

The Ease and Challenges for an English Speaker Learning French

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There is a widespread perception among high school and college students that French is difficult to learn compared to other languages commonly taught in the United States. However, the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center regards French as one of its Category 1 languages. This means that it is among the languages that require the least amount of instructional hours in order for an English speaker, achieving only the minimal required score on the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) test, to reach a high level of speaking proficiency.ⁱ

Category I language (French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish)

Category II language (German)

Category III language (Greek, Hebrew, Moro, Persian-Farsi, Persian-Afghan, Pashtu-Afghan, Russian, Serbian/Croatian, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Uzbek, and Vietnamese)

Category IV language (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean)

Notice that the difficulty of French is on a par with that of the other Romance languages, all of which would require approximately 720 hours of instruction in order for an English speaker to reach an advanced level of speaking proficiency. By contrast, only students who score the highest on the DLAB are permitted to take the Category IV languages and, even then, it takes over 1,000 hours of instruction for them to reach a low level of speaking proficiency in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese or Korean.

Why, then, does the notion that French is hard to learn persist? Why, in particular, is it generally considered to be harder to learn than Spanish? The linguistic response is that for English speakers, French is *no more difficult to learn to speak* than is Spanish. The misperception regarding the difficulty of French likely arises from two sources. First, French has historically been regarded as *the* language of high European culture and this association leads to the faulty assumption that the language of this culture must be more complex and difficult than other European languages. Second, like English, the spelling system of French can take some time to learn.

The difference between Spanish and French from the linguistic point of view, then, likely reduces to the fact that Spanish has a relatively transparent spelling system and French a relatively opaque one. (This difference should not be conflated with the ease/difficulty of pronouncing the languages; English speakers struggle equally with the pronunciation of Spanish and French and tend to have persistent foreign accents in either language.) However, there are real advantages for the English speaker in learning French spelling as it actually helps foster correct spelling habits in English. French borrowings in English, such as *bureau*, *cuisine*, *architecture*, *ballet*, *menagerie*, *restaurant*, *trompe l'oeil*, often retain their etymological spelling

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and this gives the French student a striking advantage in all areas where spelling matters, from writing essays and job application letters to competing in a spelling bee.

In reality, the reputation of French as a difficult language could be easily recast as the very reason for studying it in high school. In my experience as a university professor, our students who choose to major or minor in French often elect to study another Romance language as a *third language* and they find that, after having studied French, they can acquire these other languages with ease. The grammar across Romance languages is fairly constant; the basic vocabularies of the languages are similar; and the gender of noun cognates is, in most cases, identical across these languages. These similarities across the Romance languages also confer advantages on Hispanophones (Spanish speakers) who, at the university level, often choose to study French for their foreign language requirement. Such students tend to advance in proficiency in French very quickly and many university and public schools now offer classes in “French for Spanish Speakers” geared to this growing population of language learners.

The Challenges

It is not easy to disabuse students of the entwined notions that “French is hard” and “Spanish is easy” but there are many practical reasons (that will be elaborated in the conclusion to this essay) to attempt to do so. In that spirit, in the paragraphs that follow, we will elaborate where the true challenges of French for the English speaker might lie and, by contrast, what aspects of the language might be acquired with relative ease and for relative gain. Most of the challenges to learning French are, in fact, the same challenges that face the English learner of Spanish.

1. **Pronunciation:** French has some vowels, such as the phonetic [y] found in the words *tu* and *pure*, which do not exist in English. It is difficult, then, but not impossible for English speakers to learn to consistently make the distinction between pairs of words like *tu~tout* and *pure~pour*. An additional pronunciation challenge that many learners fixate upon as “difficult” in French is the production of the “r” sound. The French (and Spanish) “r” sounds are both produced in a way dramatically different from English. However, the dissimilarity between these sounds across languages actually aids the learner in keeping the “r” of French distinct from that of English.
2. **Stress:** The stress systems of English and French differ. In French, there is only one prominent syllable that normally falls at the end of a phrase. In English, all major words contain one or more stressed syllables. Those that are not stressed can be reduced or deleted. Thus, the word *university* in English has a pattern of alternating strong and weak syllables (‘*univérsity*’) while its cognate in French, *université*, maintains equal prominence on all syllables. Using an alternating English-like accentual pattern in French or in Spanish is one of the strongest indicators of a foreign accent.
3. **Spelling to Pronunciation:** Like English, the spelling conventions of French were established during a time when the pronunciation of the language was still very much in flux. This makes the spelling system of modern French somewhat difficult for a beginner to acquire. For instance, although the word *eau* is spelled with three letters, it is pronounced simply as an open vowel [o]. However, unlike English, the mapping between spelling and pronunciation in French is still very consistent (for instance, the combination *eau* is always pronounced as [o] in French.) Students can, with time, easily master the mapping from letter combinations

to sounds and, as stated above, this may provide them insights into English spelling conventions.

4. Gender: The gender system of French is notoriously difficult for an Anglophone to acquire since there is no foolproof way to know the gender of a word. (Hispanophones have little trouble with gender in French as cognates between the languages have the same gender.) While there are some clues to selecting the gender of a word (for example, all words ending in *-tion* and nearly all of those ending in *-té* are feminine), it is still best to learn and teach noun vocabulary in a context where the gender is clear (for example, *une fleur blanche* rather than merely *fleur*.) On the other hand, native speakers of French are very tolerant when they hear gender (or gender agreement) errors from foreigners and such errors rarely pose an obstacle to effective communication.
5. Verbal complements: Verbs that require a preposition before an object or another phrase can cause learners some difficulty (for example, *se souvenir de*) because the preposition does not carry any meaning for them. Learners should be made aware, though, that similar problems exist for second language learners of English since, for instance, the choice of preposition in expressions like *happy about*, *proud of*, *pleased with* is also simply automatic.
6. The Use of the Imperfect Tense: While French expresses the imperfect tense of a verb by a verbal ending, English expresses the imperfect through various means (*I used to [do]*, *I would [do]*, *I always [did]*). Thus, there is no direct map between a single English verb form and the French (or indeed Spanish) imperfect. The acquisition of the imperfect, then, usually takes some time in any Romance language because in English the imperfect is a property of the whole sentence rather than a property of the verb.

The Ease

In spite of these challenges (often made to sound more difficult than they really are), the English speaker has numerous advantages when learning French. Several of these do not apply to the learning of Spanish because of the special historical relationship between English and French, dating back to the Norman conquest of England.

1. Word Order: The word order of English and French word is strikingly similar: subject–verb–object.
2. Pronoun Placement: Once students learn that object pronouns precede the conjugated verb, they rarely make errors with pronoun placement.
3. Adjective Placement: English and French differ here in that adjectives generally follow nouns, rather than precede nouns in French. However, students readily accept this difference.
4. Negation: Negation in English and French also differ substantially; however, most learners correctly master the placement of the negative element *pas* (*ne* is almost always deleted in spoken French.)
5. The Subjunctive: Surprisingly, students learn how to use the present subjunctive in French with relative ease, even though there is no clear correspondent for this form in everyday English. This is because the subjunctive in French is triggered automatically by certain verbal expressions and conjunctions, chief among them by *il faut que*. In this case, acquiring the subjunctive in French is easier than it is in Spanish.

6. The Use of Pronouns: Learners of French rarely struggle with the system of French pronouns. They learn quickly to distinguish subject, object, and tonic pronouns and make very few errors in this regard. English learners of Spanish or Italian, on the other hand, have great difficulty mastering the use of subject pronouns since, in these languages, the subject pronoun is usually dropped and only retained when required in particular conversational contexts. English learners of Spanish and Italian, then, overuse subject pronouns, whereas they have no difficulty in French.
7. Liaison in Pronunciation: The obligatory cases of liaison of *-s* and *-t* between words (for example, , *les amis*, *les Etats-Unis*, *comment allez-vous?*) are relatively easy for English speakers to learn, even though English has no obvious parallel.
8. Verb Conjugation: The challenge with verb forms is mainly in the written language. In spoken French, where the present, the *passé composé*, the imperfect and the *futur proche* dominate in conversation, many of the verbal endings (final *-t* or *-s*) are actually silent. The highly irregular verbs – *être*, *avoir*, *faire*, *aller* – are so frequently used that their forms are fairly quickly memorized. Aside from these, the regular verbs (in *-er*), which pose no difficulty for learners, dominate among all verbal types. Unlike Spanish, oral French does not employ the simple past, thus there is one less paradigm that learners of French must master.

The Easiest

Finally, English speakers have a clear advantage in learning the vocabulary of French relative to any other foreign language. A conservative estimate holds that one third of the vocabulary of English has been borrowed from French.ⁱⁱ Word borrowing between French and English has a very long history that continues to the present day. Recent borrowings in English include *au jus*, *soupçon*, *je ne sais quoi*, *frisson* while anglicisms in spoken French continue to multiply unabated: *email*, *babysitter*, *parking*, *pompom girl*, even from the domain of text messaging, (e.g., *lol* =Laughing Out Loud, pronounced *lolle* in French.)

Studying French enriches the *English* vocabulary of the Anglophone student in immeasurable ways and in many domains that are part and parcel of everyday life. The legal and administrative vocabulary of English is stocked with French words: *people*, *govern*, *chancellor*, *country*, *people*, *conference*, *council*, *judge*, *jury*, *suit*, *verdict*, *contract*, *guarantee*, *crime*, *treason*, *felony*, *ward*, *regal*, *royal*, *majesty* all hail from French. The field of architecture abounds with French terms: *mason*, *carpenter*, *scaffold*, *choir*, *chapel*, *belfry*, even *gargoyle*. Household terms were transported directly from French: *table*, *chair*, *cushion*, *chimney*, *laundry*, *garden*, *arbor*, and specially into the kitchen: *dinner*, *supper*, *dessert*, *flavor*, *sausage*, *pastry*, *tart*, *pork*, *mince*, *purée*, *sauté*, *butter*, *mushroom*, *veal*, *beef*, *bacon*, *mutton*, and so on.

In sum, a very large percentage of the words in English and French have a common and easily identified source. So, while many university-bound students, encouraged by their parents and guidance counselors, assume that Latin will improve their vocabulary in English for the purposes of standardized tests (SAT/ACT/GRE/LSAT), the richest source of learned (academic) vocabulary in English actually derives not directly from Latin, but from French. For instance, Latin *fragilis* entered English through French, first as *frail* (from French *frêle*) then later, as *fragile*, a word the modern languages now share as a cognate. Even those words that may have entered English from Latin by a more direct route, such as *ascend*, are also found in one form or

another in French: *ascenseur*. Thus, the classical word roots of Latin can be acquired by the English-speaking student via French, a living language!

Conclusion

Aside from the social, educational, professional, and even cognitive advantages conferred upon a student who is bilingual in any language, there are concrete reasons why French is a particularly important part of the curriculum in the United States. It should be underlined that French is an *American* language. There are over one million French speakers in the United Statesⁱⁱⁱ alone. Beyond our borders, French shares official language status with English in Canada, where there are currently between six and seven million French speakers, and it is also a language of the Caribbean (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti) and South America (French Guiana). For this reason, French, Spanish, and English make up the official languages of NAFTA. Students wishing to expand their ability to work abroad in the Americas and, certainly, in Africa would do well to study French. And those seeking to work in international humanitarian efforts are served well by French, the official language of Amnesty International, The World Health Organization, The United Nations, The International Olympic Committee, the Red Cross, and Doctors without Borders, among others.

And while there is no doubt that there is a dramatic increase in the study of Spanish as a second language in the United States, this essay should make it clear that the study of Spanish does not preclude the study of French (or vice versa). In fact, our growing population of Hispanophone students may constitute a new population of French language students and, eventually, a highly qualified cadre of French language teachers for the future.

As we move ahead, it may be helpful to insist that French is *not* a foreign language. It continues to be acquired and used as an integral language of our contemporary American cultural, political, and industrial life.

ⁱ Source: *The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center Catalog*, Chapter 2, updated June 2003.

ⁱⁱ Finkenstaedt, Thomas and Dieter Wolff (1973). *Ordered profusion; studies in dictionaries and the English lexicon*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universität.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: www.ethnologue.com