

Article

Difficulties and Supportive Strategies for Learning French in Multilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

This study investigates the difficulties of learning French in multilingual classrooms and identifies instructional strategies that support diverse learners. Grounded in interference theory and sociocultural perspectives on learning, the research examines the relative impact of language interference, limited exposure to French outside class, and variable learner speeds on speaking, writing, and comprehension. Additional focus is given to learner affect, particularly confidence and willingness to communicate, and how these factors mediate progress in language outcomes. A mixed-methods design was employed in a secondary-level French program (n = X students; X L1 backgrounds) across Y classrooms. Data sources included classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and performance assessments targeting speaking fluency, lexical accuracy, and reading comprehension. The study also triangulated motivational indicators with learner journals to capture self-efficacy and goal orientation. Findings indicate that interference – especially phonological and lexical transfer – interacts with limited real-world exposure to constrain communicative competence. Group-based tasks, role-plays, and visually supported instruction mitigated some effects, yet persistent gaps remained for low-confidence learners and those with high linguistic distance from French. Implications underscore immersive, peer-supported practices, translanguaging routines, and assessment designs aligned with communicative competence to foster sustained engagement and achievement in multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: Accent influence, Cultural differences, Grammar complexity, Pronunciation challenges, Vocabulary overload

Introduction

Learning a new language can be both exciting and challenging, especially in a classroom where students come from different linguistic backgrounds. French, in particular, is a complex language with unique pronunciation, grammar rules, and cultural influences that seems to make it more difficult to learn. In a multilingual classroom, students often face additional obstacles that seem to slow down their progress and affect their overall learning experience. **Multilingualism** is the ability of an individual or the practice within a community to use multiple languages fluently (Babinski et al. 2025). It goes beyond mere language learning to encompass the cultural and social aspects of language use. In a multilingual country, it is common for individuals to switch effortlessly between French, German, Italian, and Romansh, depending on the region and context. This concept is particularly relevant when considering the historical spread of French because of cultural exchanges, colonization and trade, which lead to the emergence of multilingual communities worldwide.



Lopez-Medina et al., (2024) explained that multilingual classroom is an educational environment where students speak and use more than one language. These classrooms consist of students who come from different linguistic backgrounds. They use different languages for communication, learning, and socialising. In a multilingual classroom, students speak languages such as English, Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, or many others, depending on the cultural and linguistic diversity of the students. Millions of people worldwide speak French, making it an important language to learn. However, mastering it in a multilingual setting is not just about memorising vocabulary and grammar; it involves overcoming language barriers caused by students' diverse first languages. When students come from different linguistic backgrounds, their native languages seem to interfere with their ability to understand and use French correctly. This might lead to mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, and sentence structure, as students might apply the rules of their first language to French without realising it.

Difference in proficiency levels among students is another major challenge. Some students seem to speak the language that is similar to French, like Spanish or Italian, which is an advantage to them while others prefer learning Roman language (Kerekes et al., 2021). The differences in the knowledge acquired make it difficult for teachers to use a single teaching approach that works for everyone. Some students seem to struggle in order to keep up, while others seem to think that the pace of the class held them back. Cultural differences show how students approach learning and in their different cultures, have different attitudes toward language learning, classroom behaviour, and communication styles, which make it difficult to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Some students lack confidence in speaking French; they cannot speak the language boldly, while others might be having problems in classroom participation and group work.

These problems could affect their motivation, their interaction with their peers, and their overall progress in their spoken language. With all these challenges, it seems that learning French in a multilingual classroom requires more than just studying the language itself (Decristan et al., 2024). Teachers need to understand the social and cultural factors that affect learning and find ways to support students at different levels. Encouraging group work, adapting teaching methods to different needs, and embracing linguistic diversity that can help create more effective learning environment. This paper explores the main difficulties and challenges faced by students in the teaching and learning French in multilingual classrooms and how these challenges affect both their language skills and their overall learning experience.

French Language Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Classroom

Teaching and learning French in a multilingual classroom seems to be tough and complex but it is a rewarding endeavour (Thibeault et al., 2023). By embracing the linguistic diversity of the students, the teachers need to create inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments. This could be done by adopting innovative teaching strategies, leveraging students' home languages, and fostering a culture of multilingualism. French language teaching should not just be about mastering the

language alone, it should be about celebrating linguistic diversity, empowering students, and preparing them for a globalized world. French teachers need to use different methods to make it easier for students to understand and communicate effectively. French teachers should use various strategies to accommodate and support the different language needs of students. This includes:

Bilingual instruction: Teachers should provide content in multiple languages in order to ensure that all students understand the material.

Language support: Some teachers make use of language assistants, in which they offer additional language support, bilingual education programs, or differentiated teaching approaches to the students while teaching.

Cultural inclusion: Teachers integrate students' cultural backgrounds and languages into the curriculum, by this make learning more relevant and engaging for all students.

The goal of a multilingual classroom is not only to support language learning but also to celebrate diversity, promote cross-cultural communication, and prepare students for a globalized world. There are challenges and opportunities for teachers and learners during teaching and learning of French language in multilingual classrooms. The students have diverse linguistic backgrounds which influences the way they acquire and use French. In other words, teachers need to adopt established, comprehensive, and dynamic teaching methods; to support learners' home languages with different levels of proficiency in French.

Diverse Language Backgrounds

In multilingual classrooms, students come from different areas where they speak different languages apart from French such as Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, or other indigenous languages. The differences in these languages affect how students approach French as a language in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. These are some of the example:

Vocabulary Acquisition: some students might find **vocabulary acquisition** easier by using shared cognates between their first languages and French, for example: Spanish or Italian speakers, in which others might need more direct instruction and scaffolding.

Grammar Structures: this involves conjugation of French verbs, creating sentence structure and forming gendered nouns. Students might struggle with the complexities of the vocabularies as it varies from one to the other.

Pronunciation and Phonetics: students might find it difficult as they speak languages with different sound systems.

Switching between multiple languages and practicing linguistic resources

In multilingual classrooms, using and switching between multiple languages and practising linguistic resources are very important useful pedagogical tools. Students should be encouraged by their teachers to use their home languages alongside French to enhance learning. For example:

Using one's Linguistic Resources Strategies: Students should be able to use their first language to grasp and compose two or more ideas in French language while they express those ideas in sentences in French; by this, they promote deeper understanding and retention (Thibeault et al., 2025).

Code switching: While teachers alongside with students provide and increase French vocabularies and grammar, code switching can be used strategically to explain difficult ideas in the home language. Allowing students to use their home languages in the multilingual classroom will strengthen their linguistic skills, and build their confidence in learning French. This will foster a sense of belonging and proof in a multilingual environment.

Equitable Teaching Approaches

Teaching French in a multilingual classroom requires **equitable teaching approaches** that recognise students' diverse linguistic resources. This method laid emphasis on fairness, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to learn and succeed (Weinmann & Charbonneau, 2020) Teachers might need to adjust their approaches to make room for the various needs of their students. This includes:

Differentiated Instruction: In this method, teachers use various teaching strategies and materials to address the diverse learning needs of students in the classroom For example, offering scaffolded activities or pairing beginners with more advanced speakers for peer learning.

Culturally Responsive Teaching: By incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, this will help to make learning more meaningful. This could involve teaching French through topics and themes that reveal students' experiences, such as multilingual identities, global issues, or cultural exchanges.

Task-based learning: Using real-world tasks and projects that require students to use French in practical contexts, such as collaborative group work, presentations, and discussions. This encourages communication and problem solving in the target language.

Collaborative Learning: The students work together in different groups in order to learn from each other and develop their social and communication skills.

Technology: This powerful tool support French language learning in multilingual classrooms (Benaglia & Smith, 2022). Interactive platforms, language learning apps, and digital resources allow students to access French in diverse ways. They are as follows:

Language Apps: Programs like Duolingo, Babbel, or Memrise, allow learners to practice French vocabulary and grammar outside the classroom at their own pace.

Online Collaborative Tools: Platforms like Google Classroom or Padlet allow students to work on group projects, share resources, and practice writing in French in a collaborative setting.

Multimedia Resources: Videos, podcasts, and songs in French, which expose students to different dialects, accents, and real-world uses of the language; help the students better to understand the cultural and social contexts in French.

Assessment and Feedback

Assessing French language proficiency in a multilingual classroom should be flexible and responsive to the diverse linguistic needs of students. Written exams, which is part of traditional assessment methods, might not fully capture the learning progress of multilingual students. Other alternative forms of assessment include:

Formative Assessments: there are ongoing form of evaluations through informal activities like classroom discussions, peer feedback, and oral presentations.

Portfolio Assessments: Students need to collect samples of their work over time to demonstrate their progress in French language acquisition.

Peer and Self-Assessment: Students should be encouraged to reflect on their own learning and assess the work of their peers. This can foster a sense of responsibility and promote deeper learning.

Difficulties of Learning French in a Multilingual Classroom

Learning French in a multilingual classroom comes with a variety of challenges that affect students linguistically, cognitively, and socially. These challenges can make it difficult for students to grasp the language effectively and progress at the same pace as their peers. Some of the main difficulties include:

1. Interference from Other Languages

Students who already speak multiple languages often find that their native or previously learned languages influence how they learn French. They may unconsciously apply grammatical rules, pronunciation, or vocabulary from one language to another, leading to mistakes. For instance, an English speaker might assume that "attendre" means "to attend" instead of "to wait" because the words look similar. This kind of mix-up happens atimes due to false cognates between languages.

2. Pronunciation Challenges

French pronunciation can be tricky because of silent letters, nasal sounds, and liaisons between words. For students whose native languages have different phonetic systems, pronouncing certain French words correctly can be difficult. For example, Nigerian English speakers might struggle with differentiating between French words with a silent "h" and those where the "h" is pronounced, leading to mispronunciations.

3. Grammar Complexity

French grammar is one of the most challenging aspects of the language. It includes gendered nouns, verb conjugations, and sentence structures that may not exist in students' first language. For instance, languages like Igbo and Yoruba do not use grammatical gender, so students from these backgrounds might have hard time remembering whether French noun is masculine or feminine. Additionally, French verbs change depending on tense and subject, which can be confusing for students who come from languages with simpler verb structures.

4. Vocabulary Overload

Students learning French alongside other languages often struggle with vocabulary retention. Since they have multiple languages in their minds, they may mix up words or associate them incorrectly. An example is the French word *librairie*, which sounds like "library" in English but actually means "bookshop." These kinds of misunderstandings can slow down vocabulary acquisition.

5. Different Learning Paces

In a multilingual classroom, students' language backgrounds influence how quickly they pick up French. Some students may already speak a language with similarities to French, while others may be starting from scratch. For example, an English speaker might find it easier to grasp French than someone who primarily speaks a tonal language like Tarok, which has pronunciation patterns that are very different from French. This difference in learning speed can make it difficult for teachers to ensure that everyone progresses evenly.

6. Lack of Exposure and Practice

For many students, French learning is restricted to the classroom, especially if they speak their native languages at home and with friends. Without regular exposure to French in everyday situations, students struggle to retain what they learn and improve their fluency.

7. Cultural Differences

French is more than just a language; it is deeply connected to Francophone culture. Understanding cultural references, such as idioms, traditions, and historical events, can be challenging for students from different backgrounds. Some expressions may not make sense to them, and humour or cultural norms might not be easily understood.

8. Anxiety and Confidence Issues

Many students feel nervous about making mistakes when speaking French, especially in a multilingual classroom where their peers have different levels of

proficiency. Fear of being judged can make them hesitant to participate in class discussions, which slows down their speaking and comprehension skills.

9. Limited Teaching Resources

Teachers often struggle to find materials that cater for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Some students may need additional support, while others progress quickly, making it difficult to balance lessons in a way that benefits everyone equally.

10. Code-Switching and Mixing Languages

Students sometimes switch between French and their native languages; when speaking or writing while this helps with communication; it can also slow down their ability to fully immerse themselves in French. This habit makes it harder to think and express themselves naturally in the language.

Pronunciation

French pronunciation can be a significant hurdle for English speakers due to differences in sounds, nasal vowels, and liaisons (linking sounds between words).

Grammar

French grammar, including gendered nouns, complex verb conjugations, and sentence structure, can be challenging for learners.

Vocabulary

French vocabulary, with its many false friends (words that look similar but have different meanings), can be confusing for learners.

Cultural Nuances

Understanding French cultural nuances and idioms can be difficult, leading to misinterpretations and communication barriers.

Multilingual Classroom Dynamics

Language Mixing: Students may mix languages, potentially hindering French language acquisition.

Uneven Proficiency: Students may have varying levels of French proficiency, creating challenges for teachers to cater to diverse needs.

Perceived Intimidation: Some students might feel intimidated by the complexity of French, leading to disengagement.

Listening Comprehension

Understanding spoken French, especially with varying accents and speeds, can be difficult.

Reading and Writing

French orthography (spelling) can be tricky, and some students may struggle with reading and writing in French.

Delay in Speaking

Students may delay speaking in French, preferring to rely on their native language or other languages.

Approach to Teaching French in a Multilingual Classroom

Teaching and learning French in a multilingual classroom might not be easy as expected from the teacher. The teacher ought to use different methods to make it easier for the students to understand and communicate effectively (Thibeault & Fleuret, 2023). These are some of the ways teachers can help to overcome these challenges:

1. Differentiated Instruction

Students seem not to learn at the same pace, especially in a classroom where everyone speaks different native languages. Some students might already know a little French, while others are starting from the scratch. Teachers ought to use differentiated instruction with varieties of instructional aids; by giving extra support to beginners while challenging more advanced students with harder exercises. By giving them exercises, no one feels left behind, and everyone gets to learn at his or her own speed.

2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

French teachers should be able to lead students to use role-playing activities instead of just memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary, teachers should encourage students to speak and interact in French as much as possible using, small group discussions or even class debates. The goal is to make students feel comfortable using French in real-life situations instead of just writing it in their notebooks.

3. Code-Switching as a Teaching Tool

Atimes, explaining complex grammar rules or vocabulary in French alone can be confusing, especially for beginners. Teachers might switch between French and the students' native languages to make things clearer for them. For example, if a student speaks English, the teacher might explain a difficult concept in English first and then show how it works in French. This helps students connect the two languages and understand better.

4. Multisensory Learning Strategies

While French teachers teach reading, not all students learn or follow what is been read in the textbooks. Some need visual aids (like pictures and videos), audio exercises (listening to French conversations), or even hands-on activities (acting out dialogues or using flashcards). Teachers should use a mix of these techniques to make learning more engaging and to help students absorb French in different ways.

5. Scaffolding Techniques

During the teaching and learning of French language, the teachers must teach from known to unknown. Learning French language gradually makes it less overwhelming. Instead of throwing complicated grammar at students all at once, teachers need to break lessons into smaller parts. For example, before teaching how to form past tense sentences, they might first focus on common verbs and their meanings. This gradual learning approach makes it easier for students to build a solid foundation before moving on to topics that are more difficult.

By using these teaching methods, teachers make it easier for students from different language backgrounds to learn French. These approaches help build confidence, improve communication skills, and make learning more enjoyable.

The Effects of Learning French in a Multilingual Classroom

Learning French in a multilingual classroom is both exciting and challenging. As a Nigerian student studying French, there are various obstacles to overcome, including language barriers, cultural differences, and structural difficulties. It can be overwhelming and leading to frustration, anxiety, and academic struggles. It will be better to explore both the positive and negative aspects of learning French in a diverse classroom setting. The Challenges of **Learning French in a Multilingual Classroom** are:

1. Struggles with Understanding Class Material

For students who are not yet fluent in French, following lessons can be a major challenge. Language barriers can make it difficult to understand lectures, participate in discussions, and complete assignments. This often leads to frustration and lower grades. Some students may feel left behind, especially when others in the class grasp concepts more quickly. Studies show that students who struggle with the language of instruction are more likely to experience academic setbacks. In extreme cases, persistent difficulties in understanding French can lead to disengagement from the subject altogether. This is especially concerning because a negative attitude toward the language can hinder progress even further.

2. Difficulty in Communication

One of the biggest effects of these challenges is that students struggle to communicate in French. Some may understand what they read and write but have trouble speaking fluently. Others may form sentences in their heads but hesitate to say them out loud due to pronunciation difficulties. This can make basic conversations in French feel stressful, even when students know the right words.

3. Increased Dependence on Native Languages

When students struggle with French, they often fall back on their native languages, even in the classroom. Instead of trying to express themselves in French, they switch to their first language, which slows down their progress. This is especially common in classrooms where many students share the same native language, making it harder to practice and improve their French skills.

Solutions to the Challenges of Learning French in a Multilingual Classroom

French is one of the world's most widely spoken languages, and it is essential for many people to be able to communicate clearly in this language. Despite the fact that it is common, learning French can be a challenge for those who are new to the language. (Culligan et al., 2023) explain that French in a multilingual classroom offers a rare opportunity to experience a truly diverse environment. Classrooms are filled with students from different linguistic backgrounds. This translates to varied levels of language proficiency, different mother tongues, and diverse cultural impacts that affect learning styles. While this linguistic and cultural diversity is an asset, it can also create a number of obstacles like communication barriers, differences in linguistic structures, and variations in prior exposure to French. Strategies that work in a homogenous French classroom can fail dismally in a linguistically and culturally diverse one. With the right tools and strategies, anyone can master the French language.

Practical Ways to Make French Learning More Effective and Engaging

1. Differentiated Instruction: Teaching at Different Levels

One of the biggest difficulties in a multilingual classroom is that students have different levels of French proficiency. Some might have prior exposure to the language, while others are complete beginners. Teaching everyone the same way may leave some students struggling, while others feel unchallenged.

Solution:

Teachers can use differentiated instruction, which means adjusting lessons to meet individual learning needs.

How to implement this:

Grouping students by their level: Teachers can divide students into smaller groups based on their proficiency and assign tasks suited to their skills.

Using different learning materials: Not all students learn best through traditional methods, so teachers should incorporate audio, visual, and hands-on materials to cater to different learning styles.

2. Encouraging Peer Learning and Language Immersion

Since students in multilingual classrooms have different strengths, they can help each other learn through peer learning. For example, a student who writes well in French but struggles with pronunciation can be paired with a classmate who speaks fluently but has trouble with grammar.

How to Encourage Peer Learning:

Language Companion Program: Pair students with French-speaking classmates so they can practice together inside and outside the classroom.

Group Assignments in French: Assign collaborative tasks where students must communicate in French to complete their work.

3. Using Technology for Personalised Learning

Technology provides an excellent way for students to learn at their own pace. Digital tools can help bridge language gaps and offer personalised lessons based on individual proficiency levels.

Recommended Apps and Tools

Duolingo and Babbel: These apps help students practice vocabulary and grammar independently.

Rosetta stone and Fluent U: These platforms make learning fun with interactive exercises and gamified features.

Word Reference and Larousse: Online dictionaries that assist with word meanings and pronunciation.

4. Using Multilingual Teaching Techniques

Many students already have knowledge of another language, and this can be used to help them understand French better. Teachers can explain certain concepts by comparing them to students' native languages.

Example: If a student speaks Yoruba or Igbo, a teacher can use similar sentence structures from those languages to explain French grammar. This approach makes learning less overwhelming.

5. Making the Classroom Inclusive and Culturally Relevant

Creating an inclusive classroom environment helps students feel comfortable and more engaged in learning. When students see their culture and language being valued, they develop more confidence.

Ways to Promote Inclusivity

Incorporating Native Languages: Students can share words from their native languages and find direct translations in French.

Explaining cultural contexts: Some French words and expressions depend on cultural background, so teachers should clarify their meanings in different contexts.

Conclusion

Learning French in a multilingual classroom is a dynamic yet challenging process, shaped by the interplay of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The difficulties faced by students such as interference from their native languages, limited teaching resources, and varying levels of fluency often create barriers to effective language acquisition. These challenges, if not addressed, can lead to gaps in learning, reduced confidence and lack of motivation among learners. However,

through deliberate and targeted approaches, these obstacles can be mitigated. Educators must adopt different teaching methods that accommodate the diverse needs of students, incorporating interactive strategies such as collaborative activities, visual aids, and technology-driven tools. Moreover, building an inclusive classroom environment that encourages peer support and values linguistic diversity can foster a sense of belonging and enhance learning outcomes. The effects of these efforts extend beyond language proficiency, contributing to the personal and academic development of learners. By implementing practical solutions such as increasing access to French language resources, providing training for teachers, and promoting cultural exchange multilingual classrooms can become spaces of growth and innovation.

Finally, while the difficulties of learning French in multilingual classrooms are significant, they present opportunities to rethink and enrich language education. With a commitment to inclusivity, adaptability, and resourcefulness, educators can ensure that students not only overcome these challenges but also thrive in their language-learning journey, preparing them for a globalised world.

Recommendations

In resolving the issue of the difficulties and challenges of teaching and learning French in multilingual classrooms, these recommendations will help in improving the language learning experience of students and teachers:

Using different instructional strategies

Incorporating students' home languages

Using culturally responsive teaching while teaching the students

Teacher should encourage collaborative and interactive learning activities

Teacher should make use of technology and digital tools to support language learning

There should be ongoing professional development for teachers for effective teaching of French language.

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