



Investigation into the Role of Mother Tongue on the Acquisition of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in the South African Education System

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DOI: 10.53103/cjlls.v4i6.188

Abstract

This paper focuses on the impact of mother tongue on students learning French as a foreign language (FFL) in South Africa. While identifying well defined advantages and challenges, this study is aimed at explicating how native language backgrounds impact students' acquisition of French as a foreign language. The study made use of the qualitative research method with a diverse sample of 50 students from educational institutions within the Gauteng and Kwazulu Natal provinces. A Qualitative analysis of the study revealed that there is a significant correlation between students' mother tongues and their levels of proficiency in French. Findings of this research show that learners whose first languages present structural similarities to French tend to excel in language acquisition unlike students hailing from linguistic backgrounds that diverge significantly from French who tend to encounter enormous difficulties, particularly in areas such as grammar and pronunciation. These findings highlight the urgency for developing tailored teaching strategies for linguistic diversity, thereby suggesting important implications for pedagogy and curriculum design in a multilingual context like South Africa. Further research that will explore the long-term effects of mother tongue influence on language acquisition and proficiency in FFL should be carried out, as well as the larger implications for language learning strategies in similar educational settings.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, French as a Foreign Language, Language Acquisition, Language Learning, Multilingualism, Pedagogy

Introduction

The world has become so globalised and interconnected to the extent that, acquiring a language has become so crucial to enhancing educational opportunities, developing cultural awareness and facilitating communication. The linguistic variety of South Africa is rich and diverse. Thus, it is essential to understand the role of the mother tongue in acquiring a foreign language. South Africa has twelve official languages and each of the languages is a reflexion of a distinct cultural inheritance (Sibanda, 2020).

Despite the dominance of Afrikaans and English in the educational system, indigenous African languages play an equally important role in forming the identities and experiences of students. The study's justification is the growing focus on multilingualism in the South African educational system, where teaching students foreign languages like French is crucial to enhancing their linguistic competencies and creating competitiveness in a labour market that is marked by constant evolution (Pretorius & Machet, 2004). The interplay between mother tongue and foreign language acquisition is therefore not only pedagogically relevant but also socially and economically significant.

The intricacies involved in the acquisition of language in multilingual settings calls for an understanding of the interconnections between students' mother tongues and their second, additional, or third language proficiency. Studies in this domain show that students' understanding and engagement are significantly impacted by the language used in instruction (Taylor & von Fintel, 2016). In a recent study Mncube posits that students who are taught in their mother tongue present a better cognitive engagement and understanding, which may positively influence their ability to grasp a foreign language (Mncube 2019). The generalizability of results is hampered by methodological shortcomings in these studies. These shortcomings range from small sample sizes to lack of longitudinal data. Furthermore, even if we look at French as a foreign language to be the main focus of this research, the main advantages and challenges associated with French language acquisition in the South African context is still underexplored (Meyer, 2017). This brings to light the urgent need for a more targeted research that will address the unique dynamics of French language acquisition.

What is Mother Tongue?

The expression "mother tongue" refers to the idea that a child's mother develops their language abilities, leading to the mother's language becoming the child's primary language of instruction. If the partners belong to the same tribe, this was and still is extremely conceivable. A person's mother tongue, also known as their native or first language, is what they have learnt since birth or during a crucial time when language acquisition is biologically correlated with age. As a result, it serves as the foundation for social identity and the primary language of instruction in schools and society. In a nutshell, a person's mother tongue is the language they acquired at home as a youngster, typically from the parents.

Identification of Knowledge Gap

Much is still to be learned concerning how mother tongue education influences the acquisition of French as a foreign language. This is particularly so in the South African context, even if there are a growing number of studies in this field and the

implications these studies have on language education. A study carried out by Lazarus indicates that the complexities of learning French, which is frequently regarded as a respected, if less widely spoken, language outside of academic settings, are neglected in the majority of current studies, which place a higher priority on English or other dominant languages (Lazarus, 2020). It is crucial to close this gap to advance language policies that will take into consideration the linguistic realities of South African students as well as to enhance pedagogical methodologies for teaching French. This research is aimed at closing or better still narrowing this gap and advancing an understanding of language education in multilingual settings.

Study Rational in the Language Learning Process

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the relationship between mother tongue and French language learning in South African classrooms. The study seeks to determine how mother tongue can either be a resource or a barrier by examining the experiences of educators and learners. This study is important because it has the potential to change educational practices and policies to better represent South Africa's linguistic variety. Additionally, by drawing attention to the particular difficulties faced by French language learners, this study advances more successful teaching methods that take advantage of students' linguistic origins and adds to the national conversation on language education and multilingualism.

Study Objective, Questions, and Hypothesis

This research therefore aims to understand the extent to which mother tongue can facilitate the teaching/learning process of FFL in the South African context as well as the impact of mother tongue on foreign language acquisition. If we consider our research hypothesis to be that learners who receive instruction in their mother tongue will demonstrate higher proficiency in French compared to those who do not, then it will be entirely legitimate for us to consider the following research questions:

- 1-What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the role of mother tongue in teaching French?
- 2-How does the mother tongue impact learners' ability in acquiring French as a foreign language?
- 3-How do teachers perceive the role of the mother tongue in teaching French as a foreign language?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Theories of language acquisition state that the importance of the mother tongue in learning a foreign language, more especially, French as a foreign language has drawn a lot of scholarly interest, especially considering South Africa's multilingual environment. To emphasize important themes and takeaways from existing literature, we will be looking at recent research investigating how learners' mother tongue affects their capacity to acquire foreign languages. The fundamental theories of language acquisition emphasize the importance of the mother tongue in the learning process. For example, Cummins's hypothesis stated that a learner's first language skills can help in learning a second language (Cummins 2000). Research like those by Akinyemi and Akinola (2015), contend that students who possess a solid understanding of their mother tongue are better equipped to acquire French due to cognitive transfer.

Role of Mother Tongue Cognition

Education has the potential to be a tool for promoting learners' independent thought. Allowing and promoting students to form their own opinions and perceptions of the world around them is important. Primary and elementary school curricula in the mother tongue place a strong emphasis on the value of each person's academic and personal growth. Research indicates that kids who have a good foundation in their mother tongue when they start school grow up to be more proficient readers. Overall, the research makes it abundantly evident how crucial mother language is to children's intellectual and personal growth (Baker, 2000; Cummins, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000 quoted in Cummins, 2000). When parents spend time with their kids, telling them stories or talking about problems in a way that helps them expand their vocabulary in their mother tongues, chances of the kids to succeed educationally are very high.

What an individual can learn is determined by the knowledge he already possesses. It is worth noting that this prior knowledge is not necessarily linked to learning situations. However, it can be employed to develop information and to formulate hypotheses on this information. Cognitivist theory posits that, mental activity is structuring. The individual has his own cognitive system and organization. He processes the material presented according to the strategies previously constructed, not according to what characterizes the material but according to the cognitive strategies applicable to this material. The cognitivist hypotheses can have interesting consequences for the acquisition of a language. They highlight the following points:

- The importance of information processing which would be more important than memorizing the content,
- The individual's prior knowledge would reside in terms of strategies used to acquire

this knowledge rather than in terms of content retained

– The self-structuring of materials by the individual would be accomplished through mental operations.

From the above, we can deduce that, in language teaching, it is important to prioritize the construction and enrichment of strategies that allow the development of new strategies for information processing and in particular, those that promote the acquisition of a new language.

Mother Tongue Dominance in Foreign Language Learning

Language usage in general can be understood as a process of externalizing thoughts and reflections in the form of previously internalized lexical items, its inherent conceptualizations and grammatical-syntactical combinations. If concepts, understood in cognitive discourse as mental units are organized by the acquisition of pre-conceptualized lexical items, grammatical items and cultural patterns in the form of procedural knowledge, they are automatically used as basis for all the interaction and abstract thought (Witte, A. 2009).

However, deeply engrained automatism must be suspended in the encounter with the foreign language; otherwise, to find guidance to use the foreign language, students will fall back into language patterns acquired throughout learning the mother tongue or first language. The inevitable result is that students would commonly use forms translated directly from their native language or mother tongue. These are usually contextually inappropriate, in that they differ in syntax, style, and register from the norms that native speakers would employ. (Witte, A. 2009).

The sounds, words, phrases, conceptualizations, the principle of verbal behavior and pragmatic contexts are different in the foreign language from what has been internalized as the hitherto universally valid ‘norm’ by the monolingual person. Thus, in the mind of the foreign language learner, increasingly complexed processes of interlingual translating will be initiated from the first encounter with a foreign word. This also marks the starting point for developing both an interlanguage and a cognitive hybrid third space between cultural patterns of the language and cultures involved.

When learning a foreign language, the learner develops a specific individual language characterized by elements of his/her knowledge of the mother tongue, his/her limited knowledge of the foreign language, knowledge of the communicative functions of language, learning about language in general, and sociocultural knowledge. On this basis, students construct a structured set of rules that, for them, explain the system of the foreign language, even if this interlanguage is unknown to the students, and highly deficient with regards to the foreign and mother tongue. Interlanguage also known as approximative system, idiosyncratic dialect, or student language (brown 2007: 256), thus,

can be defined as a succession of highly individual ongoing attempts to construct a linguistic interspace between the language systems involved, to better comprehend and memorize the different items and structure. It is based on attempts to translate and interrelate, lexical, but also syntactical, morphological, phonological, and semantic elements of each language involved. Interlanguage is characterized by its systematicity, its unstable and transitory character, its dependence and simultaneous independence about native and foreign languages, its variability, its permeability, and its changeability through processes of learning and communicating. However, interlanguage can easily stabilize, or even fossilize, due to internal and external factors such as age (loss of plasticity of the brain), lack of desire to acculturate (maintaining one's language identity in foreign language situations), communicative pressure (Students must communicate ideas, overstretching his or her linguistic competence), lack of learning opportunity and the nature of feedback on learner's use of second language (positive feedback results in fossilization (Ellis 1994:354).

Importance of Mother Tongue in child's Life

The mother tongue is part of a child's personal and sociocultural identity. The identification we get from speaking our mother tongue enforces positive social patterns of speaking and acting. We are unique and appealing in the society because of our diverse social background. The mother tongue is an indispensable tool for the growth of intellectual, physical and moral aspects of instruction. Habits, values, virtues, customs and beliefs are all built-up through the mother tongue. It is worthless to say, weakness in the mother tongue means a paralysis of all thought and power of expression.

Role of Mother Tongue in Child's Education

The underappreciated benefits of multilingual education in the early years are highlighted in Early Childhood Care and Education, UNESCO (2008). Children are more likely to enroll in school and do well, and parents are more inclined to interact with teachers and be involved in their children's education when they have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue. Particularly disadvantaged groups, such as girls and children from rural areas, who typically have less exposure to an official language, benefit from mother tongue-based education. When taught in their mother tongue, they typically stay in school longer, do better, and repeat grades less frequently. The majority of kids speak a language at home that is different from the one used in schooling. Additionally, studies show that children learn best.

Mother Tongue's Influence on Second or Foreign Language

Learning additional languages is frequently hampered by incomplete first language proficiency. According to Cummins (2000), children's mother tongue proficiency is a reliable indicator of their second language growth. Concepts and literacy abilities can be transferred to the second language when the mother tongue is encouraged. Additionally, it has been discovered that learning to read in the mother tongue has a strong association with later success in reading the second language. To put it briefly, encouraging the growth of the mother tongue improves the learning of the second language.

According to studies, acquiring the level of literacy and linguistic proficiency needed for academic success in secondary school requires six to eight years of language instruction. The following are requirements for children whose mother tongue is not the medium of instruction: Ongoing formal instruction in their first language to improve their reading and writing skills; Ongoing interaction with their family and community in their first language on increasingly complex topics that go beyond household matters; and good parental attitudes on the preservation of the mother tongue, both as a symbol of cultural identity and for specific practical reasons (e.g., success in the local economy or international trade).

Furthermore, a growing body of evidence indicates that when a child's mother tongue is used as the major language of instruction throughout primary school, it does not negatively impact their ability to learn a second or additional local language as well as an international language like English, French, or German. A linguistic and cognitive basis for learning other languages, such as French, is established by fluency and literacy in the mother tongue. Children acquire a second or foreign language more rapidly when they get formal teaching in their first language during elementary school and then progressively switch to academic learning in the second or foreign language. They become completely bilingual (or multilingual) learners if they are given the chance to continue honing their first language skills in secondary school.

However, children's first language acquisition may be hindered or even lost if they are forced to transfer abruptly or too soon from learning in their mother tongue to learning in a second language. More significantly, their enthusiasm in what they are studying and their self-confidence as learners may deteriorate, which could result in low motivation, academic failure, and early school dropout. Despite the fact that the world is a global village, we should make use of our moral traditions and values since they define who we are and identify where we belong. Children should learn and value their native dialects just as much as they should be taught foreign languages.

Mother Tongue Influence in Multilingual Contexts

According to Gough and Tunmer (1986) the presence of multiple mother tongues in South Africa makes the influence of linguistic origins on foreign language acquisition especially noticeable. . According to research by Heugh (2011), students who receive instruction in their mother tongue generally perform better in subsequent language learning, suggesting that mother-tongue education could improve the acquisition of FLE. Phonological and grammatical subtleties of French are a challenge for students from different language backgrounds. Studying effective teaching strategies that utilize students' mother tongues has become essential. Studies such as those carried out by De Oliveira (2014), emphasize the need of using translanguaging strategies in foreign

The influence of linguistic backgrounds on FLE acquisition is particularly noticeable in South Africa, where many mother tongues coexist. Gough and Tunmer (1986) claim that, learners from different linguistic origins, may encounter particular difficulties in comprehending the phonological and grammatical subtleties of French. Children who get taught in their mother tongue typically perform better in later language learning, according to research by Heugh (2011), which suggests that mother-tongue education could improve foreign language acquisition.

Challenges and Limitations

Even with the clear benefits of mother tongue impact, there are also several issues. According to Krugger (2018), the unfavorable view of African languages in the educational system is a major obstacle that might erode students' self-esteem and drive, Additionally, the absence of resources and qualified teachers who are knowledgeable about the learner's mother tongue is a major challenge to proper language instruction (Sibanda, 2021). Studies indicate that the mother tongue plays a crucial role in the acquisition of French as a foreign language within the South African education context. Theoretical frameworks, pedagogical approaches and empirical studies, jointly underscore the necessity of recognizing and integrating the mother tongue as an asset in language learning. There is a need for future research to continue to explore innovative approaches for leveraging the mother tongue to promote foreign language acquisition while addressing the challenges that arise in a multilingual educational context.

Identified Gaps in the Research

1. Few long-term studies: Studies conducted abroad tend to concentrate on immediate effects. Existing literature emphasizes the significance of longitudinal data in language learning research, pointing out that longitudinal studies are required to

comprehend the long-term impacts of mother tongue on language acquisition.

2. Awareness and training for teachers: According to the literature, successful teaching requires teachers to be aware of and trained in multilingual environments. There is a need for more research in this area, too, as there is little data on how this training affects instructors' capacity to help mother tongue speakers acquire foreign languages. Simple!

3. Aspects of socioeconomics: Although socioeconomic position has been shown to have an impact on educational achievements in earlier study, less attention has been paid to how these factors explicitly interact with mother tongue influences in language learning. Given the socioeconomic variety in South African schooling, this disparity is crucial.

4. Attitudes and motivation of learners: Language attitude has been studied in previous studies, but little is known about the direct relationship between attitudes toward one's home tongue and motivation to learn a second language, such as French. Gaining insight into this link may help educators develop more successful teaching methods.

5. Curriculum development: Curriculum that takes into account the important role of mother tongue in foreign language instruction should be developed. Therefore, addressing research gaps that has been identified is vital in understanding the how mother tongue can positively help to improve the acquisition of foreign languages. In addition, further research in this field will greatly improve teaching methodologies in multilingual context.

How to Use Mother Tongue in Classroom: A Few Suggestions

- Explain instructions in French but use the mother language when you repeat them. To determine whether the learners have understood, you may eventually teach them French and ask them to repeat it in their mother tongue.

- When giving instructions in French, make every effort to convey meaning through gestures. For instance, during the craft activities, the kids can hear and understand an English-language instruction.

- When giving instructions in French, give the students some time to get used to the language before continuing. Giving students a pause between sentences, rather than speaking more slowly, improves comprehension.

- Use the mother tongue only when appropriate. For instance, while previewing or assisting students in understanding new material.

- Explain to the students the meaning of the terminology you will use frequently in the course. For instance: Work in pairs. Get your book open. Pay attention and comply.

Using the Mother Tongue Judiciously

It goes without saying that using the MT in an EFL classroom requires prudence. In recognition of this, Atkinson (1987: 246) points out that excessive use may result in the following unfavourable effects:

- Until a language item is translated, the teacher and/or students start to believe that they have not "really" grasped it.
- The instructor and/or pupils oversimplify to the point of employing clumsy and incorrect translation because they are unable to recognize the differences between pragmatic aspects, semantic equivalency, and equivalency of form.
- Even when they are perfectly capable of expressing themselves, students naturally address the teacher in their mother tongue.
- Students tend to use the mother tongue more than French during most of the class activities.

Role of Mother Tongue in Teaching Methodology

By investigating the students' MT, FFL teachers oversee the language instruction process in their classrooms. The objective is to first classify various language teaching approaches before briefly going over each one's function and application of MT. Methods are sometimes divided into three categories: modern, alternative, and classic communication techniques. The Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, and the Audio-lingual Method are the three conventional approaches to teaching foreign languages. One undesirable consequence of monolingualism, which is still frequently used by disgruntled educators today, is the haphazard usage of the mother tongue. Larsen-Freeman provides a fairly succinct explanation of the importance of mother tongue in the context of FL. She is in favor of the mother tongue's inclusion in classroom protocols and:

Direct Method and Audiolingual Method: The students' native language should not be utilized in the classroom since it is believed to impede students' efforts to become proficient in the target language.

Silent method: When necessary, lessons can be given in the learner's original tongue, and a student can get better at pronouncing words correctly. During feedback sessions, the native language is also used (at least at beginner competency levels).

Suggestopedia: The dialogue's meaning is clarified with the use of native-language translation. When needed, the instructor also speaks in the students' native tongue. The instructor's use of the native tongue decreases as the course goes on.

Community Language Learning: Speaking in their native tongue first increases student security. Mother tongue is meant to serve as a link between the familiar and the

unfamiliar. Also, directions in class and sessions during which students express their feelings and are understood are conducted in their mother tongue.

Total Physical Response: This method is usually introduced initially in the students' native language. After the introductory lesson, rarely would the native language be used. Meaning is made clear through body movements.

Communicative Language Teaching: Judicious use of the students' native language is permitted in communicative language teaching. The students' native language has had a variety of functions nearly in all teaching methods except in Direct Method and Audiolingualism. Those methods had their theoretical underpinnings in „structuralism“ and assumed language learning to be a process of habit formation, without considering the students' affect, background knowledge and their linguistic abilities in mother tongue.

Solutions of Overcoming the Usage of Mother Tongue in French Language Teaching

Every language instructor has occasionally experienced feelings of shame, perplexity, and frustration due to their pupils' alleged excessive usage of their mother tongue in class. This notion can become a significant issue in a monolingual setting, where all pupils speak the same mother tongue. For most language teachers, this is the reality of the classroom. For some teachers, the greatest solution to the issue is to force the kids to talk in English and to refrain from using their mother tongue. As far as it goes, this approach is fine, but it hardly ever gives either the teacher or the pupils an opportunity to comprehend the original motivation behind the usage of MT.

However, being proactive is a more comprehensive approach. This implies that the mother tongue should be actively controlled and influenced by the teacher. He shouldn't waste time attempting to get the mother tongue out of the classroom entirely. Rather, he ought to focus on how to play and take advantage of MT. Determine when and why using MT would be advantageous. If the instructor believes it would be beneficial, he should give his students an explanation of his decisions. If he can accomplish this, his lessons will probably be more realistic since they will capture the organic interaction between MT and FL, which is a fundamental aspect of learning a second language.

Methodology Design of the Study

In this study, the qualitative research design was used to comprehend and interpret data derived from students' and teachers' experiences with regards to French. Furthermore, data was transcribed, the corresponding texts were examined, a reflection

on the content was done, meaningful themes were extracted, and the themes were rewritten through the process of interpreting the meanings of experiences.

Participants and Samples

Participants for this study were purposefully selected from schools across Gauteng and Kwazulu Natal provinces. The chosen schools are schools that offer French as a foreign language to students with different linguistic backgrounds. Specifically, students who are speakers of Indigenous African languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho. Those whose mother tongue is English were not left out. For the sake of this study, we used a maximum variation sampling to ensure a wide variety of participants. Ajjiwi and Higgs (2007:617) posits “the advantage of the range of experience are the richness in the depth of data obtained and the multiple perspectives illuminating the phenomena”.

Making reference to maximum variation sampling, Patton (2002:234) argues that this sampling gives an effective description of each participant and produces important patterns that cut across cases and their significance derived from having emerged out of heterogeneity. Since this study aimed at exploring the impact of mother tongue on students learning French as a foreign language, the selected participants had different experiences in learning the French language. Some of them studied at their previous schools while some are beginners in French language learning. Furthermore, to assure confidentiality, participants were asked to use pseudonyms.

Individuals had to meet certain criteria to be eligible for participation, namely:

1. Be enrolled in French language classes at either the primary or secondary school level.
2. Fall within the age range of 14 to 18 years.
3. Be able to have parental consent if minor.

Procedure and Materials

Recruitment flyers, informed consent forms, and informational brochures outlining the study's objectives and requirements were used. Participants were recruited through local Consent forms were collected before the commencement of the study, to ensure ethical compliance. Standard office supplies were utilized for documentation, including pens, paper, and storage folders for consent collection. The standardized French language proficiency test (e.g., DELF) was employed alongside questionnaires designed to assess participants' language backgrounds and experiences. Each participant undertook a language assessment to evaluate their proficiency in French, followed by a

questionnaire aimed at gathering information regarding their mother tongue and previous language exposure. The assessment was estimated to take approximately 30 minutes. The assessment was delivered using either computer-based or paper-based test forms, complemented by test-scoring rubrics for evaluation.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. For participants under the age of 18, parental consent was also required. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any stage without incurring any penalties or repressions. Confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process to protect participant identities.

Results, Discussion and Interpretation

This study aimed to examine how the mother tongue affects the acquisition of French as a foreign language in the South African educational context. This study demonstrates a relationship between mother tongue proficiency and the ability to acquire French as a foreign language. It is shown that students whose mother tongue is a language more closely related to the language being learned are more fluent and are more comprehensible in French. However, students with a language significantly different from French encounter great difficulties in circumstances where it became necessary to acquire the language, particularly with grammatical structures and vocabulary. It is for this reason that, according to these results, there is a link between the mother tongue and the process of learning a second language, and this, in a multilingual society such as South Africa. The consequences which result from this show that the mother tongue can be an asset or a hindrance in language learning. The mother tongue with all its complications can also represent advantages and facilities in learning other languages, which is also positively linked to the acquisition of foreign languages.

According to transfer theories of language, students who speak a language with similar lexical or syntactic structures as French are likely to easily grasp French, and those are the French speakers. On the other hand, students whose first language are very different from French and do not share such similarities will require special teaching methods that cater for languages with very different structures and features. All these results are in agreement with other findings that have already shown that mother tongue instruction helps improve language proficiency. As noted by Howie et al (2008) as well as Department of Education, South Africa (2010), learners are more likely to achieve better results when the language of instruction is the first language of the learners during grade R and one. This allows to further contribute to existing knowledge by

demonstrating that the effect of the mother tongue language continues to hold influence even when foreign language contexts such as that of French are learnt. This study brings new insights to the current literature on the matter by showcasing real data from South African context where language diversity is very much pronounced. Educational policy and practice are profoundly affected by this. Because of the critical nature of mother tongue in language learning, there is strong case to promoting mother tongue instruction especially in early education. Policy makers need to contemplate adopting multilingual education techniques based on mother tongues that appreciate language diversity while improving the command of foreign languages. Besides, institutions ought to explore how the mother tongue of the students may be used as a resource in the classroom to enhance French language learning. In addition, they may consider proposing a curriculum that is bilingual or multilingual and draws from the linguistic repertoire of the students in order to create an integrated approach to language education.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

While the findings of this study are significant, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was limited to specific regions within South Africa, which may not be representative of the entire population. Furthermore, the study did not account for other factors influencing language acquisition, such as socioeconomic status, educational resources, and exposure to French outside the classroom. Future research should aim to include a larger, more diverse sample and explore these additional variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Future research should investigate the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches that incorporate the mother tongue in teaching foreign languages. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of mother tongue instruction on language proficiency would also be beneficial. Additionally, exploring the experiences of the teaching of teachers who implement mother tongue-based strategies in foreign language classrooms could yield valuable insight into best practices and challenges faced in diverse educational settings. Furthermore, research could be focused on the development of specific instructional materials tailored for students with varying mother tongue backgrounds, potentially enhancing the effectiveness of French language instruction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The role of mother tongue in foreign language instruction is still up for dispute. However, some teachers severely misuse the mother tongue, while others reject its use or fail to see any meaningful potential in it. Both are misusing a very valuable resource. In

our opinion, instruction should be given in the target language whenever feasible, and in the mother tongue only when it is required. In French lessons, using the mother tongue sensibly and sparingly can only be beneficial. Effective target language instruction must be integrated with mother tongue use, taking into account the learner's mother tongue and cultural context and making the most of their interest. Above all, we must keep in mind that students' mistakes are a valuable resource that tells the teacher about the inter-language proficiency of his students. Avoiding negative marking, when the student only learns that he will lose points for making a mistake, is crucial for this reason. Only in specific circumstances, such as the following should be should the foreign language instructor utilize the student's mother tongue:

1. When comparing the grammar of the mother tongue with French
2. Beginners will likely advance more quickly if the mother tongue is permitted in the classroom.
3. Exercises involving translation could also be ideal when there is a grammar point that is causing trouble to the students.

It is therefore important to reiterate that the whole idea is not to support the abolition of the communicative approach and everything that it represents. Nonetheless, this study firmly believes that educators must consider the home language or foreign language distinction more thoroughly, paying more attention to students' learning preferences and views, and adjusting their behavior accordingly. "There is no one best method, and no one method that is best for a particular context" as McKay (2002:116) correctly points out. Ultimately, selecting the most effective method to employ with a specific student body should involve a combination of expertise, experimentation, cultural and interpersonal sensitivity, and observation. In addition, this study has critically examined the impact of the mother tongue on the acquisition of French as a foreign language within the South African education system.

The findings revealed a significant correlation between learners' proficiency in their mother tongue and their ability to acquire French. Specifically, students who possess a strong foundation in their native language demonstrated enhanced capabilities in understanding French grammatical structures and vocabulary. This correlation directly addresses the research questions posed at the outset, establishing a clear link between mother tongue competence and success in foreign language acquisition. The implications of the findings are considerably challenging prevailing second language acquisition theories that often neglect the influence of a learner's first language. By juxtaposing our results with similar studies in multilingual settings, it becomes evident that mother tongue proficiency functions as both a language resource and a cognitive careful, facilitating the language learning process. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasizes the significance of prior knowledge in fostering new

learning experiences (Vygotsky, 1986)

Despite the robust nature of the findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and predominantly urban, potentially skewing the results and limiting generalization to the broader South African context. Further research should strive for a more diverse demographic, encompassing rural learner and various socioeconomic backgrounds to foster a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to assess the long-term effect of the mother tongue on language acquisition.

Furthermore, employing mixed methods research approaches would enrich the findings and provide insight into the qualitative factors influencing language learning. To further explore the dynamics between mother tongue and foreign language acquisition, future research needs to develop targeted pedagogical strategies that actively incorporate students' mother tongue within the foreign language curriculum. Specific recommendations include:

- 1. Integration of bilingual instructional materials:** Schools should develop and implement bilingual resources that allow students to draw connections between their mother tongue and French, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention.
- 2. Promotion of code-switching:** Educators should foster value environments in which code-switching is encouraged, allowing learners to utilize their mother tongues as a tool for understanding and encouraging and engaging with the French language.
- 3. Teacher training programs:** Policymakers should prioritize the establishment of teacher training programs that emphasize the importance of the mother tongue in language education. Training should equip educators with strategies to effectively integrate linguistic diversity into their teaching practices.
- 4. Inclusive educational frameworks:** The educational system should reorganize and utilize linguistic diversity as an asset, promoting an inclusive approach that caters to the unique linguistic backgrounds of all learners.

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