

Exploring Possibilities of Learning Beginners' level French in Gujarati

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Abstract:

The prevailing practice of English being used as the medium for instructing French classes in Surat, Gujarat raises questions regarding the exclusion of other languages already familiar to learners. This paper seeks to understand how Gujarati could contribute to learning French. For this, a comparative analysis of English, French, and Gujarati of the first chapter of the textbook *Apprenons le Francais* is presented. The examination demonstrates that employing translations and translanguaging could serve as effective pedagogical strategies to inspire learners and instill a passion for the language, enabling educators to guide students from the familiar to the unfamiliar. This might entail changes in the language policy of the schools if they strongly emphasize the use of only English. In conclusion, it is recommended that the development of a comprehensive Gujarati-French or English-French-Gujarati textbook and dictionary tailored specifically for Gujarati learners is undertaken. This resource would significantly enhance language acquisition and comprehension for these target learners.

Introduction:

Formal and informal interviews (written/oral) with the French teachers (working currently or quit working) of Surat, Gujarat revealed two major factors concerning French (as foreign) language teaching. Firstly, teachers generally use English in class to facilitate French language learning because they have a mixed group of learners - Gujarati, Marwari, learners from other states of India, and sometimes, even international learners. Teachers use English also because of the school's language policy. This implies that facilitators mainly rely on learners' knowledge of English to help them learn French. Little or no importance is given to other languages that the learners have learned before French. Ironically, the knowledge of one foreign language is being harnessed to learn another, sidelining the native languages of the learners. Secondly, learners opt for French mainly to get a high score (the assessments are so designed), they do not demonstrate a passion for the language or the schools offer French only to fulfill the criteria of having a foreign language in school. In brief, there is a lack of certain seriousness on the learners' part.

As a solution to these points, teachers could move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. That is, in a multilingual class, when learners are exposed to a new language, they are likely to make connections with languages they are familiar with. According to the Typological Primacy Model, debutant learners tend to depend on the structurally most similar language irrespective of the order and context of previous language acquisition (Rothman, 2015). Overt similarities between English and French cannot be ignored and hence it is likely that learners instinctively fall back on English. If the teachers reinforce this, it is challenging for those who are not

proficient in English. This leads to demotivation and consequent withdrawal from the language. At the same time, if learners cling extensively to English, the differences between the languages may turn burdensome. In such a situation, if teachers draw cross-linguistic references between the other languages that learners know, they could deal with a wide range of ideas and concepts and help learners make connections allowing the creation of a bridge between the known and the unknown languages/cultures. This could encourage and motivate learners who are not proficient in English to learn French and render confidence to regional language learners to explore a foreign language. Even in cases where learners join the French language to gain high scores, such a strategy could generate interest and aid them achieve their goals satisfactorily.

Rationale

Given the above scenario, there are hardly any studies/research comparing French and Gujarati to examine the role of Gujarati in facilitating French language learning. Unless a comprehensive study is executed, it cannot be established that Gujarati cannot be used to learn French or that there are no similarities between the languages. Further, when learners learn English, they might either be taught via immersion or Gujarati and/or Hindi or other languages. Then, the question is, to what extent is it possible to use Gujarati to learn French? For learners who are less comfortable with English and more conversant with their native languages, can they rely on prior language learning experiences and learn French as if it were their first foreign language? Alternatively, can they apply knowledge from all previously learned languages (including English and other regional languages)?

Objective

This study aims to conduct a comparative study of learning the basics of French in English and Gujarati. Thus, the main purpose is to demonstrate how Gujarati could facilitate learning French. This is likely to result in non-English speaking Gujarati learners to study French. It may also encourage French language facilitators to exploit the potential of Gujarati when teaching French in class. Possibly, schools offering French will understand the importance of cross-linguistic influence and make relaxations regarding the use of different languages in (French) language classes. This paper might open doors to consciously using code-switching and translanguaging strategies to facilitate French language learning.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis for this paper has been designed based on the belief that emerged from the interviews with teachers. Due to cultural distance and dissimilarity in scripts and pronunciation, learning French via English is more feasible than learning French via Gujarati.

This hypothesis creates space for a comparative study. It allows for an examination and analysis of the interrelationship between Gujarati-English-French.

Methodology

To examine the hypothesis, two conversations, one formal and another informal from pp.14 of Chapter 1 of *Apprenons le Francais - I*, a widely used English-French bilingual textbook at the debutant level, has been considered. English and Gujarati explanations of the words, phrases, sentences, and conversations along with other linguistic and cultural aspects have been compared to understand how crosslinguistic influence/transfer of learning operates and how Gujarati can facilitate French language learning in the absence of English or complementing English. In this comparative study, it has been kept in mind that not all Gujarati speakers would speak standard, fluent, chaste Gujarati. Spoken Gujarati uses many English words since English has become an integral part of Indian society. In such cases, Gujarati font has been used to write the English words.

Data and Analysis

This section presents a comparison of sentences from the pages chosen. In a tabulated form, the French version as given in the text book has been written in the center. English and Gujarati have been written on either side. The linguistic and cultural concepts (similarities and differences) have been explained below the tables.

Chapter 1 p.14: The title of the chapter *Les Salutations* can be understood as “Greetings” in English. According to the dictionary, Gujarati words like શુભેચ્છા, અભિવાદન, શુભકામના have similar meaning. This might seem too literal or even literary and hence, it is advisable to discuss it contextually - words that are used when we meet people. The background for this chapter has been written in English. It can be translated to Gujarati as: હાથ ફેંદુસ, આ કાળા વાળ વાળો અનીષ ભારતથી આવ્યો છે. તે મારો ફેંડ છે. ચાલો, એની સાથે ફેંચ શીખીએ. This sentence has cultural implications of Indians having black hair compared to English/French/Europeans. A facilitator may explicitly discuss this in any medium of instruction.

Table 1: Conversation 1: p.14

| English | French | Gujarati |
|--|--------|---|
| Hi!/Hey! Hi!/Hey! My name is Manuel. And you? What is your | Salut! | હાથ/કેમ છે? હાથ/કેમ છે? મારું નામ માન્યુએલ છે. |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| name? My name is Aneesh. | Salut! Je m'appelle Manuel. Et toi! Comment tu t'appelles? Je m'appelle Aneesh. | અને તું? તારું નામ શું છે? મારું નામ અનીષ છે. |
|-----------------------------|---|--|

The greeting “Salut” is informal and hence is often translated as “Hi” in English. In Gujarati, people have begun to use “Hi”. Nevertheless, it could also be culturally translated as કેમ છે? often used as a phrase to greet as well as ask for the other’s well-being. At the same time, “Salut” is not always equal to “hi” or “hey”. Though “hi” can be used when we stop someone on the road and ask for directions, “Salut” cannot be used in the same way in French because of its extremely informal nature. (Caroline, 2020) In such a situation, the French use “Bonjour”. In Gujarati, in such situations, people tend to use “ભાઈ” or “બહેન/બેન” to begin the conversation without any formal/informal greetings. Such cultural distinctions in usage need to be explained clearly. Taking cues from different familiar cultures could be useful.

Further, how one asks/says his/her name is similar in English and Gujarati. They use the “to be” form to construct the question/sentence. However, French employs the reflexive verb “s’appeler” meaning “calling oneself”. Therefore, when transliterated, “Je m’appelle Manuel” is “I am called Manuel.” and “મને માન્યુએલ બોલાવે છે.” Similar is the case of the question used for asking one’s name in French, “What are you called?” or “તમને શું બોલાવે છે?” None of these sound correct to English or Gujarati speakers. Therefore, teachers are forced to find alternate explanations other than just translating or transliterating the sentence, which can be in any of the known languages.

Table 2: Conversation 2: p.14

| English | French | Gujarati |
|-------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Good morning/afternoon sir! | Bonjour Monsieur! | નમસ્તે! |
| Good morning/afternoon madam! | Bonjour Madame! | નમસ્તે! |
| Excuse-me! What is your name? | Excusez-moi! Vous vous appelez-comment? | |
| My name is Sophie Delpas. | Je m'appelle Sophie Delpas. | |
| And yours? | Et vous? Je m'appelle Jean Martin. | તમારું/આપનું નામ શું છે? |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| My name is Jean Martin. | | મારું નામ સોફી દેવપા છે. અને તમારું/આપનું? મારું નામ માર્તે છે. |
|-------------------------|--|---|

This table provides an example of a formal conversation. In French, not only the greetings, but the pronoun used to ask the other person's name also change. Bonjour is a polite greeting used in most situations in French and it can be used till evening. It is not restricted by the time of the day as "good morning" or "good afternoon" is. Similar is the case with નમસ્તે, which can be used in the evening as well. Bonjour and નમસ્તે encompass means hello, good morning, good afternoon, or good day as a greeting.

Here, learners also need to be aware of false cognates. A direct translation of "good morning" as "Bon matin" or good afternoon as "Bon après-midi" is not always acceptable. Where the former does not exist and can be dismissed as an anglicism, bon après-midi exists, and is used when leaving to imply "Have a good afternoon!" At the same time, in Quebec, bon matin and bon après-midi are used as greetings as well as goodbyes. (Greetings, n.d.) Learners must know despite geographical proximity, cultural differences exist and linguistic proximity might confuse too.

The concept of sir/madam is more common in the West and has penetrated the regional scenario where people may use નમસ્તે સર/મેડમ. However, ભાઈ/બહેન/બેન belongs to the native Gujarati culture. Moreover, નમસ્તે or Bonjour is one word, "good morning" or "good afternoon" are two distinct words. Further, here, people tend to join their hands and maybe bow a little when નમસ્તે is used. In the English culture, people shake hands. In French, one might nod a bit when saying Bonjour to strangers. When greeting the known, Bonjour is accompanied by a strong firm handshake (like the English) or in the case of friends and acquaintances, kisses on the cheek sometimes even three or four. (Caroline, 2020). The last gesture is completely alien to Gujarati culture and not used by the English either.

Excusez-moi in French and Excuse-me have a variety of contextual meanings like addressing someone older, making a request, interrupting a conversation, asking for forgiveness, or asking for a favor. (Ellis, n.d.) In Gujarati, expressions and terms used in these contexts are different. Sometimes, no equivalent expression may be required in Gujarati, like in this case for example or one could use સર/મેડમ or બાઈ/બહેન. Hence, Gujarati speakers must understand the French “excusez-moi” based on the context in which it is used. In addition to context, the tone of the expression used in social interactions is also important. (Ellis, n.d.) If they have already learned these nuances in English, it helps, or else, the cultural comparisons could facilitate a refined understanding of both languages.

French uses the subject pronoun “vous” in formal contexts, with elders, and with strangers to maintain politeness. Such a distinction is absent in English where the consistent second-person pronoun is “you” irrespective of age or context. However, Gujarati observes this difference, perhaps in a more refined way than French because there exist two different pronouns, તમે and આપ where the latter is regarded as the most formal and polite.

Where sentence structure is concerned, French seems to be more flexible than Gujarati and English at least in the case of asking for someone’s name. The question “Comment vous appelez-vous?” or “Comment tu t’appelles?” can be rephrased as “Vous vous appelez-comment?” or “Tu t’appelles comment”. In Gujarati, any sentence order apart from “તમારું/આપનું નામ શું છે?” or “ તારું નામ શું છે?” might require greater attention to intonation so that its real intention can be understood. For example, “નામ શું છે તારું?/શું નામ છે તારું” is possible but might be misconstrued. In English, there are hardly such possibilities for playing with the word order.

Gujarati is a language based on sounds where each letter represents a sound, therefore, transcribing French pronunciation can be easier and can help acquire it faster. For example, “જહે માપેલ સોફી દેલપા” for “Je m’appelle Sophie Delpas”. At the same time, it must be considered that all sounds cannot be transcribed. જહે may not lead to the exact pronunciation of “je” but aids in getting close, especially for debutant native language learners. It is usually observed that in French, the last letters are not pronounced and spellings at times resemble English. In such cases, noting the Gujarati transcription beside the French words could be handy. The influence of English could be minimized.

Discussion

Language teaching strategies have evolved from grammar-translation method to communicative/task-based language teaching. An amalgamation of these strategies based on

context and learners' needs is essential such that learning moves from the known to the unknown. For instance, role plays, discussions, problem-solving activities, etc. as part of communicative language learning ensure learning in context rather than in isolation. An immersive class may encourage learners to use the target language. Task-based activities provide a platform to explore the language. Audio-lingual methods could improve listening skills. However, according to Cenoz and Gorter, isolating the target language is a key idea in several of these methods. Ignoring and avoiding the mother tongue is paradoxical when learning a new language drives toward acquiring multilingual competencies. (2020)

The previous section shows the interactions between English-French-Gujarati. This paper advocates using known languages to teach a new language, welcoming teachers to take advantage of the multilingual scenario in their classrooms. When teachers use the strategies mentioned above, they can extend themselves to understand that no one medium of instruction binds them. If they already use translation (from French to English), they can now experiment with translanguaging. Translanguaging involves prompting students to consider various language elements simultaneously across multiple languages, including the positioning of adjectives, the presence of cognates in different languages, and more. (Najarro, 2023) Further, Teachers do not need to be fluent in their students' home languages to facilitate translanguaging. However, teachers need to be open to learning from their students about their languages. While some teachers may worry about students speaking in languages that they do not understand, research shows that teachers are still able to understand what is happening and redirect students back to the task at hand. (Najarro, 2023)

In fact, as Bolkvadze in the context of second language learning notes, teachers frequently engage in code-switching for a variety of reasons, such as to help students better understand the content, as a way to make instruction more engaging, or to save time. However, it's important to note that code-switching should not be used to encourage students to rely solely on their first language. Instead, the goal should be for students to fluently switch between languages, ultimately improving their lexical skills. At the same time, many teachers discourage using the first language in language classrooms due to its connection with traditional teaching methods. However, students could be taught that the purposeful use of both languages creates meaningful learning experiences and enhances the acquisition of the second language (L2) This means that employing both languages intentionally could lead to a richer understanding of L2. (2023). Based on the data and analysis presented in the earlier section, teachers could experiment with extending these ideas to French language teaching.

Thus, translanguaging is likely to help teachers overcome the second challenge stated in the introduction leading to increased seriousness among learners to learn French. For the first challenge, teachers themselves need to be convinced about the use of translanguaging. When the strategy produces results for learners and long-term benefits are evident, schools/educational institutions are likely to reconsider the language policies. On the other hand, school authorities /educational institutions could initiate pilot projects of translanguaging in classes to observe its effect and then take appropriate steps.

Limitations

This study is limited to a few pages from the text. This could be enlarged to other basic conversations and adequately explored in class. At the same time, classes may have learners from different parts of the country/world, implying that they speak a wide variety of languages, it might be difficult for the facilitator to identify the languages that could be exploited to facilitate language learning. This study does not offer a comparison of other regional/Indian languages. However, in such cases, the regional language Gujarati and the widely spoken language Hindi could be used. Further, the extent to which a facilitator can depend on these languages also depends on the proficiency of the learners. This has not been ascertained in this study. Facilitators might have to design a survey at the beginning of the class to determine how fluent learners are with the languages that they have previously learned. Nevertheless, this is true for English also, not all learners in a class are proficient in English considering it is not yet a widely spoken language in all families/environments. Given a choice, learners usually prefer conversing in their native tongues/regional language/common Indian language.

Recommendations

Considering similarities and differences between Gujarati/English/French, the models of crosslinguistic influence and language learning strategies like translanguaging, a bilingual or trilingual Gujarati/English/French resource book could be designed. This may or may not be available for learners but the facilitators could depend on these resource books to create a motivating environment in class for learners struggling with English or learners who prefer Gujarati to English.

Recently, a French-Hindi dictionary has been published for Hindi learners to gain access to the language (Srivastava, 2024). In addition, there are a greater number of videos facilitating French through Hindi than French through Gujarati on YouTube. In the comments section, learners are seen asking for more videos to learn French in Gujarati. This information along with the evidence from this paper should be regarded as a springboard to launch resource

books that could help Gujaratis and promote the learning of French as a foreign language with greater accessibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a need to reconsider the language policy for French language teaching in Surat, Gujarat. The exclusion of Gujarati as a medium for instructing French classes overlooks the potential benefits of leveraging learners' familiarity with their native language. The comparative analysis presented in this study highlights the potential of using Gujarati as a tool to facilitate French language learning. It is recommended that pedagogical strategies such as translanguaging be employed to inspire and engage learners, leading to a more comprehensive language acquisition process. Additionally, the development of a comprehensive Gujarati-French or English-French-Gujarati textbook and dictionary tailored for Gujarati learners is essential to enhance their comprehension and proficiency in the French language. Overall, incorporating Gujarati into the French language learning process has the potential to benefit non-English speaking Gujarati learners and should be considered in shaping language education policies.

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