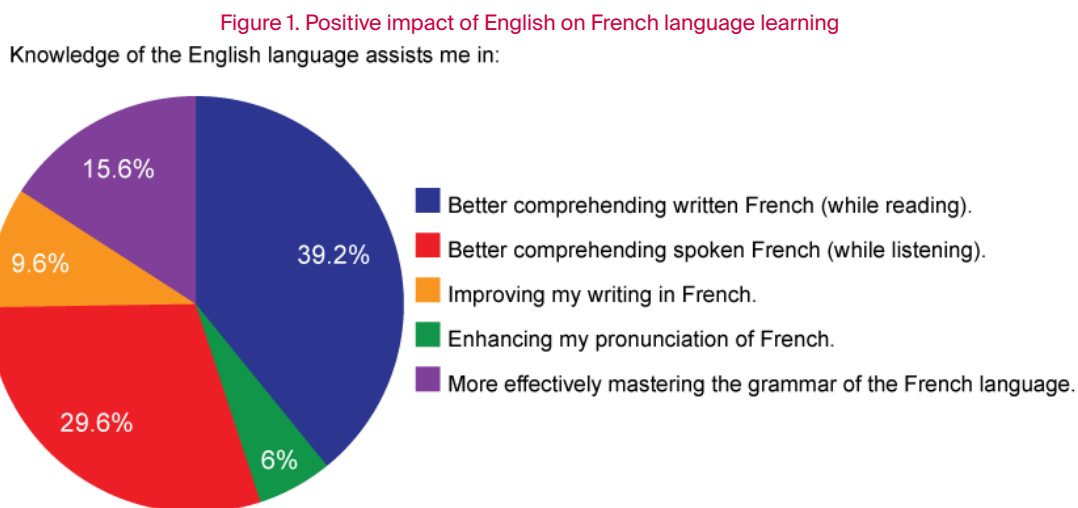
4. Results analysis and discussion

This study aims to examine students' perceptions regarding the interaction between English as their first foreign language (L2) and French as their second (L3). Specifically, it explores the perceived impact of prior English proficiency on the process of learning French, focusing on identifying areas where English serves as a facilitative tool versus instances where it acts as a "false friend," potentially impeding progress. In this study, the concept of English proficiency refers to participants' self-reported experience with English, including a minimum of five years of formal instruction received prior to beginning French. Although no standardized proficiency tests were administered, the fact that all participants acquired English in structured educational settings ensures a homogeneous level of competence.

4.1. Positive Impact of L2 English on Learning L3 French (RQ1)

This section presents the ways in which students perceive their knowledge of English (L2) as beneficial in the process of learning French (L3). As English was acquired earlier and studied for a longer period than French, which all participants are learning as their second foreign language, it is not surprising that many of them view English as a helpful resource in understanding the new language. The findings reveal that students report facilitative effects of English, particularly in receptive skills, such as reading and listening comprehension.

As illustrated in Figure 1, more than one-third of respondents (39.2%, $n = 98$) stated that their knowledge of English helps them better understand written French. A slightly smaller proportion, 29.6% ($n = 74$), indicated that English positively influences their comprehension of spoken French.



Source: Elaborated by the authors

Additionally, 15.6% of the participants noted that English facilitates their mastery of French grammar, suggesting a perceived structural transfer between the two languages, in line with cross-linguistic influence theory and previous research on L2-L3 interactions (Bardel & Falk, 2012; De Angelis, 2007). Only 9.6% ($n = 24$) believed that English aids in improving their ability to write French correctly, while 6% ($n = 15$) reported that English helps them with French pronunciation. Although the questionnaire did not include explicit items on vocabulary or speaking, responses such as improved writing or pronunciation may indirectly reflect perceived benefits in productive language skills. These results are consistent with previous studies emphasizing structural and lexical overlap between English and French (Bérubé & Marinova-Todd, 2012; Klein, 2008), and they point to areas where transfer effects are both acknowledged by learners and supported by theoretical models such as the Typological Primacy Model (Rothman, 2011).

We were particularly interested in examining whether the positive transfer effects of English as the first foreign language (L2) on French as the second foreign language (L3) vary according to the duration of French language learning. Table 3 below illustrates this relationship.

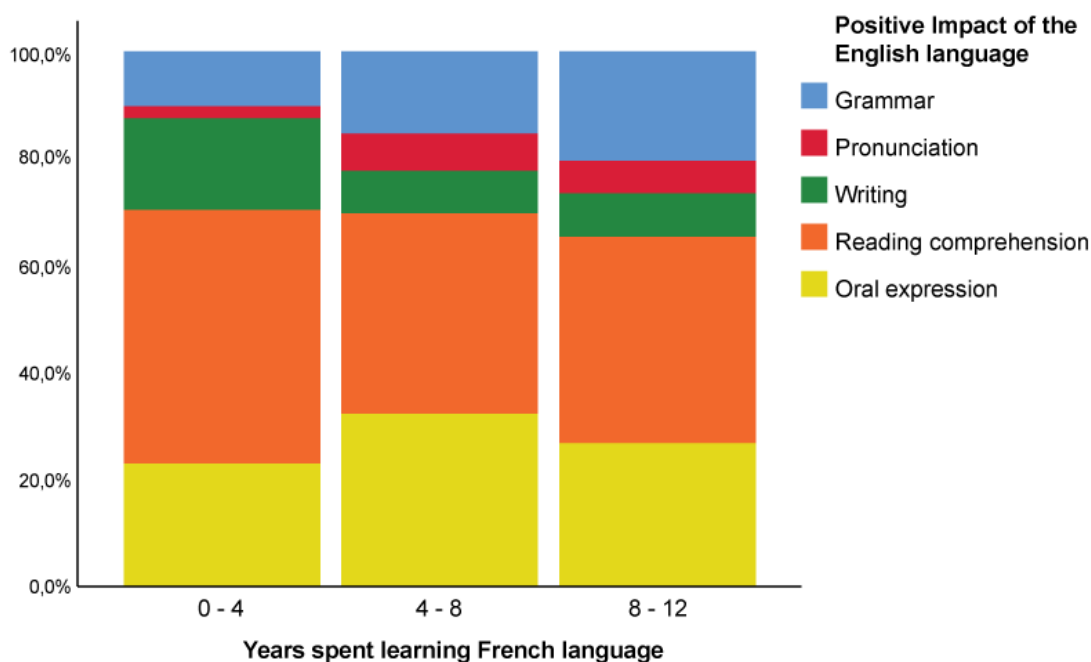
Table 3. Positive impact of the English language in relation to the years of French language learning

Years of French Language Learning	Grammar	Pronunciation	Writing	Reading	Speaking	Total
Less than 4 years	4 (10.0%)	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.5%)	19 (47.5%)	9 (22.5%)	40 (100.0%)
4 to less than 8 years	25 (15.5%)	11 (6.8%)	13 (8.1%)	60 (37.3%)	52 (32.3%)	161 (100.0%)
8 years or more	10 (20.4%)	3 (6.1%)	4 (8.2%)	19 (38.8%)	13 (26.5%)	49 (100.0%)
Total	39 (15.6%)	15 (6.0%)	24 (9.6%)	98 (39.2%)	74 (29.6%)	250 (100.0%)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

As shown above (Table 3), the data reveal that although learners with more years of French instruction tend to report slightly higher benefits from English in mastering grammar and pronunciation, these differences are not statistically significant (Fisher’s Exact Test, $p = .519$). This suggests that the perceived influence of English as a facilitating language remains stable across experience levels. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Positive impact of the English language in relation to the years spent learning the French language



Source: Elaborated by the authors

In response to RQ1, the results indicate that learners predominantly perceive English as facilitating their comprehension of written and spoken French. This can be attributed to lexical and orthographic similarities between the two languages, as discussed in the theoretical framework (e.g., Klein, 2008; Singleton & O’Laoire, 2006, 2009). Comprehension is closely tied to vocabulary recognition; shared word roots and familiar spelling patterns likely help learners decode and interpret French input (Bérubé & Marinova-Todd, 2012; Klein, 2008). Furthermore, the number of years spent learning French does not significantly affect this perception, as no statistically significant differences were found among the groups (Fisher’s Exact Test, $p = .519$). Therefore, English appears to serve as a consistent facilitating factor in French comprehension, regardless of the learners’ experience levels.

These findings directly confirm Hypothesis 1 (H1), which predicted that learners would perceive English (L2) as facilitating their comprehension of French (L3), particularly in receptive skills such as reading and listening. The correspondence between RQ1 and H1 is evident: both emphasize the facilitative role of English in understanding French input. The consistency of this perception across experience levels further reinforces the view that English serves as a stable linguistic support in the early and intermediate stages of L3 acquisition.

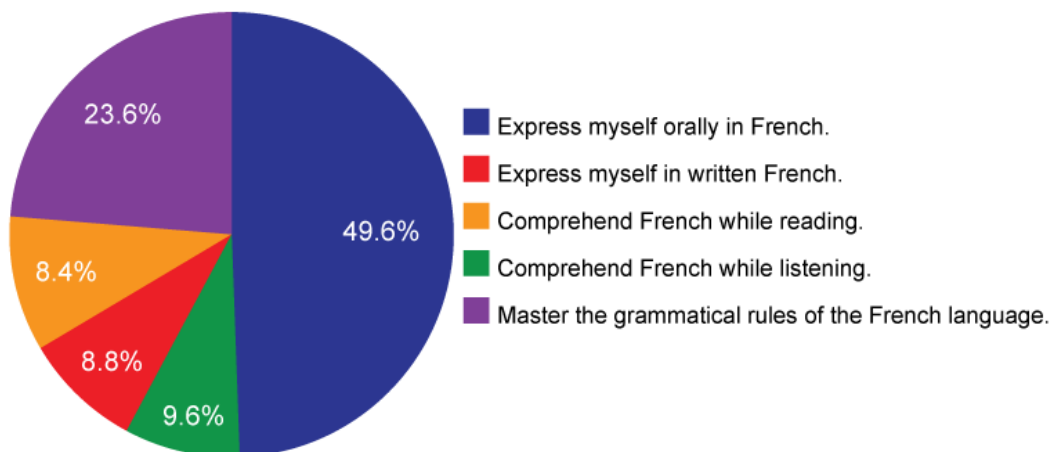
4.2. Negative Impact of L2 English on Learning L3 French (RQ2)

Participants reported several challenges linked to the influence of English while learning French as a third language (L3). The most frequently cited difficulty was related to oral expression: nearly half of the respondents (49.6%, or 124 out of 250) indicated that English interferes with their ability to speak French fluently. As a dominant global language and the first foreign language (L2) acquired by the participants, English often becomes the default medium for self-expression. In contrast, French, introduced later and with more limited exposure, is less readily accessible in spontaneous speech situations. This imbalance may hinder students’ ability to achieve fluency in French.

As illustrated in Figure 3, oral expression stands out as the most negatively affected skill.

Figure 3. Negative impact of English on French language learning

Knowledge of the English language hinders my ability to:



Source: Elaborated by the authors

Interference from English appears most prominently in oral production, particularly when learners attempt to speak French and actively engage in conversation, an issue reported by nearly half of the participants. Additionally, 23.6% of respondents (n = 59) indicated that their knowledge of English grammar complicates the acquisition and application of French grammatical structures.

Other forms of interference were observed to a lesser extent. Specifically, 9.6% of participants reported difficulty in understanding spoken French; 8.8% experienced challenges in written expression due to English influence; and 8.4% noted that their comprehension of written French was hindered, as their stronger familiarity with English often dominated.

We sought to examine whether the negative and obstructive impact of English on French is associated with the duration of French language learning. The findings are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Negative impact of the English language in relation to the years of French language learning

Years of French Language Learning	Reading	Listening	Grammar	Writing	Speaking	Total
Less than 4 years	6 (15.0%)	2 (5.0%)	9 (22.5%)	1 (2.5%)	22(55.0%)	40 (100.0%)
4 to less than 8 years	10 (6.2%)	19 (11.8%)	41 (25.5%)	15 (9.3%)	76 (47.2%)	161 (100.0%)
8 years or more	5 (10.2%)	3 (6.1%)	9 (18.4%)	6 (12.2%)	26 (53.1%)	49 (100.0%)
Total	21 (8.4%)	24 (9.6%)	59 (23.6%)	22 (8.8%)	124 (49.6%)	250 (100.0%)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

The distribution of participants across groups based on the number of years spent learning French, in relation to the perceived negative and hindering influence of English, shows no consistent trend of increase or decrease in specific categories. Statistical analysis using Fisher’s Exact Test (p = .329) revealed no significant differences in the frequency of reported negative impacts of English across the groups defined by this independent variable. The results suggest a general homogeneity in participants’ responses, regardless of their experience level. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 4.

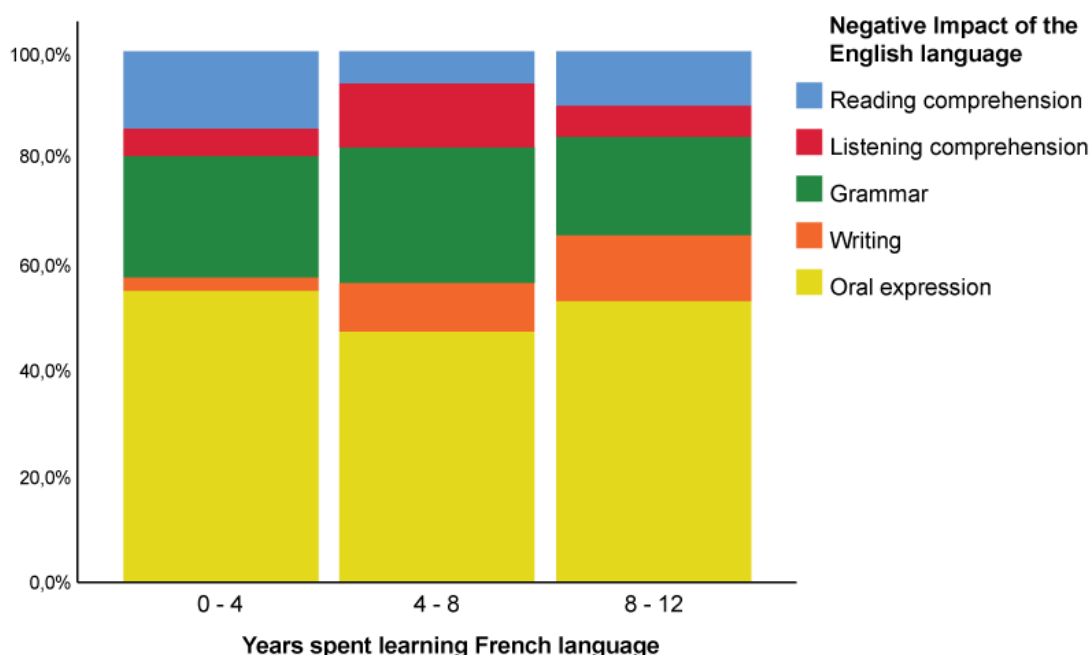
These findings directly address RQ2, which explores in which linguistic areas learners perceive English as hindering the learning of French. According to participants’ responses, the most significant negative influence of English was reported in oral expression, suggesting that productive skills, especially speaking, are more vulnerable to interference than receptive or grammatical domains. This outcome aligns with studies such as De Angelis (2007) and Puig-Mayenco et al. (2020), which point out that previously acquired languages, particularly dominant ones like English, can inhibit fluency in L3 speech production.

The results also suggest that this perception of interference remains consistent regardless of how long participants have been learning French. While it may be expected that learners with more years of instruction would report fewer difficulties, the data show no statistically significant differences between groups based on years of French study. This observation may reflect the persistent dominance of English as a default language of communication and thought, making spontaneous expression in French more challenging. Overall, the consistency of responses across experience levels reinforces the idea that cross-linguistic influence from English is deeply rooted in learners’ language processing habits and is not easily diminished by time alone (Bardel & Falk, 2012; De Angelis, 2007; Puig-Mayenco et al., 2020).

These results provide strong evidence in support of Hypothesis 2 (H2), confirming that English (L2) interferes primarily with productive skills in French (L3), especially speaking and, to a lesser extent, writing. Furthermore, the observed variability in grammatical influence, with some learners reporting facilitation and others interference, partially confirms Hypothesis 3 (H3). Taken together, these outcomes directly answer

RQ2, highlighting that English exerts a predominantly negative impact on oral production and mixed effects on grammar, consistent with prior findings on cross-linguistic interference in multilingual contexts.

Figure 4. Negative impact of the English language in relation to the years spent learning the French language



Source: Elaborated by the authors

5. Conclusion

this study set out to explore learners' perceptions of how English, as their first foreign language (L2), influences the process of acquiring French as a second foreign language (L3). Guided by the two central research questions, (RQ1) in which linguistic areas learners perceive English as facilitating the learning of French, and (RQ2) in which areas they perceive it as hindering, the analysis revealed a nuanced picture of cross-linguistic influence.

Regarding Research Question 1, the findings suggest that English is perceived as beneficial primarily in receptive skills, particularly reading comprehension. A significant number of participants reported that their knowledge of English helped them understand written French. This observation supports earlier research emphasizing the role of lexical and orthographic similarity between English and French in promoting positive transfer (Bérubé & Marinova-Todd, 2012; Singleton & O'Laire, 2006, 2009). Although the questionnaire did not contain explicit questions on vocabulary, participants' perceptions of improved reading and listening skills likely stem from recognizing familiar word forms and shared Latin-derived vocabulary, as theorized by Klein (2008) and Grzega (2005).

In response to Research Question 2, the data reveal that oral production is the domain most affected by negative transfer. Nearly half of the participants stated that English interferes with their ability to express themselves fluently in French. This suggests that productive skills, especially spontaneous speaking, are more vulnerable to cross-linguistic interference. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g., De Angelis, 2007; Puig-Mayenco et al., 2020), which emphasize the dominance of L2 in learners' mental lexicons and the resulting difficulty in inhibiting it during L3 speech.

Interestingly, while participants held diverse opinions on the facilitative role of English, their responses about its interfering role were more consistent, especially in speaking. Moreover, no statistically significant differences were found across experience levels, indicating that perceptions of both positive and negative transfer remain relatively stable, regardless of how long students have been learning French.

Overall, the confirmation of H1 and H2 and the partial confirmation of H3 demonstrate that the study's findings are aligned with the proposed research questions, reinforcing the theoretical assumptions about cross-linguistic influence in multilingual learners.

Taken together, the results highlight the complex nature of cross-linguistic influence in multilingual learners. English serves both as a helpful bridge, particularly in recognizing vocabulary for comprehension, and as a source of interference, especially in spoken fluency. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of third language acquisition and suggest that future pedagogical strategies should aim to raise learners' awareness of both the benefits and challenges posed by prior linguistic knowledge.

The pedagogical implications derived from this study offer valuable guidelines for improving French language instruction. These implications emphasize the need for a more tailored and strategic approach to teaching French to students with prior knowledge of English. By addressing both the positive and negative influences of English, educators can help students overcome challenges and enhance their language proficiency in a more balanced and effective way.

The positive influence of English on understanding French suggests that language instruction should emphasize cross-linguistic vocabulary connections, particularly focusing on similarities between English and French. This could help students more easily transfer their vocabulary knowledge from English to French, improving their overall comprehension and fluency.

The significant challenge observed in speaking fluently in French due to interference from English highlights the need to focus more on developing oral communication skills. Pedagogical strategies might include targeted speaking exercises, conversation practice, and listening comprehension drills to minimize the negative impact of interference and encourage more fluent spoken expression.

Given the phonetic challenges faced by learners when speaking French, it would be beneficial to incorporate phonetic training into language instruction, helping students master the specific sounds and intonation patterns of French. This could reduce confusion caused by similarities and differences between English and French phonology.

To combat the challenges of translating thoughts into fluent oral French, immersion practices or activities that encourage spontaneous language use, such as debates, role plays, or simulations, could be implemented. These practices can help students gain more confidence in using French in real-life contexts and reduce hesitation due to interference.

The study's findings suggest that the order in which languages are learned significantly influences language proficiency, aligning with the L2 Status Factor Hypothesis (Bardel & Falk, 2007, 2012), which emphasizes the cognitive and contextual effects of sequential language acquisition. Consequently, educators should consider the cognitive load imposed on students when acquiring multiple languages sequentially (Tomoschuk et al., 2021). For example, introducing French earlier in the language learning process might help alleviate some of the difficulties learners encounter when studying it as a third language.

As the study suggests that proficiency in English can aid in learning French, instructors could consider differentiating instruction based on students' levels of English proficiency. Advanced English speakers might benefit from more complex French materials and tasks, while beginners could focus on strengthening their basic vocabulary and grammatical structures through explanations based on English.

Given the complex interactions between multiple languages, teachers should adopt a cross-linguistic approach (Jessner, 2006), recognizing that students' prior knowledge of one language can both facilitate and hinder the acquisition of another. Instructors can use this insight to design exercises addressing both positive and negative cross-linguistic influences, helping learners become more aware of how their existing language skills affect their learning process. Encouraging students to reflect on their experiences with English and French can promote better understanding of these connections and support more effective self-correction strategies, particularly in vocabulary, syntax, and phonology.

This study presents valuable insights into learners' perceptions of English influence on French acquisition; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of a structured questionnaire with exclusively closed-ended questions limited the depth of understanding regarding the reasons behind learners' perceptions and experiences. Consequently, the study captures the presence and direction of cross-linguistic influence but does not fully explore the underlying cognitive or affective mechanisms. Moreover, the limited number of questions may have restricted the scope of issues investigated, potentially overlooking nuanced aspects of language transfer.

Another limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment of language proficiency. Additionally, the sample consisted solely of learners from Serbia with a similar educational background, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or learner populations.

For future research, it would be beneficial to incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews or open-ended surveys to gain richer insights into how learners experience and manage cross-linguistic influence in real-time language use. Investigating the bidirectional influence between French and English, examining whether and how French facilitates English learning, would also extend the understanding of multilingual dynamics. Furthermore, exploring the impact of learners' first foreign language acquired prior to the second foreign language on subsequent language acquisition could provide important developmental insights.

Finally, future studies might focus on identifying which linguistic domains (e.g., phonology, syntax, semantics) most significantly contribute to successful oral proficiency development, especially considering that this study highlighted speaking as the most challenging skill for learners at both secondary and tertiary education levels. Such research would contribute to designing more targeted and effective multilingual pedagogical approaches.

6. Bibliography

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (n.d.). *The benefits of learning languages*. ACTFL. <https://www.actfl.org/advocacy-and-public-education/the-benefits-of-learning-languages>
- Angelovska, Tanja; & Hahn, Angela (2023). Third language acquisition in the classroom. In Jennifer Cabrelli; Adel Chaouch-Orozco; Jorge Gonzalez Alonso; Sergio Miguel Pereira Soares; Eloi Puig-Mayenco & Jason Rothman (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Third Language Acquisition* (pp. 466-491). Cambridge University Press.
- Bardel, Camilla; & Falk, Ylva (2012). Behind the L2 Status Factor: A neurolinguistic framework for L3 research. In Jennifer Cabrelli Amaro, Suzanne Flynn & Jason Rothman (Eds.), *Third Language Acquisition in Adulthood* (pp. 61-78). John Benjamins.

- Bardel, Camilla; & Falk, Ylva (2007). The Role of the Second Language in Third Language Acquisition: The Case of Germanic Syntax. *Second Language Research*, 23(4), 459-484. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43103748>
- Bérubé, Daniel; & Marinova-Todd, Stefka (2012). The development of language and reading skills in the second and third languages of multilingual children in French immersion. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 9(3), 272-293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2011.631708>
- Bialystok, Ellen (2001). *Bilingualism in development: Language, literacy, and cognition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cabrelli Amaro, Jennifer; Campos-Dintrans, Gonzalo; & Rothman, Jason (2018). The Role of L1 Phonology in L2 Morphological Production: L2 English Past Tense Production by L1 Spanish, Mandarin, and Japanese Speakers. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 40(3), 503-527.
- Cabrelli, Jennifer; Iverson, Michael; Giancaspro, David; & Gonzalez, Becky Halloran (2020). The Roles of L1 Spanish Versus L2 Spanish in L3 Portuguese Morphosyntactic Development. In Karina Veronika Molsing, Cristina Becker Lopes Perna & Ana Maria TramuntIbaños (Eds.), *Linguistic Approaches to Portuguese as an Additional Language* (pp. 11-33). John Benjamins.
- Cabrelli, Jennifer; Chaouch-Orozco, Adel; González Alonso, Jorge; Pereira Soares, Sergio Miguel; Puig-Mayenco, Eloi; & Rothman, Jason (2023). *The Cambridge handbook of third language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108957823>
- Capucho, Filomena (2011). Intercomprensione fra lingue appartenenti a diverse famiglielinguistiche. In Maddalena de Carlo (Ed.), *Intercomprensione e educazione al plurilinguismo* (pp. 223-241). WizartsEditore.
- Castagne, Eric (2008). Les langues anglaise et française: amies ou ennemies? [The English and French Languages: Friends or Foes?] *Études de Linguistique Appliquée*, 149, 31-42.
- Cenoz, Jassone; Hufeisen, Britta; & Jessner, Ulrike (2001). *Cross-linguistic influence in third language acquisition: Psycholinguistic perspectives*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000218>
- De Angelis, Gessica (2007). *Third or additional language acquisition*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847690050>
- De Angelis, Gessica (2018). Lecture 6: Cross-linguistic Influence and Multiple Language Acquisition and Use. In David Singleton & Larissa Aronin (Eds.), *Twelve Lectures on Multilingualism* (pp. 163-177). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788922074-008>
- Falk, Ylva; & Bardel, Camilla (2010). The study of the role of the background languages in third language acquisition: The state of the art. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 48, 185-220. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.2010.009>
- Grzega, Joachim (2005). The Role of English in Learning and Teaching European Intercomprehension Skills. *Journal for EuroLinguistics*, 2, 1-18. <https://www1.ku.de/SLF/EnglVglSW/ELIX/grzega-051.pdf>
- Hammarberg, Björn (2010). The languages of the multilingual: Some conceptual and terminological issues. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 48(2-3), 91-104. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.2010.005>
- Hemming, Erik; Klein, Horst G; & Reissner, Christina (2011). *English – the Bridge to the Romance Languages*. Shaker Verlag.
- Ignjačević, Anđelka (2006). *Engleski jezik u Srbiji* [English Language in Serbia]. Čigoja Press.
- Jessner, Ulrike (2006). *Linguistic awareness in multilinguals: English as a third language*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Jessner, Ulrike (2014). On multilingual awareness or why the multilingual learner is a specific language learner. In M. Pawlak & L. Aronin (Eds.), *Essential topics in applied linguistics and multilingualism: Studies in honour of David Singleton* (pp. 175-184). Springer International Publishing.
- Klein, Horst G. (2008). L'anglais, base possible de l'intercompréhension romane? [English: A Possible Basis for Romance Intercomprehension?] *Éla. Études de linguistique appliquée*, 149(1), 119-128. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ela.149.0119>.
- Luan, Xiaoyu; Masakazu kuno; Sugawara, Ayaka; Kawasaki, Yayoi; & Sugimori, Eriko (2024). The effect of previously acquired languages on third language acquisition. *Heliyon*, 10(4), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e26202>
- MacWhinney, Brian (2005). A Unified Model of Language Acquisition. In Judith F. Kroll & Annette M. B. de Groot (Eds.), *Handbook of bilingualism: Psycholinguistic approaches* (pp. 49-67). Oxford University Press.
- Maksimović, Jelena & Osmanović, Jelena (2020). *Statistički testovi u pedagoškim istraživanjima* [Statistical tests in educational research]. Niš: Faculty of Philosophy.
- McCann, William, J; Klein, Horst G; & Stegmann, Tilbert (2002). *EuroComRom - The Seven Sieves: How to read all the Romance languages right away*. Shaker Verlag GmbH, Germany.
- Melo-Pfeifer, Silvia (2014). Intercomprehension between romance languages and the role of English: a study of multilingual chat rooms. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 11(1), 120-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2012.679276>
- Ó Laoire, Muiris; & Singleton, David (2009). The role of prior knowledge in L3 learning and use: Further evidence of psychotopological dimensions. In Larissa Aronin & Britta Hufeisen (Eds.), *The Exploration of Multilingualism: Development of research on L3, multilingualism and multiple language acquisition* (pp. 79-102). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/aals.6.05ch5>
- Puig-Mayenco, Eloi; González Alonso, Jorge; & Rothman, Jason (2020). A systematic review of transfer studies in third language acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 36(1), 31-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658318809147>

- Robert, Jean-Michel (2013). Intercompréhension entre l'Anglais et les Langues Romanes. *Passages de Paris*, 8, 107-117.
- Rothman, Jason (2011). L3 syntactic transfer selectivity and typological determinacy: The typological primacy model. *Second Language Research*, 27(1), 107-127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658310386439>
- Singleton, David & Ó Laoire, Muiris (2006). Psychotypologie et facteur L2 dans l'influence translexicale. Une analyse de l'influence de l'anglais et de l'irlandais sur le français L3 de l'apprenant. *Acquisition et interaction en langue étrangère*, 24, 101-117. <https://doi.org/10.4000/aile.1672>
- Stadt, Rosalinde; Hulk, Aafke; & Sleeman, Petra (2018). The influence of L2 English on L3 French acquisition in bilingual education. *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 227-245. <https://doi.org/10.1075/dujal.18006.sta>
- Tomoschuk, Brendan; Duyck, Wouter; Hartsuiker, Robert; Ferreira, Victor; & Gollan, Tamar (2021). Language of instruction affects language interference in the third language. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 24(4), 707-718. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728921000043>
- Westergaard, Marit; Mitrofanova, Natalia; Mykhaylyk, Roksolana; & Rodina, Yulia (2017). Crosslinguistic influence in the acquisition of a third language: The Linguistic Proximity Model. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 21(6), 666-682. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006916648859>

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Questionnaire on Students' Perceptions Towards Challenges in Learning French Due to the Influence of English

Dear Students,

The questionnaire you are about to complete is intended to collect information regarding the challenges and discomforts you experience in learning and acquiring French as a second foreign language, influenced by English as your first foreign language. Your responses are of crucial and invaluable importance to the objectives of this research. We kindly request that you answer each question honestly, drawing from your personal experiences. Please note that this survey is entirely anonymous, and all data collected will be used exclusively for scientific research. We sincerely appreciate your cooperation.

- I study French:
 - a) in high school
 - b) at university
- I have been studying French for:
 - a) less than 4 years.
 - b) 4 to less than 8 years.
 - c) 8 years or more.
- Knowledge of the English language helps me:
 - a) to better understand written French (while reading).
 - b) to better understand spoken French (while listening).
 - c) to write better in French.
 - d) to pronounce French better.
 - e) to master French grammar better and more easily.
- Knowledge of the English language hinders:
 - a) my ability to express myself orally in French.
 - b) my ability to express myself in writing in French.
 - c) my ability to understand French while reading.
 - d) my ability to understand French while listening.
 - e) my ability to master French grammar rules.