FRENCH INTERFERENCE ON MALIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' EFL WRITINGS: PERSPECTIVES FROM TEACHERS

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Abstract: Writing in a foreign language can be challenging for non-native writers. According to the contrastive rhetoric theory, students' first languages and cultures influence the linguistic and rhetorical choices of their written discourses in English (Kaplan, 1966). In Mali, West African country colonized by France, students' indigenous languages are acquired in their family settings and are mainly used for oral purposes. Some of these languages have been elevated to the status of national languages with a codified alphabet but remain taught mainly at the primary level. French is therefore the language used to teach most subjects, including academic writing or composition. English is introduced as a foreign language in secondary school and students are just taught basic English in most subjects. Students, therefore, learn academic writing or composition in French during their academic career before reaching university. This study set out to investigate difficulties undergraduate students face while writing their paragraphs in English. The purpose of this study is to examine possible interference of French on Malian undergraduate texts and explore the perspectives of teachers on this interference. Data were collected from both students and teachers through an in-depth set of interviews and writing analysis. The results revealed that students experience difficulties that are caused mainly by the interference from their education background, which is French.

Keywords: Composition, interference, French, English, undergraduates

INTERFERENCE DE LA LANGUE FRANÇAISE SUR LES ECRITS DES ETUDIANTS MALIENS APPRENANT L'ANGLAIS COMME LANGUE ETRANGERE : PERSPECTIVES DES ENSEIGNANTS

Résumé : Écrire dans une langue étrangère peut être difficile pour les écrivains non autochtones. Selon la théorie de la contrastive rhétorique, les langues et cultures locales des étudiants influencent les choix linguistiques et rhétoriques de leurs discours écrits en anglais (Kaplan, 1966). Au Mali, pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest colonisé par la France, les langues locales des élèves sont acquises dans leur milieu familial et sont principalement utilisées à des fins orales. Certaines de ces langues ont été promues au statut de langues nationales avec un alphabet codifié mais restent enseignées principalement au niveau primaire. Le français est donc la langue utilisée pour enseigner la plupart des matières, y compris la rédaction ou la composition. L'anglais est introduit généralement comme langue étrangère dans le secondaire mais n'occupe pas une place de choix. Les étudiants, par conséquent, apprennent la rédaction ou la composition académique en français au cours de leur carrière académique avant d'atteindre l'université. L'objectif de cette recherche est d'examiner les difficultés auxquelles les étudiants de premier cycle font face lorsqu'ils écrivent leurs paragraphes en anglais. Elle vise principalement à explorer l'interférence du français dans les écrits des étudiants en anglais. Les données ont été recueillies auprès des élèves et des enseignants au moyen d'une série d'entrevues approfondies et d'une analyse des écrits. Les résultats ont révélé que les élèves éprouvent des difficultés qui sont causées principalement par l'interférence de leur langue de formation, qui est le français.

Mots-clés : : Composition, interférence, français, anglais, premier cycle

Introduction

Writing has revealed to be a significant tool of communication and expression. It is a valuable means of civilization, culture, and knowledge preservation. In language learning situation, writing is one of the four important skills learners need to master for language fluency. In addition, writing represents an instructional area that spans all students in universities in many different subjects. Its mastery is as well a requirement for academic and professional advancement. In talking about the importance of writing Bjork and Raisanen (1997: 8) claim that writing is 'a thinking tool' that serves language development and intervenes in the learning of all disciplines. It is used to 'promote and sharpen' students' learning (Brangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson (2004); Graham & Hebert, (2011b); cited in Graham & al., 2018). However, research have shown that writing can be very challenging for many people, and most importantly when the language learned is a second or a third language. Research has shown that students strive to express properly their thought in a way understandable to natives. Difficulties, that span from lack of motivation, language deficiency, to cultural and linguistic interference were given as the main reasons. At the university during their academic years, students, from the first year through Licence (the class of the first degree), are trained in various fields of research. Writing or composition constitutes an important subject in the curriculum; however, in Mali, like in many African countries, the notion of writing is linked only to an academic context. Writing as an activity is neglected and most students practice it only for the purpose of getting a good mark or passing the exam.

Interest into studies of nonnative English learners' texts began with the seminal work of the American Linguist Robert Kaplan (1966), who has examined discourse frameworks and paradigms as they are manifested in rhetorical traditions other than Anglo-American and has proposed that English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' first languages and cultures have specific rhetorical organizational and rhetorical traditions which has a great influence of their written discourses in English. This claim gave rise to interest into constative rhetoric and has urged the scientific community in ESL/EFL to investigate L2 writing and discourse in different languages and to compare the organization of discourse paradigms and rhetorical structures of text in these languages. Indeed, Languages such as Arabic (Ostler, 1987); Thai (Bickner& Pevasantiwong, 1988); Chinese (Mohan & Lo, 1984; G. Taylor & Chen, 1993; Korean (Y.-M. Park, 1988); Shona, spoken in Zimbabwe, (Thondhlana, 2000), have been compared to English.

On the Francophone side, few studies have dealt with French interference on the writing discourses of students learning English as a foreign language. In a contrastive analysis study, Swan and Smith (1987 cited in DiPietro,1988) have contrasted features of French and English that may constitute problems for language learners, however, the focus was more on contrastive analysis than rhetoric. Ameyrou Mbaye (2001) in his dissertation has examined English essays of five senegalese students studying in the US and has found that these students 'texts are influenced by their French composition writing style named 'dissertation' that they acquired in secondary school. Notwithstanding, the focus of the analysis were just on students enrolle in a US tertiary system, the results cannot therefore be generalized to all the students involve a francophone context and learning English as a foreign language. The general overall observation is that there is a paucity of studies which have dealt with problems francophone students encounter while writing in ESL/EFL. The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap through

empirical research results that will inform on Malian students' problems in producing essays in English as a Foreign language. The paper holds the hypothesis that French as an earlier language of instruction of undergraduate students interferes to a certain extend in their English writings. Based on this hypothesis, these two research questions will guide the data analysis of the paper: what interference, if any, French language has on undergraduates EFL writings in Mali? what perspectives teachers hold on French interference on undergraduates EFL writings?

1. Linguistic Situation of Mali

Mali is a landlock country located in West Africa with many ethnic groups sharing the same environment. Each of them enjoys a typical cultural identity enriched by its specific languages and customs. This said, the country is characterized by a high linguistic diversity and counts more than twenty local languages and numerous dialects. Out of this number, thirty have been codified and risen to the status of national languages. Through a program called Convergence pedagogy, the different national languages have been gradually introduced in the Malian education system and are all taught at the primary school according to its level of spread. However, even with a codified alphabetic system, they are taught only at the fundamental level (from first grade to the sixth) and their teaching is limited just to some schools. In Secondary schools, national languages are replaced by other foreign languages which are English, German, Russian, Arabic or Spanish. In Universities, these languages are taught in separate departments. As a result of the French occupation, French language has been adopted as an official language. Even though it is mastered by a very small number of the population, French is the language of instruction in most schools and at workplaces. Therefore, most subjects are taught in French in most Malian schools. English is learned and taught in most cases as a third language at secondary school and in universities. Students acquire their different first languages in their home environment and French as a first foreign language at School. Any other language learned or acquire will count as a third foreign language.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine possible interference of French on Malian undergraduate texts and explore the perspectives of teachers on this interference. For that purpose, twenty (20) teachers of composition were selected from the faculty of letters, Languages and Science of Languages of Bamako, more specifically from the English Department of this faculty. In addition, twenty (20) students written prompts were analyzed and examined to determine this French interference, if any. Undergraduate students were chosen for students' population, since they are new learners of English as their major at university; these students have been taught in previous year composition or writing in their language of instruction, which is French, which is different from English. This research draws on case study for the data collection. Therefore, the researcher believes that Case studies have been used in EFL/ESL by different researchers (Leki and Carson, 1997; Mbaye, 2001). A case study approach is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011). Rooted in a social constructivist paradigm that suggests "truth" as subjective, we utilized the approach due to its relevance in gaining a better and deeper

understanding of participants unique experiences of a phenomenon in a specific context (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell & Creswell, 2005)

2.1 Procedures and data analysis

As mentioned above, 20 teachers and students of the same number were purposely selected to participate to the study. The teachers have at least three to ten years of experience in teaching writing at the department. Both teachers and students' consents were obtained by the researcher prior to the data collection. Furthermore, pseudonyms were used to ensure participant's anonymity. Each interview lasted for approximately 1hour and 50 minutes to 2 hours. In- depth interviews were administered to teachers at their convenient time and students' written documents were collected by the researcher for analysis. Two argumentative topics were proposed to students in two different moments. In the first prompt, students were asked to give their opinion about polygamy and convince the reader on their thesis and in the second they were supposed to give their opinion on girls 'schooling and convince the readers on its advantages or drawbacks. Upon completion of data collection, all the recordings were transcribed by the researcher and the written prompts were organized for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to generate themes given its flexibility which allows the researchers to move as often as needed throughout the analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006) and reducing bias in the study finding.

3. Results

3.1 Students' written scripts

Upon analysis of the interview collected data from the teachers and the written scripts of students, the results are presented according to the participants of the study. Firstly, the analysis of the written scripts has revealed that French language interferes in the writing of students in different levels. This interference has generated four themes which are: Organization- Grammar- Vocabulary- Translation.

-Organization

French essays obey one of the three organizational patterns which are dialectical, thematical and analytical. The dialectical style or "dissertation" is the most widespread. The students writing scripts were analyzed to see if any of these structures will influence their rhetoric. As a result, the dialectical is the one which has most influenced students' writings. In fact, this outline consists of either thesis-antithesis-synthesis, for- against or yes-but organization. The qualitative examination of the data from both prompts reveals an influence of one of the above-mentioned organizations. It was noted that students at first makes a claim or gives their position about the topic. Then without any indication why this should happen, they shift to hold a different position. Most of the time, both sides of the topic is examined.
Example of a script written by one participant:

> Polygamy is both a good and bad fact for a society. It's good because it can bring more children in the society, which was consider as a sign of power, for the more numerous you are in the society, the more powerful and strong you are also. This idea is still so much considered in Mali. But it's not exactly as in the past. A chief who got many workers in his household is considered to make good harvest. Although men are outnumbered by women, each woman will have the

opportunity to get a husband by polygamic marriage. […] In fact, polygamy is bad because it can be a factor of a society overpopulation which can bring about poverty. Furthermore, this kind of marriage generally provokes divorce. The most important thing in a marriage is faithfulness. Men are often unfaithful, and women are jealous. Moreover, polygamy has divided many families. This happens generally after the death of the husband. Most of the time wives don't get on well with sharing the inheritance. That misunderstanding usually ends up with splitting up the family.

In this paragraph, the writer presents both sides of polygamy. He shows first the advantages of polygamy and follows it by the drawbacks without really taking position. This paragraph is an example of the thesis antithesis model which examine both sides of the topic. Therefore, this paragraph does not have a clear topic sentence, a requirement in any paragraph with unity. In addition, this paragraph lacks the clincher with which every English paragraph ends, and which reminds the topic sentence or the stance of the writer. Furthermore, the influence of French structure is also found in the way some students choose to introduce their paragraphs. In fact, many students abide by the French requirement of restating the topic in a form of question; in other words, raising what French composition calls the "Problematique" of the topic. This is what the English writers call the "controlling idea" of the topic. Hence, the data analysis has revealed that after defining the ambiguous terms in the topic, some students emphasized "the controlling idea" by turning it into a question. Here is a sample example that illustrates this case: "Polygamy means taking more than one woman for wife. It means that the man can marry until four wives. This is practiced in Islamic countries. Now, the question is to know if Polygamy is good or bad. In the following paragraph I am going to give my opinion and say why. I think it is advantageous". In this above example, this paragraph starts by defining the key word, which is polygamy. It went on to raise the question asked before stating the topic sentence. This structure is typical to the French structure which requires a small introduction or what French calls 'entrée en matière' before stating once's view. Therefore, this is an influence of the French organizational structure on students' English texts.

-Grammar

Interference of French grammar has been observed throughout the scripts of students. This interference was observed in the use of articles, pronouns, modals, the infinitive, subject-verb agreement, and negation.

-The use of definite articles in English

It was noticed that many students mistakenly use the definite article "the" before the abstract noun polygamy. This is due to the influence of French. In fact, in French the use of the article depends on the gender of the word (feminine or masculine gender) for example (le lait et la voiture). The first one is masculine and the second one is feminine. Therefore, before the masculine gender the word "le" is employed while the feminine gender requires "la". However, in English the employment of the definite article "the" depends on the context. The article "the" is omitted before names of substances and abstract nouns (uncountable nouns) used in general sense. For example (sugar is bad for your teeth; polygamy should not be practiced…). However, the definite article "the" is used before nouns when it is employed in a particular sense specially when it is qualified by an adjective of adjectival phrase (high school English grammar and

composition, Warriner, 1988: 148). For instance: the polygamy practiced in Mali is the best one. Below are examples where the definite article is used mistakenly:

Example 1
In the life the girls must attend school and help her mothers
The polygamy has many advantageous

-The use of possessive adjectives

The qualitative data analysis has revealed that students are strongly confused using possessive adjectives in English. In fact, in French, the gender of the possessive adjective depends on the gender of the word. The agreement is determined by the gender and the number of the word. For example, in French, la voiture will be 'sa voiture' and 'le sac' gives 'son sac. As far as English is concerned it is all the opposite. The possessive pronoun is determined according to the owner of the object. For example, it is correct to say 'his wife' because the owner is a man and 'her husband' when the owner is a woman. However, it was found out that students mistakenly use possessive adjectives according to the gender of the words. This is an interference of the French language with English. This interference was observed in some written paragraphs.
Example 2

When you send a girl to school, she will know many things. She can do many things after **his study**. She can help **his husband** about the family problems and know how to well educate **his children**.

It can be clearly seen through this example that the student has mistakenly used the possessive pronoun. Instead of "her study" and "her husband" the student says, "his study" and "his husband" like in French.

-Subject-verb agreement

Another aspect of French interference is observed with the third person singular. In fact, the English language requires the use of the inflection 's' whenever the third person singular is used. However, this rule does not exist in the French language. Therefore, students tend to omit the 's' at the end of verbs precede by third person singular. The following examples are illustrations of this case:
Examples:
She give her children a good education.
The president promote the education of girls.
She get money each end of the month.
Send a girl at school first help her husband.

-The use of negation

It was noticed as well that students have difficulties to build negative sentences in English because they simply translate forms of negations from French to English. For instance, negation in English is built by adding the auxiliary 'do' plus 'not' to the verbs, while in French the verb comes after the auxiliary (ne) and is followed by the negation mark (pas). For example

English
I do not know
Subject +aux+not+verb

French
je ne sais pas
Subject＋aux＋verb＋not

They often say:

French translation: **I know not** why she has to stay home: meaning in English (I do not know why she must stay home).

French translation: My grandmother **want not** my sister to study, meaning in English: my grandmother does not want my sister to study).

French translation She **will not to have** money: meaning in English (she will not have money).

-The use of gerund

In English, when verbs are used as subjects or objects, they become 'gerund' and take 'ing' at their ends. For example: giving is better than receiving. It was noticed that Malian students, when using verbs as nouns or objects, omit the 'ing' and translate literally from French to English.

Here are examples of what they wrote:
Example:
French translation "send girls to school is important" for (English: sending girls to school is important).

"French translation: briefly go to school is one of women's rights" for (English: going to school is one of woman's rights)

"French translation: Educate a girl is educate a whole family" for (English: educating a girl is educating a whole family).

-The use of preposition

French language interferes as well in the way undergraduate students use the English prepositions. In fact, the data analysis has revealed that students frequently translate the way they use prepositions in French to English. For Instance:

French translation	English
To depend of	Depend on
To go at school....	To go to school
To be different of	Different from
To be interested at.....	Interested in

-The use of complete infinitive after English modals

Another domain of French interference is the use of the infinitive "to" after the modals (can, may or must). The data analysis has revealed that Malian students have difficulties as far as the use of the English modals are concerned. After the modals students frequently use the infinitive with 'to' like in French. Here are some examples:

French translation   English

Girls **must to be** educated   Girls must be educated.
If she is educated **she can to buy** everything.   She can buy everything.
Grandmother **must to let** my sister go to school---Grandmother must let my sister go to school.

-French Vocabulary

It is very important to stress the fact that French vocabulary frequently interferes in students' texts, for they often resort to French words whenever they cannot find the correct English word. In fact, it was found out that in cases where the students did not know the correct word in English, they sometimes, consciously, or unconsciously, replaced it by a French word. They may imply that the reader understands French and will not be bothered by the meaning of the word or they sometimes believe that the word is employed the same way in both languages. However, it is very dangerous to practice such a method; because many French words may have different meanings when they are used in English, or they may simply be nonsense in English. Here are some examples:

                     French translation   English

Educated woman will help her husband in the **foyer**---Educated woman will help her husband in the household.

Girls **scholarization** is important----   Girls 'schooling is important.

They don't know the importance of the **instruction** of girls---- They don't know the importance of girls schooling/education.
-When you **instruit** one wife, you **instruit** a country   When you educate a woman, you educate a country.

When woman **win money** she will **duminate** his husband spending.   when the woman gets money she will reduce her husband's spending.

The women are **in the base of development**...women are the source of development.

As indicated through the different examples, English words are interchanged for French in many cases. For example, the word 'foyer' when used in English means 'theater'; but in the given case, the student means 'home, family'. The same is true as far as the word' instruction' is concerned. In French the word generally means 'education'. However, as stressed by the dictionary Robert and Collins, English language rather uses the word 'education' and employs 'instruction' to refer to 'directions. As far as the word 'duminate' is concerned, it has no meaning in English and is a simple transformation of the French word 'diminuer.

-Word for word translations and literal translations

Word for word translation is another aspect of French interference into English. There are many cases where students use word for word translations in their texts. They literally translate the words the way they hear it. However, translation is context dependent. The meaning depends on the way the word is employed. One word may have many meanings and only the context will determine the exact meaning. The same is true for idioms. They are language

specific; in other words, all languages have their own idioms. The meaning depends on the way they are used and when they are translated, they sometime lose their meanings. In each language idioms have their correspondence that may be totally different from the way they are used in the source language. The data analysis has revealed many cases of word for word translations in students' texts. As a result, the translated sentences will sound awkward or nonsense to native speakers or to someone who has no knowledge of the French language. Here are some examples of word- for word translations:

French translation.	English
-I **am not agree**	I don't agree
-school **don't say** that she will not work at home	School does not mean that she will not work at home.
-to **learn to your daughter**.	To teach your daughter.
-I want to do know to my family.	I want to make my family know.

These different examples draw from the written scripts of students show the level of interference of French on students' English texts. The data analysis of the scripts has shown rely on French not only to organize their paragraphs, but also at the sentence level with Grammar and Vocabulary. Importantly, teachers interview results is corroborating the early findings of French interference. Below is the results of this analysis.

3.2. Perspectives from teachers

The analysis of the interview data has corroborated in many aspects the results found in the scripts analysis. In fact, as the interview data analysis of teachers has revealed, students' writings are highly influenced by the language of instruction received earlier, which is French. Many teachers recognized that French does interferes in several ways in students writing. Some have stressed the organization, others the Grammar and some the French vocabulary students use to replace English words, either because they don't know the word, or the word is a false cognate with English language.

-Organization: topic sentence

Some teachers have stressed the fact that students have problem with the organization, as far as the notion of topic sentence is concerned because in French they are used to the problematic of the topic. They have stressed the fact that students would introduce the same way their paragraph as in French, by using rhetorical questions and stating the 'problematic of the topic**".** For example, one teacher that the researcher has named Aly reacted:

Aly: 'When I teach composition to my students, I pay attention to make the difference between the problematic that they are used to in French and topic sentence in English. Some students will ask me: what is topic sentence in French? because they cannot find an equivalent. It is good that they understand writing in French is different to writing in English.

Another teacher, Mark has stressed the fact that students sometimes replace topic sentences by definition and do not take any position in their writings. He claimed that it is while reading the paragraph of students that the writer's view is eventually discovered, but not at the beginning as it is required in English.

-Grammatical interference

In addition to Organizational interference of French language, some teachers also have noticed the interference of its grammar on students' writings. This finding backed up the earlier from students' written data. Below is an example extracted from one interview with a teacher. For anonymity he will be called Paul.

> Paul: Both languages interfere. For the first foreign language, I mean French, at the syntactic level the students would write for example "he go at home" or "I am name X". These ones can have some many levels of analysis in terms of first foreign language and native language... but I think it is more about French interference.

Another teacher has claimed that French Grammar interferes with students' writing:

> Moussa : Yes! French has definitively some influence on students' English. We can say that as far as French interference is concerned, generally when students are asking questions in English, they do not use the "do" I mean the auxiliary "do" as the rule in English they will just inverse the verb order; instead of using the do as the English will require.

-Word for word Translation

The interview data analysis has revealed that some teachers have found many cases of French to English word for word translations in the English writings of students. In fact, this finding as well confirm the earlier finding in students' scripts where many have resolved to word for word translation when writing their paragraphs. Below is an example of one teacher reaction on this issue:

> Aminata: What I usually see is the interference of French, because that is the language of their education. So they are used to write in French. Because they are not very used to write in their mother tongues.so to me the French interference is more visible than mother tongue and I don't know the first languages of all the students. And at the level of vocabulary we see French interference, at the level of sentence structure also because usually they write doing word for word translation. And in fact I have seen some students writing the whole composition in French and translating into English, so of course the French interference will be very visible.

4.Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to explore French language interference in students English Text. As students in their high majority have received French earlier in their academic journey as their main language of interference, it is important to examine in which way this language can impact students writing when they move to a different foreign language, English in this case. Two research questions guided this study: What interference, if any, French has on undergraduates EFL writings in Mali? What perspectives teachers hold on French interference on undergraduates EFL writings? As can be seen through the different responses from teachers and students themselves, language transfer is very important in students' writings of English.

The data analysis has revealed that French interferes in many English writings in many aspects. Very often, consciously, or unconsciously students transfer patterns of their first and second language into English. It was observed that students are influenced by French dialectical organization when they write their paragraphs but also use the French way of introduction, either with a definition or raising the problematic of the topic. The findings of this study align with those of previous studies. In fact, Budiharto, (2019) in exploring the influence of source language on target language, has found that Indonesian students transfer some patterns of their first language to English. Similarly, Thondhlana, (2000), in a contrastive rhetoric study of Shona and English argumentative texts, has found that students in Zimbabwe transfer their first language which is Shona, to English while producing argumentative texts. Finally, Mbaye (2001) has found that Senegalese students studying in America have difficulties writing proper essays in English because of the influence of French that they have received as their language of instruction.

Conclusion

The contrastive rhetoric theory claimed that students transfer patterns of their first language and culture to their English texts. This theory has raised as a pedagogical need to investigate problems international students face in their English writings in the US and It suggests that students should be made aware of the differences of their first and second languages to avoid these setbacks in writing. However, this claim has received many criticisms and interests in problems related to L2 writing. In the Malian context, French has been found to be a considerable concern in the undergraduate students' English texts; but it is far from being the only obstacle. Further studies suggest investigation on students' culture on their English writing or other developmental factors such as students writing and reading habits.

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