

Using English as a gateway to Romance language acquisition

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Romance language acquisition through English acquired as the first foreign language. A conscious approach to relations between languages enables learners, who acquired certain knowledge, attitudes and skills while learning one language, to learn other languages more easily. Research is based on contrastive analysis of two Romance languages – French and Spanish – and their relations to English. Learning those two Romance languages was carried out through the knowledge of some principles of how languages function and are related to each other. The analysis of vocabulary and grammar focuses on similarities between the three mentioned languages, emphasising the level of intensity in similarity on one hand, and possible problems related to spelling, pronunciation and meaning on the other hand. The research supports the idea of language plurality in education, and the necessity to help learners construct and continuously broaden and deepen their own plurilingual competence.

Keywords: plurilingualism, multilingualism, FREPA, contrastive analysis;

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1. Introduction

Supporters of a principle of language plurality in education are convinced that society is becoming more and more plurilingual and pluricultural, which results from globalisation, migration and integration (Candelier, 2003). Globalisation can be considered positively in terms of plurilingualism if its unification consequences are limited by particular counterbalance. The globalising lingua franca (the function of which is fulfilled by English currently) should be provided to everybody as it fulfils its pragmatically communication function, but studying other languages mediates other values such as intellectual, ethical, aesthetic and so on (Fenclová, 2005). The Council of Europe included the positive acceptance of difference and diversity into the key competences of a European citizen through greater mutual knowledge of national and regional languages, including those less widely taught (CEFR, 2001). In terms of languages, including plurilingual language propaedeutic in education meets such a goal, however, in language teaching methodology four pluralistic approaches have emerged over the past 40 years. From the intercultural approach advocating the use of phenomena from more cultural areas and contact of individuals from different cultural backgrounds through more linguistically oriented approaches (awakening to languages and the intercomprehension of related languages) to helping language learners establish links between a number of languages resulted in the integrated didactic approach. This approach focuses on using the mother tongue or the language of education as a springboard for acquiring a first foreign language, and then to use these languages as the basis for learning a second foreign language (Candelier et al., 2012).

Developing a set of items of knowledge, attitudes and skills related to one language (and its culture) enables learners to acquire other languages (and their cultures). As languages belong to different language families, it is obvious that learning languages of the same family is easier due to similarities, mainly in vocabulary and grammar structures. Many native speakers of one Romance language are able to use other Romance languages in real life situations.

This article focuses on using knowledge, attitudes and skills, achieved while acquiring English, in learning Romance languages, namely French and Spanish from the perspective of a Slavonic native language speaker.

2. The family backgrounds of languages

In terms of a historical perspective, it seems to be proper to mention how these three languages have developed, being influenced by each other, some of them more or less. All of them belong to the Indo-European family of languages. The Indo-European language was spread by peaceful processes of expansion, which naturally resulted in different groups. While Romance languages originated from Vulgar Latin (spoken in the streets and bars as opposed to the elite written form studied at schools), the similar process might be recognised while speaking about Germanic languages (German, English, Danish, Dutch, Swedish and Islandic), as all developed from Old German before evolving their own identities (Russell, 1993). Comparing the translations of the Pater Noster (the Lord's Prayer) into languages of three branches: Germanic, Romance and Slavonic, the contrastive analysis enables us to see similarities within the branch:

Table 1. The expression *bread* in some languages of three branches of the Indo/European family of languages

Germanic	Romance	Slavonic
Brot (German)	pain (French)	chlieb (Slovak)
brood (Dutch)	pane (Spanish)	chléb (Czech)
bröd (Swedish)	pan (Italian)	chleb (Polish)
Brød (Danish)	pâinea (Romanian)	хлеб (Russian)
brauð (Icelandic)	pão (Portuguese)	хлеб (Serbian)
bread (English)		

The users of languages of the same branch have fewer problems with acquiring languages of the same branch, as the languages have many similar words that developed from the same origin, similar grammatical patterns, sentence structures and syntactic relations between sentences. In general, English spoken by the population of Germanic languages is natural, appropriate and more easily acquired than in other countries. Statistically, the Scandinavian holders of Cambridge examination certificates have achieved the best results in the tests (British Council), not only due to the educational system but due to the exposure to the language in everyday life as well. Being exposed to a language similar to the mother tongue is not so demanding as if the language is completely different.

2.1 The Nature of English

We advocate that English is an appropriate language for being the first foreign language, which can later make acquiring other European languages easier and help learners seek to identify relationships among the languages and thus create plurilingual competence.

While defining word stock of English, it is necessary to take into account that Modern English is made up of three layers of vocabulary:

- Anglo-Saxon (with additions from the Viking language, Old Norse)
- French
- Latin (with additions from Greek, often through Latin).

Germanic tribes invaded today’s British Isles in about 450 AD bringing the language, nowadays called Anglo-Saxon or Old English. Many Modern English content words are of Anglo-Saxon origin, such as nouns: house (hūs), husband (hūsbonða), sun (sunne), son (sunu), day (dæg), wife (wif), love (lufu), king (cyning), moon (móna); adjectives: cold (cald), broad (brád), bloody (blódig) and verbs: eat (etan), drink (drincan), live (libban). Being invaded by Scandinavian Vikings and ruled by Danes for 28 years brought a new language to the territory. Russell (1993) stated, “The Germanic language spoken by the invaders – Old Norse – was so like Old English that Danes and Anglo-Saxons could understand one another as readily as Danes and Swedes do today, and the two languages eventually blended into one” (p. 12). So the words which were borrowed and are still used in modern English are, for example, leg, root, steak, skill, skin, skirt, ill, die, raise, take, give, get.

Russell (1993) found “the Norman French who ruled England from 1066 onwards were from the same stock as the Danes who had invaded England three centuries earlier” (p. 13). However, in those times they were a very different people: thoroughly civilized and thoroughly French. It seems to be very interesting to know that Norman means Northman or Viking. The rate of French borrowing reached a peak in the second half of the 14th century and French influence on the English lexicon is

clearly recognisable in words related to administration, law, religion, military, food and drink, fashion, leisure and the arts, science and learning, etc. (Crystal, 1995).

Although English was once a largely homogeneous Germanic or Teutonic language, well over half its vocabulary today is derived from Latin. The effect of Latin can be traced in the form of the Christian missionaries from Ireland and Rome which resulted in hundreds of new words coming into the language, and motivated many derived forms (Crystal, 1995). The second invasion of Latin into English happened during the 16th century. The words for new concepts, techniques and inventions were taken from Latin, with a good number of Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.

As English has words from three different sources (Old English, French and Latin/Greek), the language is rich in synonyms as it comprises at least three, with different qualities that fit them for different purposes in different contexts, such as *ask-question-interrogate*, *help-aid-assistance*, *fire-flame-conflagration*, *folk-people-nation*, *time-age-epoch*, *holy-sacred-consecrated*. However, these triplets make the language achievable for many learners.

As the English language was strongly influenced by the introduction of French at the time of the Norman invasion of the British Isles in the 11th century, these two languages contain many cognates and share many grammatical features. French influenced English grammar through introducing postmodifying genitive, marking the infinitive, intensifying the development of the progressive and perfective forms.

2.2. The Nature of French

Romance languages are considered melodic for their higher emphasis on vowels, which are pronounced clearly. The languages are characterised as synthetic with an emphasis on the verb, which plays specific semantic roles in the action and specific syntactic roles in the clause. For each tense, there are usually six distinct verbal inflections, encoding three persons and two numbers (singular and plural). Modern Romance languages are more analytical than synthetic Latin.

In French much greater reliance is placed on word order and intonation to convey meaning rather than on morphological form. Having lost the declension system of Classical Latin, French makes extensive use of prepositions.

French radically changed in the 14th and 15th centuries. While in the 14th century the word order became more fixed (subject-verb-object), in the 15th century the language lost word stress and morphological markers and emphasis is put more on intonation rather than on morphological forms in sentence meaning (www.britannica.com). Subjunctive remained mostly in emotional utterances, in which it is necessary to express doubt, unreality or hypothetical future (*je doute qu'il vienne*), or is used after subordinate conjunctions which carry the action to future (*avant que vous soyez venu*). Latin subjunctive in concessive clauses was replaced by the infinitive in Modern French.

From the vocabulary perspective, French was always open to replacing old expression by new ones and it borrowed many words from Celts and the language of Franks, which belonged to the Germanic family of languages. Many expressions penetrated into French due to Spanish and Portuguese explorers such as (*patate*, *banane*, *tabac*) or the words of cultural value in the arts, architecture and a bank sector from Italian. In the 17th century many new words emerged in French due to German-speaking neighbours. Nowadays, in spite of the purists' rejection anglicisms penetrate naturally, predominantly in technical areas and therefore they do not influence basic vocabulary, which is of Latin origin (www.britannica.com).

2.3. The Nature of Spanish

After English and Mandarin Chinese, Spanish is the third language in the world in number of speakers and is considered the most widely studied Romance language, predominantly by native speakers of English.

The Spanish language developed from Vulgar Latin, being influenced by Arabic and other Romance languages. It is less intelligible with French than with Italian as they do not differ very much in grammar, vocabulary and have a very similar phonological system.

Spanish is relatively inflective language with about 50 inflections concerning mostly verbs, nouns and pronouns are no longer altered to indicate their grammatical functions. The relations between words are based on the use of prepositions and adjectives generally follow the noun they modify. Spanish syntax is based on subject-verb-object order, which is still a little flexible. It is possible to omit a personal pronoun if it is pragmatically unnecessary and directed by a verb. In both Spanish and French, negation is generally expressed by a negative adverb before the verb and other negative adverbs or pronouns to indicate what kind of negation is being made (www.britannica.com).

From the historical perspective, English, French and Spanish had close relations both through marriages of royalty and nobility representatives and during the long-lasting wars between England and France and between England and Spain.

3. Contrastive analysis between English and Romance languages

For purposes of contrastive analysis, several resources have been used: French and Spanish self-study books, internet articles and notes related to personal experience with all three languages. Analysing them, the focus was predominantly put on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling, focussing on 115 samples in French vocabulary and 50 samples in French grammatical structures. The number of analysed Spanish samples was 50 vocabulary samples and 25 grammar-related samples. The aim of the analysis was to distinguish between similarities and differences between English and Romance languages and categorise them.

Comparing Romance languages with Germanic languages, the former ones are considered more musical due to the relatively greater importance of vowels, which are clear and bell-like. Stress in Romance languages is light, but there is no stress in French, and articulation is energetic, as the Romance speech seems to be rapid due to elision. From the grammatical perspective, the Romance modern languages have retained some of the synthetic character of Latin.

3.1 Contrastive analysis between English and French

In approaching the word stock, it was necessary to determine categories which would distribute the samples. After several attempts, 100 samples were distributed as follows:

- None or minimal differences in written mode and a high intensity of similarity in pronunciation (28), therefore it is possible to guess meaning from acquired English: *airport – l'aéroport, expression – l'expression, lesson – la leçon, telephone – la téléphone, letter – la lettre, music – la musique, post – la poste, port – le port*. A significant group formed words of measure and size: *grand – grand, large – large, petit – petit*.
- Similarities in written mode, slight differences in pronunciation (24), therefore it is quite difficult to guess meaning if a listener does not speak French: *activity – l'activité, central – central, concert – le concert, decide – décider, difficulty – la difficulté, interesting – intéressant, enter – entre, family – la*

famille, historic – historique, comfort – confort, voyage – la voyage, September – septembre, theatre – le théâtre.

- Almost the same words in written mode and slight differences in pronunciation (12), where only the words which were borrowed directly from French and assimilated were incorporated: *buffet – le buffet, ballet – le ballet, café – le café, mayday – m’aidez, cul-de-sac – cul-de sac, faux-pas – faux pas.*
- Slight differences in both written and spoken modes (26), where more significant misunderstanding may be caused by different pronunciation: *departure – le départ, environment – les environs, embrace – embrasser, representative – représentant, finish – finir, reason – la raison, button – le bouton, indicate – indiquer, society – la société, course – le cours, museum – le musée.*
- Similarities between words which might cause problems to learners as they might confuse them or limit their preciseness (10), it is necessary to learn words in both languages very precisely not to use them incorrectly: *address – l’adresse, exercise – l’exercice, modern – moderne, pharmacy – la pharmacie, Sunday – le samedi, Wednesday – le vendredi.*
- Similarities based on similar spoken and written forms, but different meaning (15), therefore it is necessary to be aware of these paronyms as they can lead to misunderstanding. While an English word *actual* means in French *real*, a French word *actuel* means in English *current*, *realise* means in English to become aware of the fact and French *réaliser* means to implement. There are tens of words like this and could make us feel very uncomfortable while using them incorrectly: *promotion – to move to a more important job or rank in a company, la promotion – the same as in English or graduation, damage – physical harm, harmful effects, le dommage – pity, etc.*

A large number of words in the two analysed languages have the same Latin roots and are mutually comprehensible, although this applies more to academic/technical words than to everyday vocabulary. The concomitant problem, however, is the significant number of false friends. Here are more examples we encountered while analysing the chosen material. The French word is listed first, followed by the correct English equivalent: *cave – cellar; isolation – insulation; demander – ask; sensible – sensitive; ignorer – not know; librairie – bookshop; magasin – magazine.*

From the historical perspective, French (after the Conquest in 1066) started to influence Old English with its typical features of Germanic languages. The most visible similarities between these two languages might be seen in the use of progressive and perfective aspects of the verbs, which allow to express activities in progress and openness or closeness of the performed activity in both languages, for example the past perfect in English – *I had brought* equals to French *j’avais porté*, enriched by another form of *the plus-que-parfait* (using the verb to be instead of to have) – *j’étais arrivé(e)*. The same parallel is seen in the future perfect *I have brought – j’aurai porté*. Gerund in English, e.g. *closing* has its equivalent in French *ouvrant*, and their similar use is recognisable from the functional perspective. Similar parallels might be seen in the following grammatical structures and their use: subjunctive, conditionals and sequence of tenses.

Table 2. Conditionals in English and French

English	French
If I have money, I will help you.	Si j’ai de l’argent, je vous aiderai.
If I had money, I would help you.	Si j’avais de l’argent, je vous aiderais.
If I had had money, I would have helped you.	Si j’avais eu de l’argent, je vous aurais aider.

Once these structures and their use are mastered in English, its acquisition in French does not need a lot of effort from students’ sides.

3.2. Contrastive analysis between English and Spanish

From the historical perspective, languages influenced each other through royal marriages, long-term wars for power over the seas and oceans, but also due to trade. While the expression such as *cigar, cigarette, sherry, banana, junta* are presented in many books as Spanish loan words into English, many Spanish words penetrated into English through the New World such as *tobacco, lasso, ranch, rodeo, mustang, pueblo, potato* and so on (Crystal, 1996). Many users of English as a foreign language are sensitive while recognising similar sounds and written forms of the words such as *access – acceso, accompany – acompañar, aid – ayudar, alarm – alarmar, April – Abril, August – Agosto, content – contento, cordial – acuerdo, grateful – agradecido, seat – asiento*. On the other hand, those who speak English and other Romance languages (French or Italian) are able to recognise many Spanish words due to its closeness to these languages: *aimable – amable, aimer – amar, le billet – billete, coeur – cuero* (French-Spanish), *azzurro – azul, quattro – cuatro* (Italian and Spanish). Despite the fact that

Slavonic and Romance languages were developed from different families, some resemblance might be recognised, for example Slovak *kravata* – Spanish *corbata* – French *cravate* (English *tie*).

On the other hand, a large number of similar words between English and Spanish can cause a lot of misunderstanding or funny situations due to a great deal of paronyms. While an English word *carpet* has its Spanish equivalent *alfombra*, Spanish *carpeta* means *folder* in English, English *grocery* relates to Spanish *abarroteria* but the Spanish word *groseria* is translated into English as *crudeness*. Spanish *delito* resembles English *delight*, but while a Spanish expression refers to crime, an English expression means pleasure (in Spanish *delicia*). Spanish *lectura* is translated as *reading* in English, while an English word *lecture* concerns Spanish *conferencia*. English *introduce* has its equivalent in Spanish *presentar*, but Spanish *introducir* means *insert* in English. The problems are seen while using English *code* and Spanish *codo*. While the former one has its Spanish equivalent *código*, the latter one (Spanish *codo*) means *elbow* in English. English *soap* should be translated as *jabón* into Spanish, but Spanish *sopa* is called *soup* in English. It is possible to find many funny stories mostly related to misuse of English *embarrassed* (ashamed) with Spanish *embarazada* (to be pregnant).

Analysing grammatical patterns, it is possible to recognise certain similarities between past tenses (simple and progressive), gerunds (*comprendiendo*), conditionals and sequences of tenses.

4. Conclusion

Learning target languages requires the ability of a learner to link what is known to him/her and what is new to him/her. This procedure was popular in the 70-80s, when the comparison of the mother tongue and a foreign language was supported with the goal of focusing on similar and different features of the mother tongue and the language of instruction. Currently we live in a multilingual and multicultural world and globalisation incredibly increases the process of connecting, interlinking and relating, therefore it is necessary to recognise the relations between languages and cultures consciously for the benefit of natural and systematic acquisition of several languages and cultures of target communities.

One specific example of using one's second language learning to facilitate the third language acquisition might be seen in the schools in which the language of the nationality is a schooling language. In Slovakia, students of Hungarian nationality study all subjects in the language of their nationality and the official language (Slovak) is the first foreign language for them. When students are exposed to learning English (their second foreign language), teachers base their explanations of grammar and vocabulary on learners' experience with Slovak to bridge the gap between Hungarian and English.

Despite the fact that English should be chosen as a first foreign language due to its features, linguistic characteristics and function as a lingua franca, acquiring any languages might be very useful

as they enable the users to develop their plurilingual competence. While analysing French, it was possible to recognise the similarities between some French expressions and Russian equivalents, such as étage – этаж, magasin – магазин which have the same meaning. Having acquired one of the Slavonic languages enables the language learner to learn the other languages more rapidly as it has been mentioned above in relation to Germanic and Romance languages.

As being able to communicate is a key competence of a European citizen in multilingual Europe, it is important to support language learning. Apart from a mother tongue, it is necessary to acquire at least two more languages, not only their linguistic aspects, but also both pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects. Learning languages needs to be supported to enable learners to develop their linguistic observing and analytical skills, to accept language diversity, to recognise similarities and differences between languages, to develop different strategies for learning languages to become language competent users. Making distances closer due to more frequent travelling or through intensive communication via emails or Skype covering distant parts of the world evokes a necessity of plurilingualism.

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