

French and English: How do they Compare?

Bon Voyage



Written by Dani Beckford

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When I grow up, I would like to be a High School English Teacher. But, in order to become better at studying English and also a better English teacher one day, I must first understand many things about the language itself in its entirety. Some of these things are as follows: I must understand the effects it has on learning language in general or as a whole since English was my first spoken language. I must understand, why or why not it has made learning a second language difficult for me, and the effect that they might have on each another, but more specifically, the effect English has had on French in my experiences with the two. For this reason, for my research paper, I am looking into the differences between learning a first and second language, English and French. I understand that there are many languages one could consider when researching first and second languages, however, the different, and possibly more complex languages could have such a wide range of differences, that I decided to focus on the two aforementioned languages, English and French. I figured since I have a history with French and English it might be in my best interest keep them as the focus of my paper. More specifically, my paper will discuss some of the differences between the two languages, as well as other aspects of learning the two languages. I also address which language I assume to be more difficult, from my personal experiences with the both of them.

English is my native language. One language was fine for me. My parents spoke a little Spanish to each other, but I never understood it, which might have been the point. Little did I know then that I was about to embark on a long journey to learning another language, the French language. The elementary school I attended, Goodrich Elementary School in Milwaukee, WI, had a foreign language program, but only offered French. It was a requirement to have a language class, so my mother figured, why not. I agreed. I had hoped that I would probably pick up Spanish anyway since a lot of my extended family spoke it; besides, a close family friend also spoke French, and could give me assistance when I needed it. Shockingly, she gave me much more than just assistance. She became my very own in-home French teacher, since we did live together for many years. This family friend, though only five years older than I, knew from the beginning she wanted to teach French, so she started with me. Every time I was at home with her, or visited her during the times we did not live together, I was only allowed to speak French for periods of time. And if there were words I did not know, I had to ask in French how to say them. This meant that for a while, all of our conversations consisted of talks about the weather, or my favorite colors until I learned some more complex concepts within the French language.

Once middle school rolled around, my school gave me a choice. I could either continue taking French, or begin learning Spanish, which I never did pick up from my family. As far as my mother and this close family friend were concerned, there was no choice. I was to continue speaking and learning French at least all the way through high school. So I continued learning and practicing the French language, with the help of this

family friend, who continued to force me to speak French around her. It was good practice for the both of us. The periods of time got longer as the conversation got a little more complex. Now, I could also talk about what people were wearing and use the past tense.

The concentration on my pronunciation of the words became more of a focus, but surprisingly not inside the classroom. Even through college, I felt as if I had to “dumb down” in class by pretending I did not know how to correctly pronounce what I was saying to avoid coming off as the “annoying, butt-kissing, nerdy girl.” I think I was fortunate to be able to speak French not only in the classroom, but also in the home. Having this family friend around to speak French with me at least three times a week was very helpful and definitely a blessing. I continued taking French classes until the second semester of my sophomore year in college. I still call her to this very day to get help with my French assignments, or even just to say “hello,” and she still makes me speak French, and yells at me if I pronounce something incorrectly.

Unfortunately, not everyone has this luxury. I was a lucky one. Yet, still French to me was difficult to pick up. Of course there were some things that were easier than others for me to learn and adjust to, and French was easier for me as a child, but would learning French have been easier had I learned it first, maybe before English? Would I have had a more difficult time understanding English in the event that French was my primary language? I have frequently heard rumors stating that French students complain that English is too hard to learn, and I planned on getting to the bottom of this issue for myself, once and for all. Unfortunately, it was not as possible as I had hoped. It is almost impossible to find someone who simultaneously learned English and French at the same time; therefore it is almost impossible to find out which one actually is easier. Many researchers say that the English language is harder to learn, but that makes me wonder what language they learned first. Are they simply just partial as I am? I could not know for sure. Therefore, I moved on to other aspects of learning the two languages, but my job became deciphering what I know of the two languages, and come up with my own conclusions.

My research continued on. Most of the material I found was only on learning a second language. I found nothing that really compared learning both a first and second, or even the two languages of my interest and therefore nothing that would seem to give me enough information focused on my topic. I was hoping to find more studies showing examples of how learning certain languages effect learning others subsequently. One book which I have started reading, entitled Language Transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning by Terence Odlin looked as if it would be of great use; however it seems to focus more on the influence of dialect and accents of the primary language on the speech of the second. It also alludes to learning French after knowing English as “easy,” especially compared to learning another language, like Chinese, since English and French are so similar. I completely disagree.

I do not think I would categorize learning French, especially having already learned English at the time, to have been an easy task. I would say there are many commonalities between the two languages, but the differences are very complex processes. For example, in French, there are many more tenses used when describing the past, and the English counterparts are not used as much in our language. In French, there are two which are commonly used when speaking, and these are known as *passé composé*

(compound past) and imparfait (imperfect). Here is an example of the two tenses. Take the verb “être” which means “to be.” The two translations are “Il a eu” which is in the passé composé and means “he was,” and “Il était” which is in the imparfait and means “he was being.” Sure, we obviously have the same translations in English, but the way we use them are somewhat different. The French language is definitely much stricter about when the tenses, not just the two mentioned, but all of them as well, are allowed to be used. It is so strict that it even has a separate tense which is used for formal writing and is called the passé simple or the simple past. The simple past tense is only used in formal writing such as novels, research papers, academic and scholarly journals, and other writings of that nature. Not only does this affect the difficulty of writing in French, but also reading. For example, the first time I came in contact with reading something in French which was actually considered formal writing was my second year in college, in my third college French course. It made not only me, but the entire class feel as if we had to completely start over learning a new tense. The conjugations are like none other. But the problem was, at that level they can not spend as much time going through a whole new tense, so the learning of the simple past was left up to our interpretations from the context of the readings. We do not have a corresponding tense in English, which not only makes it more difficult to adapt to the language, but it also assists me with my thinking that the French language would be harder to learn if learned second, after English.

According to Foreign Language Learning: a Research Perspective edited by Bill VanPattern, Trisha R. Dvorak, and James F. Lee, “passé composé corresponds in English to the past or to the present perfect; the imperfect corresponds to the past, to the progressive past, and to ‘would/used to’ plus infinitive.” When put together with the many other possible tenses, it gets very confusing for an English-speaker learning French to figure out which one to use when. This book even states that the aspectual differences between the passé composé and the imparfait are particularly problematic for English-speaking learners of French. Although, I do believe that learning Chinese would have probably given a bigger headache than French, I am interested in it’s comparison with our primary language, English, as opposed to another more difficult language, and I am not sure if this book can offer me the all of information I am truly searching for.

There are many other differences between the English language and the French language. Aside from the aforementioned differences about verb tenses, there are many more which could make the French language seem more difficult to learn. I will only give a few examples. The French make things difficult by giving different placements of words different meanings. For example, look at the following two sentences:

Il est un cher ami.
C’est un restaurant cher.

In the first sentence, the word “cher” means dear, as in “He is a dear friend.” In the second sentence the word “cher” means expensive, as in “This is an expensive restaurant.” There are two things of note about these two sentences. The first is that the exact same word is used for two completely different meanings. Of course we have words that have double meanings as well, but this is much more common in the French

language. The second thing about these sentences is that the simple placement of the word changes its meaning. Another example is as follows:

C'est ma propre chambre.
C'est ma chambre propre.

It is the exact same four words, but the placement of one completely changes the meaning. The first sentence means, "This is my own room," and the second sentence means "This is my clean room." Hopefully, one can see where this could get confusing.

Something else that I think shows how much more complex the French language is is how many English words were adapted from the French language. There are so many words that do not translate into English at all, so we have to use their word. For example, think of the word Hors D'oeuvres. What comes to mind when you think of the meaning? Chances are you can think of exactly what they are, maybe even picture them in your head, but no English word comes to you. This is not the only word. The words crayon and ballet are two other examples. Over the years I have been told by some French teachers that these two words and many more, come from the French language. If French was not more difficult, would not we be able to come up with our own words that correspond to those words? Also, the French language is always changing, as is English, but it is a lot easier to adapt to a changing language if you already know it, instead of trying to learning it while it is still changing. This cause a lit of frustration during the many years of taking French, but I would probably still be the same for someone who was not an English-speaking person trying to adapt to our language.

One thing that I have come across from my research is an awkward phenomenon I like to refer to as the Phenomenon of Translation. I find it weird that often times I can think of an English word that I would like to use, however, it does not come to me in English, but instead in French. For instance, I was writing a paper for my cognitive science class, and I could not think of an English word, for example the phrase "exact time," that I wanted to use. Instead, the French phrase, *juste au moment*, kept popping up in my head. In such a case, with the use of a French-English dictionary, I would translate the word from French to English, which would give me the word I was originally thinking of; however, sometimes this does not exactly translate directly. But, why does this happen? Apparently, I am not the only one that this happens to. This actually happens to many, if not all, students who learn a second language. I spoke with Rakeda Rawlins, an ISU alumnus who recently graduate with a French Education degree, and she agrees that this phenomenon has happened to her as well. She says it has to do with the fact that when you "drill" another language in your head for so long, especially during a time when you are not "drilling" your first language as much, it becomes natural for the second language to appear first. It does go the reverse way as well.

Leslie Alvarez, a student at Loyola University, notices this phenomenon also in her everyday speech. Leslie is a student who has learned to speak three languages, French, English, and Spanish; however Spanish was her first acquired language. She had to pick up English in order to enter into Kindergarten, and later decided to pick up French as a freshman in high school. When I asked her if this has ever happened to her, Leslie nodded her head "yes" in response very vigorously. She stated that she has had this happen to her not only with one of the languages she has learned, but also with her native

language. She has oftentimes had to call her mother to ask how to say a Spanish word in English because she cannot think of it. Leslie is by far not the only student that agrees with me. I asked 20 students, mostly French students, who have taken a foreign language for at least four years, if they have ever experienced this phenomenon. 100 percent of them said “yes.” Leslie’s response to the phenomenon itself was, “It is extremely frustrating and annoying for me especially since I speak three languages. I feel bad for anyone that can speak more than three!”

Those are some questions, among many others, that come into my mind when I think of how I have learned these languages. If we look at the languages separate from each other, both could be categorized as the same level of difficulty. Each of these two languages has their quirks which would make them both seem equally difficult. Look at them in comparison with each other. If a student learns French first, they will clearly have difficulty picking up English and vice versa. That is because the two languages are so different from each other. However, if you look at a case like Leslie’s, where Spanish was learned first, everything changes. From Leslie’s point of view, although she does not remember learning English very well, she claims that learning French was easy. “I guess you can attribute that to the fact that Spanish and French are every similar, as are all European languages. If I had not known Spanish, I guarantee learning French would have been more difficult for me.”

In my experience with learning French, I have found it hard to understand certain concepts. A lot of times, my teacher will explain that it is something that is commonly difficult for English speakers to pick up because it is one of the points where English and French differ greatly. At the same time, it is also a concept which the French speaking students pick up very quickly. This is due to the fact that learning the English language sets us up with our own set of rules, which are drilled into our heads from younger ages. It then becomes harder to learn that concept in another language, because we are so used to doing it our way, and cannot get around it. That could also be blamed on not only the English language, but the way we have been taught it as well. For example, I found it very hard to grasp the uses of the difference tenses in French. I think it is hard to understand a concept in another language, if you have yet to master it in your own.

When I speak English, I do not really think about what tenses I am using, where as in French, I have to fill out a work sheet and separate the times when I would use each tense. I often times find me saying the sentence in English and translating it back to French, but that does not always produce the correct answer. This also happens in reading. Leslie Alvarez, the student from Loyola University, brought up a good point. “When we are reading something in a different language, we tend to translate it into English, before we can comprehend it.” Does this show that learning English is easier? Do we translate it into English because we understand the language better? One could argue that we do. Would this happen if we were native French speakers? This brings to my question of the role of the brain in learning.

I saw a speaker in the Psychology department who said that learning a second language was harder because it used a different part of the brain. His presentation was a little over my head, so I would encourage you to look more into this if you think it could be possible, although it is debatable. I also spoke briefly to one of the Professors in the Psychology department who focuses on the cognitive development of language. I participated in one of his studies, and I am waiting to hear the results. Again, these are

all things that I will not be addressing, but I encourage you to do more research on these topics if you are interested.

In conclusion, I do not feel that it is yet safe to say either language is more difficult. Although a lot of research says that English is more difficult, I do not think that is a valid assessment until all sides of the spectrum have been covered. From what I have discussed, I could easily say that French is more difficult, but I think it has something to do with each person's individual background in language. Maybe one day we will be able to discover which language truly is more difficult to learn, not matter what language was first acquired. I personally will still say that French is more difficult, but that was my experience with it.

This project has not only shown me some reasons why I have had or continue to have the difficulties with certain aspects of French that I have encountered, but I am still hoping it will help make me more efficiently prepared for my future career as an English teacher, which I plan to pursue after I graduate. I know that there are many students who learn two languages in their home, one being English. These children are not necessarily in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and may be in one of my classes in the future because English was learned and spoken in the home as well as the other language, whatever it may be. I have to be prepared to aid them with any difficulties they may experience due to their other spoken language interfering with aspects of English being taught in my class. If I am aware of what languages influence each other, which I am hoping to be after I finish my research paper, I will be able to anticipate these problems, and in turn, I will be a better teacher to them.

Doing this paper has led me to want to do my own research to finally get to the bottom of my original question, which we currently do not have enough information about to make a final decision. Maybe one day, I can raise my child speaking both languages to them, and putting them in a bilingual school for speakers of French and English. After they are grown, maybe then someone will finally be able to answer all my questions about learning the two languages of English and French. Until, then I will continue to pursue an answer. But for now, my research will not only help me in the present, but also in my plans for the future. It will also help me understand why certain things have happened in the past. I am still hoping it will impact someone else's life as greatly as it has impacted mine.

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