

# TEACHING FRENCH AS A THIRD LANGUAGE: THEORETICAL ASPECTS AND A WEB-BASED COURSE REDUCING THE NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF SELECTED VERBAL CONSTRUCTIONS FROM ENGLISH TO FRENCH

**Halina Widła, Aleksandra Serwotka**

University of Silesia

Institute of Romance Languages and Translation Studies

ul. Grota Roweckiego 5; 41-200 Sosnowiec, Poland

halina.widla@us.edu.pl, aserwotka@us.edu.pl

***Abstract:** The paper revolves around the problem of cross-linguistic influence in multilingual learners with a particular focus on the issue of teaching French as a third language. The distance learning course described in the article has been created in order to reduce the number of mistakes resulting from negative transfer and committed by learners of French and English, the latter being their dominant foreign language.*

***Keywords:** distance learning course, FLE, language transfer, Moodle, multimedia*

## INTRODUCTION

The following article will concentrate on the online teaching material elaborated as part of the MA seminar on the use of multimedia in foreign language teaching at the Institute of Romance Languages and Translation Studies in the Faculty of Philology at the University of Silesia (Poland), under the supervision of Halina Widła. It illustrates the mechanism of cross-linguistic influence in multilingual learners and provides an example of how to use distance learning tools in the process of teaching French as a third language to students whose dominant foreign language is English. The main objective of the course prepared by Aleksandra Serwotka is to prevent the occurrence of grammatical errors resulting from interference, as well as to provide efficient methods of referring to the foreign language already known to students in order to facilitate the acquisition of another language. The emphasis is put on self-studying so as to encourage the learners to perceive certain regularities, but also major differences between the two languages. The course has been created on the

basis of CLMS Moodle (selected as the University of Silesia's e-learning platform) with the aid of the Prezi presentation software and the Hot Potatoes software suite.

## **1. THE MA SEMINAR 'MULTIMEDIA'**

The MA seminar „Multimedia“, conducted since 2008, aims to prepare the participants to write their MA theses, which are supposed to include a theoretical part, discussing selected problems, and a practical part, consisting in the creation of educational materials with the use of various means and techniques of distance learning.

Taking into account the widespread use of web-based textbooks, one may ask whether and to what extent a future foreign language teacher would need the skill of creating multimedia resources. It appears that the numerous educational aids available on data storage devices and online frequently require to be expanded through embedding within the local context, comparison, or adjustment to individual capacities of the learner. Therefore, ensuring the students' ability to apply modern technologies is not sufficient; a lot of time needs to be devoted to the reflection concerning the creation of online teaching materials. This allows for a thorough analysis of the learners' needs, as well as the assessment of their possibilities; moreover, it gives an occasion to perform a comprehensive analysis of the factors which foster language instruction, the evaluation of its effects, and a better assessment of the mechanisms conditioning successful teaching.

The MA theses written as part of the seminar may touch upon a variety of subjects related mainly to Internet communication and described so as to meet the needs of the target user. So far, 33 courses have been created on the Faculty of Philology's distance learning platform. Each of them is aimed to deepen the knowledge and expertise of the specialised language.

Each thesis is based on the author's own online project, related to the use of modern technologies at work, including the specialised language instruction with a particular focus on the possibilities of the so-called e-learning of foreign languages. The seminar classes revolve around the theoretical issues which are raised in the theses, as well as the evaluation of the courses prepared online and described in the theses with regard to their goals, content, utility and the issues discussed during their preparation.

The subjects of the theses are related to specific interests of the participants. They usually address the issue of the students' current or future professional career. For instance, a number of courses refer to such domains as tourism, art, history, medicine and content-based instruction. Many times the skills acquired during the seminar (both theoretical and linguistic skills related to the issues portrayed by the students, as well as strictly technical skills regarding the use of modern technologies) proved to be a valuable asset in the process of getting a job. The

course described in the following part of the paper has been created by Aleksandra Serwotka as part of the seminar.

## **2. WEB-BASED LEARNING AS A COMPONENT OF BLENDED FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Tavangarian et al. (2004) put emphasis on the change in learning methodologies which started to emerge in the nineties in the US and whose effect was the shift of the attention from the teacher towards the individual learner. This resulted in a rapid development of e-learning, defined as “computer and network-enabled transfer of skills and knowledge” (Hejtmánková 2013). Hejtmánková remarks that the present-day foreign language education has also been transformed by the dynamic advancement of new technologies. As distance-learning platforms offer the possibility of creating learner-specific content easily, they may be successfully used to support the process of foreign language teaching within a variety of learning environments.

The syllabus of the module „French practical grammar“ for second year students of applied languages (French and English) at the University of Silesia comprises 20 hours of student’s individual work, and the total number of hours that the student should spend on individual learning as part of the practical French module is as many as 140 (this includes the theoretical preparation, doing homework and preparing for written assignments). The use of web-based learning may constitute a good alternative for the students to meet this requirement. However, taking into consideration the abundance of linguistic material offered by the World Wide Web, it is essential to assist the learners in the process of selecting the right educational aids. Otherwise, the students may find the choice of learning materials difficult (El-Bakry and Mastorakis 2009). One of the numerous solutions may be the preparation of online self-studying content and its distribution among students, which can prevent confusion resulting from being faced with the immense quantity of various educational supporting materials.

The authors of the present article are of the opinion that the use of distance, web-based learning strategies is a proper method to motivate the learners to individual work in the amount of time that is required of them. The type of education including both participation in traditional classes and the use of other learning methods, such as web-based education, is referred to as blended learning (see Garrison and Vaughan 2008). Mazurek and Vrsecka (2011) claim that blended learning, understood as the connection of traditional instruction and distance learning, is the optimal form of learning. Nevertheless, these authors notice the great potential of web-based learning, especially in relation to university education. Thus, the course described in the present paper is designed to support the learning process occurring at the university in the traditional form (i.e. inside the classroom in the presence of both the teacher and the student).

### 3. THE SPECIFICITY OF TEACHING FRENCH AS A THIRD LANGUAGE

Over the years, many language teaching methodologies have emerged. Some of them, such as the Grammar Translation approach, emphasise the use of the learner's native language during the teaching process (see Mackey 2006). Nevertheless, before selecting a teaching method, the teacher should take into consideration a number of factors, including the learner's linguistic background, especially when it comes to multilingual learners (who dispose of more than one language system). There are numerous components which can possibly determine the influence that specific languages exert on one another in an individual speaker. There is also a wide variety of hypotheses concerning the nature of factors that condition the influence of several languages upon one another in a speaker's mind. For instance, Paradis (2004) claims that cross-linguistic influences result from neurobiological mechanisms.

As for the factors which can possibly determine the non-native language influence, de Angelis (2007) mentions, among others, such elements as proficiency, recency of use and language distance. According to Widła (2007), during the process of acquiring their third language, learners base upon language resources which they believe to be the closest to the target language. This factor is referred to by de Angelis (*ibidem*) as psychotypology (a term borrowed from Kellerman; Chłopek 2011) – the manner in which a person learning a language perceives the similarities, as well as the differences between given languages. Hence, in case of a Polish native speaker who had mastered English at advanced level and began to learn French, it is possible to observe the influence of both Polish and English on the speaker's performance in French. This hypothesis was confirmed by the research, conducted by Aleksandra Serwotka on 27 students of the second year of Applied Languages – a course offered by the University of Silesia, as part of which English is taught from the advanced level, whereas French from the basic level. The students were asked to translate 20 sentences from Polish into French. The sentences contained verbs whose complementation (for example, the presence or lack of a preposition, the use of direct object or indirect objects) differs between English and French. When it comes to Polish structures, in case of the chosen verbs they were either corresponding to French structures or entirely different from both languages mentioned before. A number of mistakes whose source may possibly be observed in English has occurred. Several examples are depicted in the table below.

It can be observed that the interferences occur between all the languages known or taught to the learner. This is why Widła (2007: 199-204) suggests that the didactic material aimed to teach French to Polish speakers whose primary foreign language is English does not necessarily have to be the same as that proposed to the Polish speaker for whom French is the first foreign language. In this case, English is far from being only the source of mistakes occurring during the use of French. As there is a number of structures which are common between these two languages, it can be

used as a point of reference in the cases when certain constructions in this language are closer to French constructions than their Polish equivalents.

**Table 1.**

**Examples of errors committed by the students of the second year of applied languages (English and French) and possibly resulting from the influence of English upon their French.**

<b>Mistake</b>	<b>Correct form</b>	<b>English translation</b>	<b>Possible source of the interference</b>
Je suis entré la chambre.	Je suis entré dans la chambre	I entered my room.	The lack of preposition in the English construction.
Quelqu'un nous s'approche.	Quelqu'un s'approche de nous.	Somebody approaches us.	The lack of preposition in the English construction; <i>s</i> added to the verb in the third person singular.
Qu'est-ce que tu pense à ?	À quoi penses-tu ?	What are you thinking about?	The possibility of putting the preposition at the end of the sentence in English.
J'ai cherché à cette livre.	J'ai cherché ce livre.	I've been looking for this book.	The use of a preposition in English; the female gender of <i>książka</i> („book“) in Polish.
Jouons le football !	Jouons au football !	Let's play football!	The lack of preposition in the English construction.

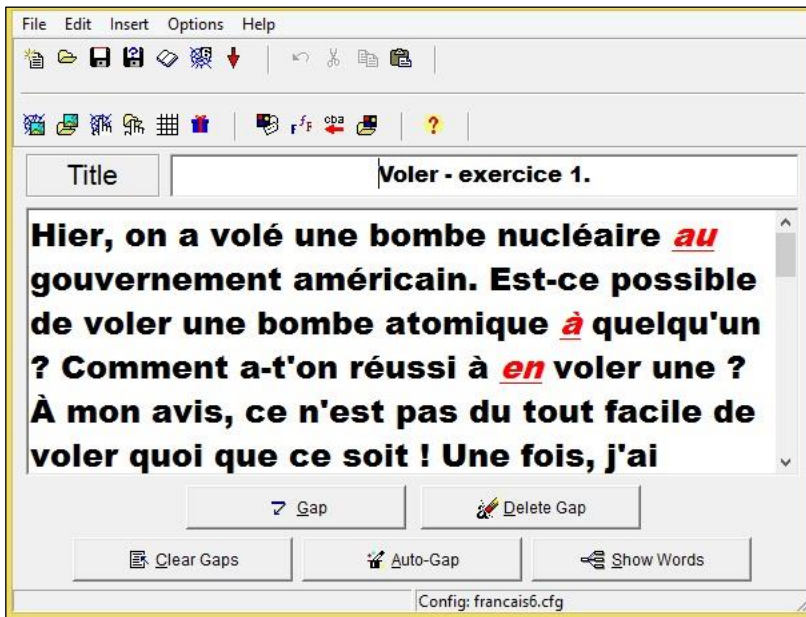
*Source: Own work*

Computer-assisted learning may be considered useful in the process of teaching French as a third language, since it enables the teacher to easily adapt the content to specific needs of the learner. What is important and emphasised *inter alia* by Widła (2007), Mazurek and Vrsecka (2011), the teacher should not be entirely replaced by a computer program. Instead, information technologies should be implemented in order to support the learning process and to assist in the process of individual learning, as it is in the case of the course prepared by Aleksandra Serwotka. Because of their flexibility, courses of this kind can be used in order to enhance or optimise the quality of teaching.

## 4. THE COURSE

### 4.1 Basic information

In order to create the course, the author made use of open-source or freeware software exclusively. Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a free learning management system whose principal function is to create personalised web-based learning environments. It was implemented by the University of Silesia as its e-learning platform. Prezi is a cloud-based zooming presentation software, whose basic version is free of charge. Moreover, students and teachers are allowed to receive a Prezi Edu Enjoy license for free. Hot Potatoes is a suite of six applications (JCloze, JCross, JMatch, JMix, JQuiz and the Masher), used for creating various types of exercises which can later be embedded into a website or an e-learning platform. The license is free of charge provided that the exercises created by means of the applications are freely available (Widła 2007). When creating the course, the author used the applications JCloze, JMatch and JQuiz, as well as the Masher in order to prepare a single web page out of several exercises.



**Figure 1. The process of creating a JCloze exercise by means of the Hot Potatoes software**

*Source: Own work*

### 4.2 Goals of the course

The course that is the subject of the present article is a supplementary multimedia course, designed in order to support the process of teaching French to the students of the second year of applied languages (English and French) who have already

mastered English at the advanced level. The educational material prepared by the author may be used as a tool for individual learning, both among students and other persons aiming to improve their language skills in French through practice. The basic objectives of the course involve:

1. the consolidation of practical knowledge of the French grammar;
2. the improvement of the learners' qualifications concerning the use of French structures selected by the author;
3. the elimination of possible mistakes resulting from negative cross-linguistic transfer between English and French;
4. creation of good linguistic habits by increasing the metalinguistic knowledge of the learners in order to facilitate the process of learning the third language;
5. encouraging the students to take advantage of their linguistic knowledge concerning one language in the process of learning another.;
6. supporting the process of individual learning as required from the students by the curriculum by making it more attractive and hence more approachable.

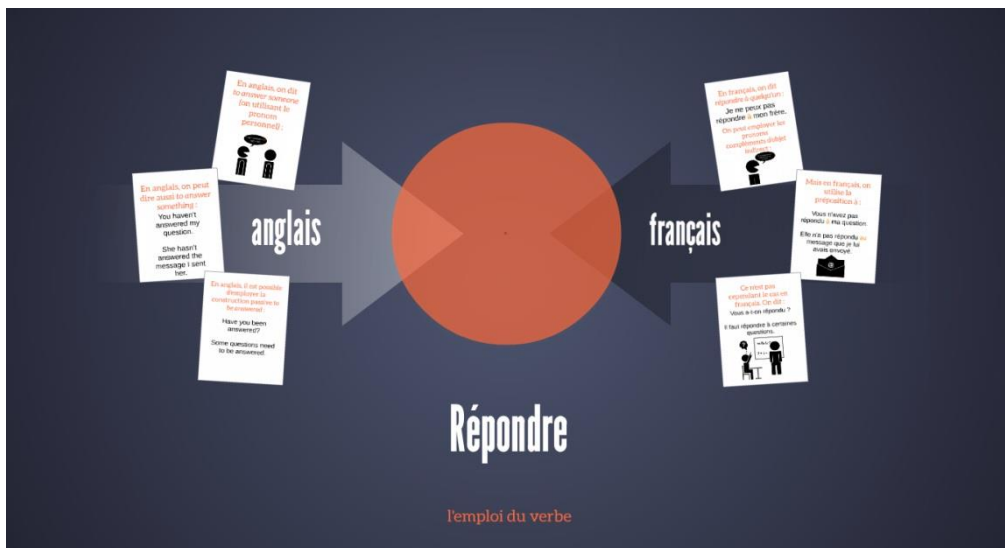
#### **4.3 Structure of the course**

The course, prepared almost entirely in French (although without surpassing the intermediate level, so that it is comprehensible to the learners), has a modular structure and comprises a short introductory part, 11 units (modules) and a final revision part. Each module is dedicated to a specific French verb (or verbs) whose complementation is different than in English. The verbs have been selected by the author in reference to her own experience related to learning French as the third language, as well as on the basis of the research mentioned in the previous chapter. The units are as follow:

1. Voler (to steal);
2. Appeler/téléphoner (to call/to phone);
3. Penser (to think);
4. Jouer (to play);
5. Demander (to ask);
6. Écouter/regarder (to listen/to look, to watch);
7. Entrer (to enter);
8. Dépendre (to depend);
9. Répondre (to answer);
10. Approcher/s'approcher (to approach, to come closer);

11. Ressembler (to resemble), chercher (to search), oser (to dare), attendre (to wait).

Each section begins with a multimedia presentation, embedded into the course so that the learners are free to zoom and switch the content by themselves. As a result, the students are able to skip the material with which they are already familiar, as well as to concentrate for a longer amount of time on the issues that they consider particularly problematic. The presentations are created by means of the Prezi software and their main goal is to compare specific English and French verbal structures in order to enable the student to spot the similarities between them, as well as the differences to avoid further errors. The main focus is on the differences in the use of specific prepositions in English and in French, together with the constructions with a direct or indirect object. Each use of a particular verb is followed by a description in French, indicating the similarities and the differences in grammar between English and French, as well as in meaning when necessary. There are also examples of use in both languages, derived from authentic texts in French and translated into English by the author. Specific parts of each sentence are marked by different colours in order to facilitate their identification and to indicate the differences in word order between the two languages. The content is accompanied by various illustrations, appropriate for the theme and selected so as not to distract the learner's attention from the lesson. The presentations are relatively short and concise.



**Figure 2.** One of the presentations embedded into the course

*Source: Own work*

The subsequent part of each lesson consists of tasks related to the content of the presentations. A large variety of exercise types proposed by CLMS Moodle is used. In relation to constructions in which differences in the word order appear, the word-



ordering exercises are proposed. After having completed each task, the students are able to verify whether their answers are correct or not, as well as to view the right answers. The majority of sections contain at least one exercise introducing an authentic French text and consisting in either writing or choosing the appropriate preposition. The tasks in which the user is asked to fill in the gaps with the right verb forms or prepositions (as opposed to the exercises in which the student simply chooses the form which is correct) are prepared by means of the Hot Potatoes JCloze application, which allows the teacher to include a keypad enabling the learner to easily type French characters.

As it has already been mentioned, the focus of the author was on the process of individual learning. Therefore, the students do not receive grades after having completed the tasks. Moreover, they are free to choose the order of learning depending on their preference. They are not obliged to accomplish every single task. The amount of time corresponding to each exercise is not limited, hence the learners can concentrate on specific examples as long as it is convenient. In the introduction to the course, it is suggested that the users do not tackle more than one verb a day in order to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge. Although dealing with more than one section in one day is possible, it is not recommended, since such an amount of information may discourage the students. Nevertheless, the author of the course is aware of the differences in individual preferences of the learners; this is why all the sections are constantly available to users who are allowed to browse them freely.

Complétez la traduction française des phrases anglaises. Utilisez les verbes mis entre parenthèses.

1. - Where is your car?  
- Someone has stolen it.  
(voler)  
- Où est ta voiture ?  
- Quelqu'un

2. I will think of him when I'm in London.  
(penser)  
Je  quand je serai à Londres.

3. What do you think of my new dress?  
(penser)  
Qu'est-ce que tu  ma nouvelle robe ?

4. This is the book I'm thinking about.  
(penser)  
C'est le livre

À à Ç ç É é ê Ê ê ë ò ù

Correction

<=> Index =>

**Figure 3. One of the revision exercises**

*Source: Own work*

Although the modules are independent of one another, it is advised to maintain the order imposed by the course structure, since the presentations dealing with the theoretical part of the lesson contain general grammatical information. Its part

should be already familiar to the students (taking into account the fact that the course is designed to be a component of the blended learning process), but the grammar tips might prove useful in order to complete the tasks that follow. Nevertheless, the users are allowed to determine the order of learning independently, as they may already be familiar with certain structures because of their different learning backgrounds not necessarily related to the university education.

The last module is different in its form from the previous sections. It contains a number of revision exercises, prepared with the use of the Hot Potatoes software. It includes several cloze activities (created by means of the JCloze application), in which the learner is asked to complete the translations of given French sentences into English. The translation usually consists in writing the right form of the verb given in brackets and the use of a correct preposition. The last exercise is a quiz (prepared via JQuiz), in which the user chooses the most accurate French translations of English sentences.

#### 4.4 Example of a course unit



**Figure 4. The process of creating a multimedia presentation using the Prezi software**

*Source: Own work*

Unit 4 – *Jouer* (to play) starts with a presentation in which the author compares various uses of the verb *to play* in French. Each example is followed by its English translation, and the differences between the two languages are clearly marked, as it is visible in the Figure 4. After having watched the presentation, the learner is invited to complete 6 exercises, out of which 3 were created with the use the Moodle tools (two *drag-and-drop* exercises, one of which is shown in the Figure 6.; and a *select missing word* exercise) and the other 3 by means of the Hot Potatoes software (a cloze exercise, a quiz and a jumbled sentence exercise).

**Jouer - questionnaire à choix multiples.**

Cliquez sur la bonne réponse.

[Afficher toutes les questions](#)

<= 3 / 10 =>

Il dit qu'il n'a jamais joué...

A. ? les boules

B. ? aux boules

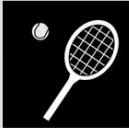
C. ? des boules


<= Index =>


**Figure 5. One of the multiple choice questions**


*Source: Own work*


Choisissez et faites glisser la préposition correcte et le nom qui correspond le mieux à l'image; « - » signifie qu'il n'y a pas de préposition.


1.  jouer

2.  jouer

3.  jouer

4.  jouer

5.  jouer

6.  jouer

des de au du à la de la avec aux à -

batterie des jouets échecs jazz tennis cache-cache

Vérifier

**Figure 6. A *drag-and-drop* exercise in which the learner has to choose the right preposition and the noun corresponding to each image. The images illustrate different uses of the verb *jouer* (to play)**

*Source: Own work*

## 4.5 Requirements

From the technical point of view, in order to start using the course the students should be able to use the computer smoothly. They must be familiar with the basic principles of Moodle courses, although any advanced knowledge is not required. When it comes to the level of language proficiency, the knowledge of French at A2 level is required. However, in case of any problems concerning the vocabulary used in the course, the learner is free to check the meaning in any web-based or traditional dictionary, as the time to be spent on the course completion is by no means limited. Although the vast majority of the course is in French, at least the intermediate level of proficiency in English may be necessary in order to make specific comparisons between the two languages.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that the role of web-based learning methods has significantly increased simultaneously with the development of new technologies. Therefore, the use of such methods in language teaching is fully justified as, due to their flexibility, they can be easily and successfully adapted to learners with specific language backgrounds. Although the e-learning course prepared by Aleksandra Serwotka constitutes an educational aid being merely an addition to the inestimable learning process taking place at the university and including personal contact with a teacher, it may prove to be an effective teaching tool.

The course constitutes an attempt to support the traditional, in-class process of teaching French as a third language to second year students of applied languages at the University of Silesia. It takes into account the specificity of teaching and learning French as a third language by Polish native speakers who have already mastered English; therefore, it makes use of the knowledge of English that the students have already acquired in order to further the process of learning French. It has been created to facilitate the selection of materials used by the students in the course of individual, independent learning. Therefore, the course should not be used as a substitute for face-to-face learning forms taking place at the university.

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