# Language contact awareness in a multilingual environment

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# LANGUAGE CONTACT AWARENESS IN A MULTILINGUAL ENVIRONMENT: THE PERCEPTION OF CROSS-LINGUISTIC SIMILARITIES BY PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH EFL TEACHERS

ABSTRACT:
Acknowledging and discussing language contacts in a multilingual environment such as Reunion Island could empower language learners and facilitate language teaching. Yet, cross-linguistic similarities cannot be nurtured without being first perceived by teachers. Considering English as a bridge language, this study aims at identifying the connections recognised by nineteen pre-service English teachers, mainly between English and French, German, Korean, Reunionese Creole, Shimaore or Spanish. The data gathered stems from elements of language biographies and the completion of four contrastive exercises. A qualitative study conveyed through manual coding allowed for the analysis of the cross linguistic contacts identified. The results emphasize the rich diversity of connections recognized but they also suggest that perception may sometimes give way to less grounded assumptions.

KEYWORDS: cross-linguistic similarities, English as a Foreign Language, language contact awareness, multilingualism, plurilingualism

## SENSIBILISER AUX CONTACTS ENTRE LANGUES DANS UN ENVIRONNEMENT MULTILINGUE : LA PERCEPTION DES SIMILARITÉS CROSS-LINGUISTIQUES PAR LES ENSEIGNANTS D'ANGLAIS LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE EN FORMATION INITIALE

RÉSUMÉ :
Admettre et discuter des contacts linguistiques dans un environnement multilingue tel que celui de l'île de la Réunion pourrait faciliter l'enseignement des langues et permettre aux apprenants de devenir plus autonomes. Cependant, encourager et exploiter les similarités linguistiques nécessite en premier lieu que les enseignants perçoivent ces liens. Considérant l'anglais comme une langue passerelle, cette étude vise à identifier les liens reconnus par dix-neuf enseignants d'anglais en formation initiale, principalement entre l'anglais et le français, l'allemand, le coréen, le créole réunionnais, l'espagnol ou le shimaore. Les données recueillies sont issues d'éléments de biographies langagières et de la réalisation de quatre exercices contrastifs. Une étude qualitative effectuée à l'aide d'un codage manuel a ensuite permis l'analyse des contacts linguistiques identifiés. Les résultats soulignent la riche diversité des similarités reconnues, mais ils suggèrent également que la perception d'éléments tangibles peut parfois être remplacée par des hypothèses plus fragiles.

Whether one considers languages as resources, fundamental rights, or inversely, as impediments, the stakes are high. Multilingualism has emerged as an unavoidable concept permeating the macro level of European recommendations as well as the micro-level of the classroom. Some fundamental ideological and methodological disputes reflect a wide diversity of challenges and contexts. Today, the focus is no longer on *bi*lingualism, but on *multi*lingualism and *pluri*lingualism. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, *multi*lingualism refers to the environments in which many languages co-exist and *pluri*lingualism focuses on the individuals. In English however, *multilingualism* is broadly used for both. Although the benefits of a plurilingual approach to language learning were identified (Candelier, 2003), some doubts remain on the strategies used by learners to build up a plurilingual competence (Montagne-Macaire, 2008). The concept of "plurilingual repertoire" was put forward to describe the intertwined collection of language abilities and information one possesses. It thus seems that the traditional barriers erected between languages are breaking down.

The questions we ask in this article are not whether or why a holistic plurilingual approach should be more coherent than a monolingual approach, or whether languages could either bring on social determinism or, conversely, trigger equal opportunity. Although these interrogations are extremely important, the focus is here neither on the socio-political nor on the ideological debates. Rather, multilingualism is taken as a genuine reality within the classrooms, and our goal is to tackle difficulties as they arise and nurture cross-linguistic similarities to facilitate language teaching. There is however one important prerequisite: it seems no one could do so without first identifying linguistic contacts. Therefore, this study explores prospective English teachers' perceptions of similarities. It tries and define whether cross-linguistic connections are made, and in what fields. Being the foreign language the most widely taught in Reunionese schools, English may have a particular role to play as a bridge language (Robert, 2008; Forlot, 2009) in linguistic, psycholinguistic, and metalinguistic terms, to try and break down the barriers between languages. Henceforth, the focus is here on the connections between English and a selection of other languages present in the multilingual Reunionese environment.


## LOOKING AT CROSS-LINGUISTIC SIMILARITIES

### Perspectives

Studying cross-linguistic similarities implies comparing languages and identifying points of convergence and divergence. It is an ambitious enterprise involving different sciences. As a result of its objectives and methodologies, contrastive linguistics seems best suited to our study. However, the study of cross-linguistic similarities also rests on fundamental studies conveyed in other domains such as comparative linguistics, language typology, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, language acquisition or sociolinguistics. For instance, language typology classifies the world's languages and studies their structural features. Yet it stems from general linguistics and has no didactic intent; as for comparative linguistics, it focuses on the common heritage of languages and identifies proto-languages from which language families descend.

On the other hand, contrastive linguistics compares the micro-systems of two or more languages. It springs from applied linguistics and is practice-oriented: the objective is to facilitate language teaching and learning. Contrastive studies first developed in the 1950s with Weinreich's (1953) and Lado's (1957) seminal studies on language contacts. Early studies focused on the negative transfers which occurred when an L2 was learnt. Error analyses were then conveyed to identify L1-based deviations. It was admitted, first, that the more different

the L1 and L2 were, the hardest it would be to learn the L2, and second, that errors could be predicted. However, the widest gaps did not eventually appear the most difficult to breach. Moreover, because of insufficient metalanguage or since certain elements bore little comparison, the enterprise proved trickier than expected. Contrastive linguistics was rejuvenated in the 1970s when it made use of developments suggested by other theories and put aside error prediction. Selinker then developed his interlanguage theory which was based on the idea that language learners develop an interim language system making use of the over-generalization of L2 rules and L1 transfers, before it ceases to develop as it reaches a state of fossilization (Selinker, 1972).

The study of cross-linguistic similarities may also convene psycholinguistics, which focuses on language and its psychological aspects, on mental processes and knowledge structures. Although monolingual at first, psycholinguistics also looked at multilingualism (de Groot, 2010), bilingualism at school (Gajo, 2001) or the positive effects of a language on another one (Montagne-Macaire, 2008; Feuillet, 2005). Other fields of research relevant to our study include metalinguistics, language awareness, studies on language acquisition from the perspective of multilingual speakers, and also studies on the cerebral activity of polyglots by neurolinguists.

*The absence of tabula rasa*

Rather than starting from scratch, language learners rely on what they already know to try and connect new knowledge (Ringbom, 2006). The notion of "transfer" refers to these connexions. The term was first coined by behaviourist psychologists. Since it is associated to a great variety of theories, its suitability is questionable (Odlin, 1989, Ringbom, 2006). Although we prefer the concept of "cross-linguistic similarities", the two terminologies are here used interchangeably. Rather, it is the notion of "transfer" in itself which interrogates us. Its *raison d'être* may be compromised if one admits the existence of the individual's holistic plurilingual repertoire rather than the presence of separate and juxtaposed elements which need to be transferred.

Multilingualism initially conveyed threats of "subtractive multilingualism" (when languages are learnt at the expense of the first language(s)) and "semilingualism" (little proficiency or deficiencies in all languages) rather than the optimistic prospect of "additive multilingualism" (when language learning develops in all the languages). When research began focusing on what languages had in common, the aim was more often than not to identify language universals. This objective had little in common with the practice-oriented approach of contrastive analysis. The tide may be ebbing today since positive transfers are increasingly studied. Yet, a review of the literature still shows the scarcity of positive studies on transfers. The scarcity of research on convergence rather than divergence may be explained by methodological difficulties which remain relevant today: the identification of positive transfers is delicate, transfers are different according to the activities performed (some cross-linguistics similarities may be very useful when listening, but less relevant when speaking), and some positive transfers probably occur even when no similarity is perceived (Kellerman, 1995; Ringbom, 2006).

Thus, early studies focused on negative transfers from L1, and in particular on the risks stemming from overgeneralisation. The concept of "semantic equivalence hypothesis" assumed that L2 conceptual patterns and linguistic codes relied on those of the L1 (Ijaz, 1986; Hasselgren, 1994). Research now presumes that learners first try and identify similarities between languages. Therefore, Chaudenson recommended to make use of similarities between

Reunionese Creole and French, in the early classes of Reunionese schools, before later having children identify differences (Chaudenson, 2008). For Ringbom, the initial focus of learners is on formal cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic similarities (what is already known of the new language); formal similarities are then associated to semantic and functional similarities (Ringbom, 2006). Additionally, researchers have shown that cross-linguistic influence also occurs for L3 learning (Ecke, 2015) and subsequent languages. When the L3 is distant from the L1, similarities may be found by learners between an L2 related to the L3 (Ringbom, 2006).

Difficulties arise when one considers the perception of similarities as a biased process. "Psychotypology" refers to the subjective perception of proximity between languages and the awareness of typological relations (Kellerman, 1995). Perceiving similarities can be considered as a personal enterprise which may suffer both from a lack of objectivity and accuracy. There is at this stage a significant difference between related and distant languages. When the level of abstraction of "linguistics universals" is too high, learners may not be able to identify the common features of the target language and the L1. While similarities could be perceived if the languages are related, they may merely be assumed if the languages are distant. Learners may presume that, despite different words, the language systems work the same way; such assumptions do not rest on prior perception and are hazardous (Ringbom, 2006).


THE REUNIONESE LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

In 2018, 706,400 inhabitants lived in Reunion Island, among which 99,230 were born in mainland France, 38,160 in another country in the Indian Ocean, and 12,200 elsewhere. The great majority of Reunionese were thus born on the island (82,5%). The official language and language of instruction is French, yet Reunionese Creole is largely spoken. Reunionese Creole is a French-based creole with Malagasy, Hindi, Portuguese, Gujrati and Tamil influences (Chaudenson, 1992). Migratory flows originate from France, Mayotte, Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros, Morocco, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Algeria, India, China, East Africa... Hence, Reunionese Creole and French are in contact with Tamil, Chinese, Hindi, Gujrati, Shimaore, Comorian, Kibushi, Malagasy, Arabic…

In 2020, 90% of natives of Reunion Island considered the Creole language to be important for the identity of the department. 90% said they easily understood and spoke Creole; 49% considered Creole should be taught in schools (compared to 40% in 2010) whereas 35% considered it should be restricted to the private sphere (compared to 47% in 2010) (Insee).

The foreign languages the most taught in secondary schools are English and Spanish. In September 2020, there were 8,088 students enrolled in their final year of general or technological education in private and public schools. 95% had chosen English as their first foreign language, 3.1% took Spanish, 1.3% German, 0.6% Chinese. However, in total, whether the language was chosen as a first, second, or third option, 100% learnt English, 78.7% learnt Spanish, 18.2% German, 3.2% Chinese, 0.3% Arabic and Creole, 0.2% Tamil, 0.1% Italian. 2.5% Latin, 0.4 Greek (Région académique La Réunion, 2020). Reunionese creole is taught in primary and secondary schools, without being compulsory. The recommendations of the Common European Framework of References for Languages are followed, the methodology of language teaching is actional, and languages are conceived as vehicles for culture, which may partially explain the apparent scarcity of linguistic reflection carried out in language classes. A monolingual tradition of foreign language teaching prevails.

CROSS-LINGUISTIC SIMILARITIES

*Languages under scrutiny*

Particular attention is paid in this study to the relationships between English and—French, Reunionese Creole, Morisyen, Spanish, German, and Shimaore. Similarities with Korean were succinctly looked at, thus helping consider seemingly unrelated languages. Numerous studies have shed light on language learning and teaching considering the relationships between English and French (Hawkins & Towell, 2001), English and German (Hufeisen & Neuner, 2003), English and Spanish, French and Reunionese Creole (Gaillat, 2014; Lebon-Eyquem & Adelin, 2015; Souprayen-Cavéry, 2020), English and Morisyen. There are, to a lesser extent, studies on Reunionese Creole and English within an educational context (Rolland, 2012, 2013; Sournin, 2011). We have however found little on Shimaore and English, which may be due to apparently limited historical and linguistic connections.

According to historical and comparative linguistics, English, French, Spanish and German all belong to the Indo-European language family and share the common reconstructed Proto-Indo-European protolanguage. The Indo-European family is divided into eight sub-families, including the Germanic languages to which German and English belong, and Romance/Latin languages, which include French and Spanish. Korean belongs to the Koreanic language family. It bears little similarity to English. The phonological system is fundamentally different, and Korean follows a Subject–Object–Verb canonical sentence order.

Shimaore (also known as Maore Comorian and *Mahorais* in French) is an indigenous language of Mayotte, a French overseas department and region contested by the Union of the Comoros. Shimaore is a dialect of the Comorian language, which is a Bantu language belonging to the Niger-Congo hypothetical language family and sharing the common Proto-Niger-Congo proto-language. Shimaore is a stable language widely spoken as a first language. Traditionally an oral language, since 2020 its official orthographies are both in Latin and Arabic scripts. Shimaore is an agglutinative language making use of multiple morphemes; it has an elaborate system of noun classification (noun classes or nominal classes, with singular or plural prefixes) and does not rely on the use of articles. Like Spanish, Shimaore phonology follows a five-vowel-system, and it includes specific consonants such as the B-hook /ɓ/, a voiced bilabial implosive also found in the African alphabet (Mori, 2023). In contrast, French has thirteen oral vowels and four nasal vowels; English comprises at least fourteen monophthongs and diphthongs, and German has a fifteen-vowel-sound system, although these numbers may vary depending on the dialects.

Morisyen is spoken in Mauritius. Although a French-based creole language, it has been in contact with English. Colonized by the Netherlands then the French, Mauritius was taken by the English in 1810; when slavery was abolished, intensive use was made of indentured labourers from China, Malay, Africa and Madagascar and then, to a larger extent, India. The name Morisyen is preferred to Mauritian Creole since it appears more inclusive in Mauritius, where the term "creole" is perceived as excluding indo-Mauricians. Some linguists consider that Reunionese Creole influenced Morisyen (Chaudenson, 1992), however this analysis is not shared by all (Baker, 1972). Morisyen and Reunionese Creole are both classified within the Bourbonnais Creole or Mascarene Creole group which comprises the French-based creoles of the Indian Ocean. Both Reunionese Creole and Morisyen have a rather straightforward grammar and follow a Subject–Verb–Object canonical word order. Morisyen verbs are invariable, and tenses are indicated by particles or the context. Watleb considers Morisyen

more distant to French than Reunionese creole (Watbled, 2021) and Chaudenson (1992) reckoned that there was little intercomprehension between Reunionese Creole and Morisyen speakers.

The relationships between Reunionese Creole and French have been subject to many studies—because of their proximity, to tackle educational challenges but also prejudiced representations. According to a 2021 report produced by *Lofis La Lang Kreol La Renyon*, 29% of the respondents to a survey (n=503) totally agreed ("total d'accord") and 12% strongly agreed ("tout à fait d'accord") on the fact that Creole is an obstacle to learning French ("Le créole est un frein l'apprentissage du français"). The belief however appears on the decline considering that 43% totally agreed and 24% strongly agreed in 2009 (*Sondage – Lofislalangkreollarenyon*, 2021).

Analysed by researchers first through the prism of diglossia (with Creole being assigned an inferior status to French), Creole and French were then positioned at each end of a continuum of practices (Carayol & Chaudenson, 1979). This second paradigm provided for an implication analysis which took into account intermediary states. The notion of "interlect" was then introduced and it endorsed intertwined interlectal forms and *mélanges* (mixing) (Prudent, 1981; Lebon-Eyquem, 2016). Code switching, translanguaging and *mélanges* are legion in Reunion; these practices, the proximity between the languages, and language variation make the formal identification and categorisation of French and Creole elements challenging (Lebon-Eyquem, 2016).

*The nature of cross-linguistic transfers*

Cross-linguistic transfers are manifold: they comprise linguistic but also psycholinguistic and metalinguistic transfers (which include cognitive, socio-affective and metacognitive strategies). At this point, we are convinced of the central role of metalinguistic transfers in language learning (Author, 2023). However, these transfers are not the subject of the present article.

Ringbom (2006) identifies three types of cross-linguistic relations: a similarity relation (either partial or full), a contrast relation and a zero relation. Formal similarity is not a prerequisite, since functional and semantic similarities may occur despite the absence of any apparent similarity of forms, as is often the case for unrelated languages.

We will here briefly look at some examples of phonological, lexical and grammatical similarities. Formal phonological similarities may be found in the pronunciation of sounds; although English has a certain amount of specific sounds (for example /θ/, /ð/, /ə/, /i:/) French, Creole and English have a great amount of consonants and vowels in common (/e/, /ɪ/). Similarity may also occur at other levels, such as sentence stress, intonation, emphasis and questions...

Language comprehension first and foremost relies on words (Hilton, 2022), and researchers have described lexical integration processes (Laufer, 1990), from the first encounter of the word to "getting the word form, getting the word meaning, consolidating word form and word meaning in memory, and using the word" (Ringbom, 2006). During the "getting the word form" initial phase, learners rely on their previous knowledge and, to a large extent, on scripted and phonological similarities. Thenceforth, semantic and/or functional similarity or even identity is expected. Words identified thanks to cross-linguistic scripted or phonological similarities are often called cognates or transparent words. According to its Latin origins (*cognatus*) the term should normally be reserved to words "of common descent", that is to say words which have a

common heritage, but which may differ in meaning. Cognates should be considered as cousins rather than twins. Sometimes their similarity may not be blatant (as for *mater, mutter, mother, mère*). Researchers have studied the positive impact of cognate status on word recognition, translation, learning, and have identified what is known as the cognate advantage, and the cognate facilitation effect (Dijkstra et al., 1999; de Groot, 2010; Marecka et al., 2021). Think of the cardinal number "six". It translates as *sis* in Morisyen, *siss* in Reunionese Creole, *sita* in Shimaore, *sechs* in German, *seis* in Spanish, *sei* in Italian, *sex* in Swedish and Latin, it is pronounced *sitta* in Arabic, and *sei* in basque, a seemingly isolate and unrelated language. The origins of the words are traced to the Proto-Indo-European *\*swéḱs*, Proto-Semitic *\*šidt-*, Proto-Germanic *seks*.

The degree of transparency varies. Lexical cross-linguistic similarity may be total, both morphologically and semantically; a partial morphological similarity may be associated to a total semantic correspondence; and both the morphological and semantic correspondences may be partial (Caddéo & Jamet, 2007). In addition, there are a certain amount of "false cognates", "pseudo-cognates", "false friends", "interlingual homographs or homophones", responsible for semantic opacity. They may show total or partial morphological similarity but diverge in meaning. Swan and Smith identify as worse friends "unreliable friends", words meaning almost the same, or "the same in one context and not in another" (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 69).

The similarities may also be grammatical, and for instance syntactic. "Word order" is used in syntactic typology to classify languages according to the canonical order of words in a sentence. Although it helps identify convergences and divergences, "word order" is of course a complex notion. It is the placement of groups of words, words or morphemes which is described, according to the subject, verb, or object functions they are endowed with. The word order of simple, affirmative, declarative and non-emphatic sentences, is a Subject–Verb–Object order in French, English, German, Spanish, Reunionese creole, Morisyen and Shimaore (*The cat eats the mouse ; Le chat mange la souris),* as is the case for most Indo-European and many African languages. Yet, these are merely canonical patterns. Spanish often omits the subject. Shimaore uses inflections, and the word order is therefore easily subject to change. In French, the use of determiners, adjectives, nominal or pronominal objects imply different word orders (*Je mange la pomme* but *Je la mange*). Hence, although common canonical patterns can be found, it is often hazardous to assume word order similarity.

*Nurturing cross-linguistic similarities within the classroom*

From thence, it appears necessary to discuss similarities within the classroom. As far as vocabulary is concerned, it seems rational both to recognize the presence, at different degrees, of phonological, morphological, or semantic correspondences, but also to acknowledge their limits. Nation advised teachers to limit the teaching of vocabulary and encourage its incidental learning (Nation, 2013, p. 92), which also raises the question of the implicit or explicit instruction required (Veronique, 2019). Although recent studies showed that awareness of cognateness did not necessarily enhance the learning of cognates (Otwinowska-Kasztelanic et al., 2020), researchers seem to agree on the fact that attention to metaphonology (Rolland, 2012) and metalinguistics facilitates many learning and production strategies (Swan & Smith, 2001; Chaudenson, 2008; Ringbom, 2006). The role of teachers should not be underplayed and at least two fundamental conditions need to be met to ensure such teaching. The first one is ideological: teachers need to be willing to acknowledge the plurilingual repertoire of their students and to nurture transfers. As rational human beings, they will not do so unless staunch benefits are expected. The second condition is practical: beforehand, teachers need to be able to identify language contacts and integrate them within lesson plans.

RESEARCH QUESTION & METHODOLOGY

*Research questions*

The focus is here on the identification of similarities since it appears as a prerequisite. The central research question aims at identifying the common points recognised by pre-service teachers, between English and other languages. There are two subsequent questions: is language proficiency required to identify connections? Are some similarities assumed rather than perceived?

*Participants*

The participants are nineteen pre-service English teachers enrolled in the first year of a Master's degree in secondary education (master MEEF Anglais) at the Institute of Education of Reunion Island. The research began with the analysis of anonymized presentation posts in a forum, written during a hybrid course in language didactics which gathered students specializing in either English, Spanish, German or Creole. We selected only the nineteen posts written by the students specializing in English, between 23 August and 30 October 2023. The same students, minus one, took part in the following step of the research. Sixteen students then carried out step three.

*Procedure*

The first step consisted in the preliminary analysis of the language biographies of the participants. The objective of this biographical approach was to gather contextual elements and identify potential points of study.
Before posting on the forum of the course, students were asked to present themselves through language biographies. The instructions were written in French ("*Avant de participer au forum, présentez-vous en nous donnant des éléments de biographie langagière!")* and the students all answered in French. Therefore, the step 1 quotations below were translated by myself. The posts were anonymized and subject to textual data thematic coding through the atlas.ti software. Each post was numbered S1 to S19, according to the date of publication (S1 being the first post published). Deductive coding was used to identify the languages mentioned; it was then enriched with inductive open-coding together with sentiment and word-frequency analyses. Forty-two language codes and twelve thematic codes were generated. The posts were expected to show bias since the last presentations may have been influenced by earlier ones; the biographies presented by the students implied subjectivity; and the students may have conformed to what they considered the teacher's or peers' expectations.

The objective of the second step was to gather data on the identification of cross-linguistic contacts. Four contrastive exercises were given in an eighty-minute time span. These contrastive exercises were inspired by an activity proposed by Bailly et al. (2009). The instructions were in English. The first exercise asked the students to "highlight", in a 270-word excerpt from the incipit of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), "everything which [reminded them] of the French language (this may include words, grammar, phonology…)" and "explain, at least briefly, why [they had] highlighted these elements." Inversely, in the second exercise, students had to highlight in a 304-word excerpt from the opening page of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (1943), everything which

[reminded them] of English". The same instructions were given in exercise three, although this time another language could be chosen among Reunionese Creole, Spanish, German, Malagasy, Comorian, Morisyen, or Japanese. Students were orally encouraged to choose any other language. Two complementary questions were asked ("Do you want to tell me why you've chosen this language?", "Which level of proficiency do you think you have in this language?"). The last exercise asked students to "find on the internet a text in the other language [they had chosen] (article, song lyrics…). This document [had] to be authentic (it [could not]be a translation), and in a rather ordinary language". Students were requested to "a) copy and paste the document (…) and indicate its source; b) highlight (…) all the elements which [reminded them] of English. Explain, at least briefly, why [they had] highlighted the elements." The eighteen students handed back a document which was then coded manually with atlas.ti to fulfil a qualitative analysis. 887 quotations were analysed. Inductive coding was used in the hope that generating codes from scratch and using the qualitative data itself would offer a more thorough analysis than deductive coding. Some codes were generated to cover the first sample; they were then applied to the next document, subject to modification when they did not match, and enriched by the creation of additional codes. The creation of new codes triggered the recoding of the samples already coded, implying an ongoing process which also attempted to prevent definitional drift. Identical occurrences were only counted once.

The coding frame included 284 codes which eventually permitted:
- language identification;
- the identification of the level of proficiency declared;
- the identification of the nature of the citation (<single word> was used to identify isolated words, separated by white space; <More than one word> was used when more than one word was highlighted; this included nouns preceded by pronouns, nouns preceded by elided prepositions (*d'explications*), nouns followed by numbers (*Numéro 1)*, phrases (*six ans; Vyé gramoun*), sentence(s) (*Their names are Grandpa Joe and Grandma Josephine*.). The code <Morpheme, word part, punctuation> was also used);
- the identification of the word(s) cited;
- the identification of the nature of the contact. A hierarchical frame was used when contacts were explicitly mentioned (top level: <explicit contact explained by student>; middle level: <grammatical structures or word order>; <phonology>; <word resemblance>; third level: <similar plural>; <word formation (construction, affix); <etymology>; <word order-adjective>…);
- the identification of similarities which were, in our opinion, questionable.

In a third step, the students formed groups according to the languages chosen and, as homework, drew a "list [of] positive and negative transfers between [the language chosen] and English". Group documents were handed back after a week, tackling the relationships between English and German (4 students), English and Spanish (5), English and Korean (1), English and Shimaore (1), English and Creole (5). The documents were subject to manual inductive coding. Thirty-nine quotations were looked at through thirty-five codes. The answers of steps two and three were then triangled.


RESULTS

*Language portraits*

The coding of the presentation posts revealed that all nineteen students mentioned English in their language biographies. Seventeen students mentioned Reunionese Creole, sixteen

mentioned French, fifteen German, fourteen Spanish, nine Japanese, six Korean, six Portuguese, six Morisyen; five Arabic, five Latin, five Mandarin; four Russian; three Haitian Creole, three Comorian, three Malagasy, three Italian, three Martinican Creole; two Ancient Greek, two Thai, two Chinese, two Polish, two Breton, two Picard. There was only one occurrence of Afrikaans, Australian, Bal, Corsican, Gaelic, Hungarian, Irish, Kanak, Kichwa, Kiswahili, Māori, Seychelles Creole, Shibushi, Shimaore, Sinhalese, Swedish, Tagalog, Urdu. The biographies comprised a total of no less than forty-two different languages. The lowest number of languages mentioned by a student was four (S16), the highest twenty-three (S2). Twelve students mentioned between four and ten languages, and seven mentioned between ten and twenty-three.

*Points of interest*

The data set revealed the importance of the notion of choice (being able to choose or not one's languages) (mentioned by seven students out of 19). It also shed light on a high number of sociolinguistic reflections on Creole and French (13/19 students) (S4: "Although a few Creole words occasionally slipped into our interactions, my parents - perhaps regrettably - preferred the national language, which they conventionally saw as superior to Creole."; S10: "At school, French became more than just a mother tongue, it was the train to take for great discoveries and the imagination."; S3: "Creole is my mother tongue, which I use mainly to communicate with my family and occasionally in the street. French is also my mother tongue, but unlike Creole, it was more widely used at school and in various institutions and businesses."). The results acknowledged translanguaging (S16: "When I'm with my close family, I tend to speak Creole, but the switch to French happens very quickly), and *mélanges* (S11: "First of all, at home and in my family circle, I very often speak Creole; but I can resort to French if a member of my family isn't used to Creole... I often mix the two without realising it."). There is also a recurrent mention of everyday exposure to language (8/19), and of the part played by music, TV series, films or social networks (15/19). A sentiment analysis showed that learning a language was associated, in varying degrees, to positive or negative experiences (S8: "I fell in love with this language"; S19: "I'd say I'm angry with Chinese"). Four students reported negative experiences, while thirteen mentioned positive sentiments. Finally, the notion of usefulness was also recurrent (5/19) (S4: "As far as Latin is concerned, it has served me well (and still does) in terms of etymology both in French and English"; S6: "Spanish has come in handy on trips to Spain and Peru", my translations).

*Nature of language contacts*

Most contacts were identified at word level since, in total, 607 single words were highlighted; 211 citations were composed of more than a word and thus evoked grammatical similarities. Eight morphemes, word parts or punctuation marks were highlighted.
When they read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in English, students found more grammatical and syntactic similarities with French Creole, German and Spanish than the other way round (exercise 4): 48.8% of the citations highlighted in exercise 1 were groups of words recalling Creole, whereas 41.9% of the citations were single words. In comparison, 10.8% of the citations highlighted in exercise 4 were groups of words recalling English, and 84.6% were single words. A similar trend was identified with German and Spanish. The number of single words identified for French largely exceeded the number of groups of words, without any major difference according to the way (English recalls French, 24.6% of groups of words, 68.8% of single words; French recalls English, 25.8% of groups of words, 73.5% of single words). Partial

explanation for such discrepancy may reside in the documents themselves, or the fact that this exercise was the last one to be done.

The students explicitly named the similarities of 50.2% of the total quotations. 31% of these explanations identified grammatical similarities. Specific mentions were made of word order, the position of adjectives, prepositions, comparative forms, similar introduction of subordinate clauses, similar structures (S4: "Elle a bien besoin d'être consolée, smilar to Be+en"), similar distinctions (S17 translated "This is Mrs Bucket" as "Unu de Monyé/Mzé Bucket" and explained "in Mahorese we also have the demonstrative pronoun 'uwo' which reminds me of the distinction of proximity between this/that"), similar negative forms (S11: "As for the construction of negation, it is also the same between both languages [English and Reunionese Creole]: V + negative marker → 'wasn't' or 'was not' is translated by 'lé pa' whereas in French the negative markers are located before and after the verb 'ne sont pas.'").

Phonology was mentioned only in 7.4% of the citations (S7: "These words are very similar in phonetics and etymology [German-English]. Ex: Töchter/daughter ; Sohn/son ; Nacht/night." (my translation); S11: "Phonetically, 'foutbol' [Creole] is 'football' and the meaning is still the same; S8: "Phonetically, to live = vivre, consonant sound /v/ similar." (my translation)).

67% of the similarities explicitly identified implied word resemblance, among which 5% referred to formation and/or affixes. Most words showed total morphological and semantic similarity ("six", "image", "large", "question"); others had partial morphological and total semantic similarities ("house"/"Haus" in German; "Family"/"familia" in Spanish; "uncomfortable"/"inconfortable" in French). Few words showed partial morphological and semantic correspondence ("histoires"/ "history"). The top ten words identified per language revealed similarities across many languages (such as "six"). Morisyen, Shimaore and Korean are excluded from the table below since only single occurrences were obtained (English recalls Morisyen: So (1); To (1); You (1); English recalls Shimaore: Family (1); Grandma (1); Grandpa (1); But (1); This (1); English recalls Korean: Mr or Mrs (1); They (1); Bed (1); He (1); the house (1)).

*Table 1 Top 10 words identified (excluding proper nouns or single occurrences); Gr=groundedness.*

| English recalls French Gr=18 | English recalls German Gr=4 | English recalls Spanish Gr=5 | English recalls Creole Gr=6 | French recalls English Gr=18 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grandma (18) | Names (4) | Family (5) | Family (4) | Excuse (18) |
| Grandpa (18) | Mother (4) | Six (3) | Six (2) | Six (16) |
| Uncomfortable (17) | Father (4) | Names (3) | Grandma (3) | Personne (15) |
| Grandparents (15) | House (3) | Uncomfortable (2) | Grandpa (3) | Jungle (15) |
| Family (13) | Old (3) | Poor (2) | Grandparents (2) | Image (13) |
| Large (11) | Six (2) | | Names (2) | Digestion (12) |
| Question (11) | Family (2) | | Question (2) | Couleur (10) |
| Six (10) | Summertime (2) | | | Numéro (9) |
| Mr or Mrs (10) | | | | Aventures (9) |
| Extremely (9) | | | | Sérieuse (8) |
| | | | | Copie (9) |

Other similarities also included sociocultural and formal items: punctuation (question marks, inverted commas), a chapter number and title, letter structure (S14: "À Léon Werth, structure similar to French, 'to whom' implies the nature of the document, an address or a letter"), title prefixing (Mr/Mrs), self-introductions (S9: "The formality of this phrase is somewhat reminiscent of French politeness in introductions"), capital letters and proper nouns (S14: "Both 'Grandpa' and 'Grandma' are quite alike their French counterparts in terms of

etymology, the fact that they're followed by a name may be relevant as well; S5: "'Mr Bucket' […] would be 'Mr. Bucket' in French too. These nouns have capital letters at the start which is similar to French and makes us understand that these are names of characters.").

*Relevance*

Although most resemblances appeared coherent, the relevance of 14.5% of the citations explicitly justified was questioned. We doubted relevance mostly when the explanations given did not seem adapted to the transfer identified, when the metalanguage used was irrelevant, or when more than two sentences were highlighted in a block, lacking precision. Without further details, we also doubted the relevance of the identification of conjunctions such as "and", "because", "but", of the French preposition "dans" (S5) or "the" and "he is" (S11).

Some students defined syntactic similarities, sometimes offering possible translations to prove the parallelism. S13 thus wrote that "This is Charlie" followed the "same *lexical structure" in French. However, if "C'est Charlie" would be grammatical, it sounds unidiomatic in this context (unsurprisingly the French translation of the book preferred "Voici Charlie").

We question the word resemblance of "people"/"demoune" (S9, Creole) (countability rather than meaning may be the source of the resemblance identified). The transparency of "old people" was also mentioned in French. However, the French use of "people" (la presse people, *People* magazine) refers to stars, news people and gossip press; it therefore has another meaning in another context.

The resemblances of "mattresses"/"matelas" (S1); "night"/"nuit" (S6); "name"/"nombre" (S9, Spanish) or "empleadas"/"employees" (S16) may be subjective since the likeness doesn't really seem to go beyond the first syllable, if not the first letter. The equivalence of "He is pleased to meet you"/"Fait longtemps pas encore vu aou" (rather: long time no see), and "better house"/"caze lontan" (S9) (rather: house of yesteryear) also seem highly questionable.

Thus, resemblance was sometimes admitted despite little formal similarities or important semantic differences.

*Language proficiency*

The four students who chose German declared A1 (2 students), A2(1) and B1(1) levels of proficiency. The six students who chose Creole: B1+(1), B2(1), C1(1), C1+(1), C2(2); the five students who chose Spanish: A1(1), A1+(1), A2(1), B1(1), B1+(1). Three students focused on Shimaore (C1-), Morisyen (A1), Korean (A1). Although the small size sample calls for precaution and hinders comparison, data analysis did not show important variations according to proficiency. Whatever the languages, similarities were identified in exercise 3 despite low levels of proficiency. It thus appears that no strong expertise is required to identify cross-linguistic similarities. The Sankey diagram below shows no divergent trends depending on proficiency.
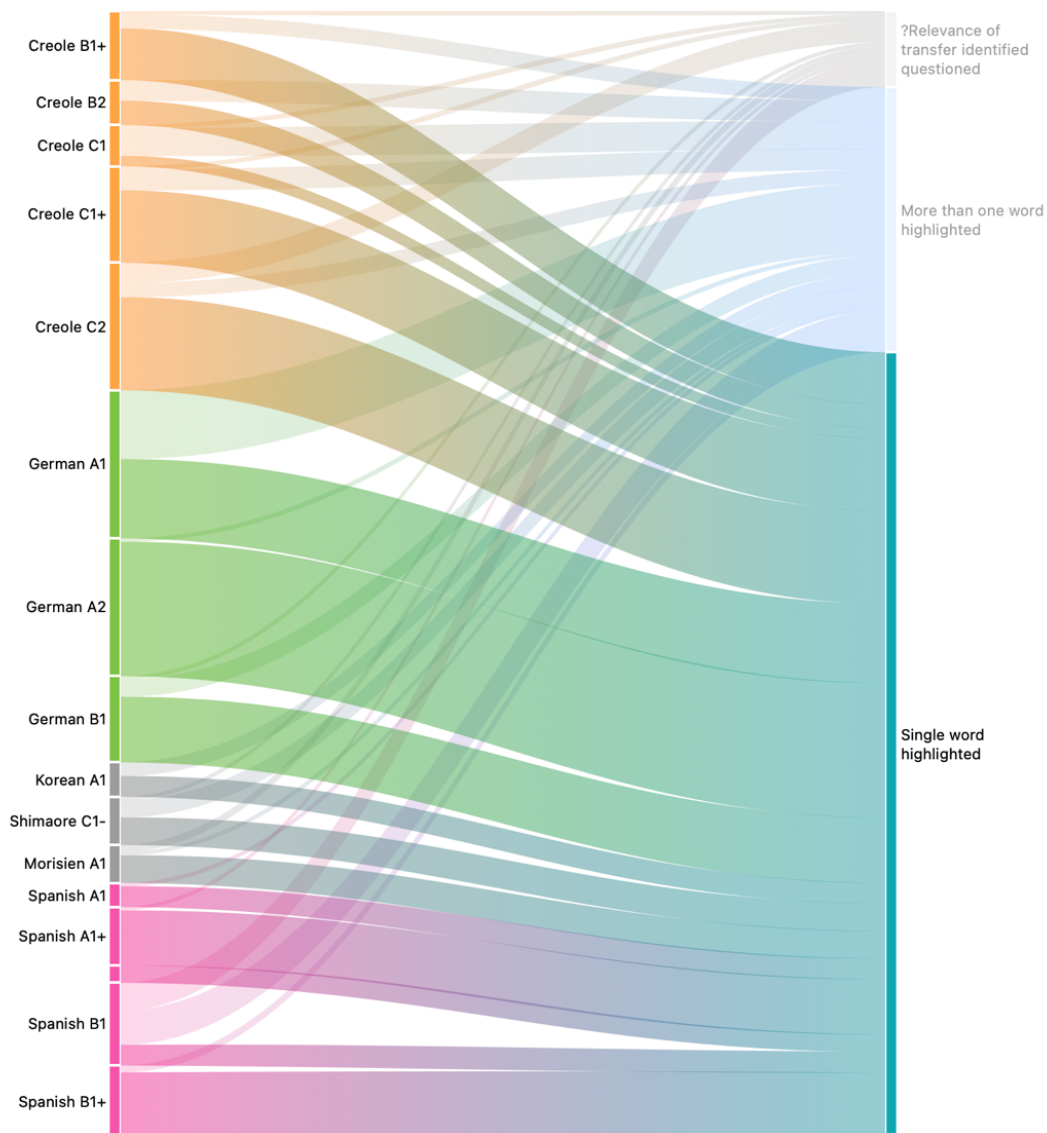
*Figure 1 Language proficiency and language contact identification in exercise 3*

## Group identification of similarities

Step three revealed that students identified slightly more positive transfers (23/39) than negative transfers (16/39). Among the positive transfers, twelve referred to grammar, eight to vocabulary, but only one to phonology; there were five grammatical negative transfers identified, eight vocabulary negative transfers and two phonological difficulties. The relevance of four items was questioned.

| | Creole ⊙ 9 | German ⊙ 9 | Korean ⊙ 5 | Shimaore ⊙ 7 | Spanish ⊙ 9 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ● ◇ 1- Negative ⊙ 16 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| ● ◇ 1- Positive ⊙ 23 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| ○ ◇ etymology/letter equivalence ⊙ 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Conjugation – tenses, aspect ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Deceptive cognates ⊙ 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Different decimal separators ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Different syntax ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Different word order ⊙ 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Gender difficulties ⊙ 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Lexical interference ⊙ 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Phonological differences ⊙ 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Specific sounds ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Negative – Very different words ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Cognates ⊙ 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Gender similarities ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – intonation useful to grasp meaning ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar comparative structure ⊙ 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar formal rules (Capitals, punctuation) ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar genitive form ⊙ 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar imperative structure ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar impersonal structure ⊙ 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar possessive adjectives ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar pronouns ⊙ 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar quantifiers ⊙ 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar structure – infinitive form ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar syntax ⊙ 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Similar use of particles and prepositions ⊙ 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Word formation, inference possible ⊙ 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| ● ◇ Positive – Word resemblance ⊙ 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| ○ ◇ Relevance questioned ⊙ 4 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

*Figure 2 Step 3 Transfer identification - group work*

DISCUSSION

The previous results offer avenues for discussion. We would like to draw attention to three noteworthy points.

First, the students showed multilingual awareness (S11: "I'm passionate about discovering and learning new languages, and today I realise that I've already been in contact with many languages thanks to this language biography."; S19 called themself "a silent polyglot"). The linguistic profiles of pre-service English teachers in Reunion Island are remarkably plurilingual; although this was expected, the number of forty-two languages mentioned by nineteen students exceeded all predictions. Some pre-service teachers appeared to be true language lovers while others mentioned languages, such as Kichwa, we would not have guessed. The unapparent, sometimes hidden, knowledge of languages of pre-service teachers, and by extension students, should therefore not be underestimated. Most participants declared they had a relatively high level of proficiency in Reunionese Creole. With hindsight, we question the relevance of differentiating Creole and French similarities. Considering the

proximity between the two languages, some English items could merely recall French as well as Creole. Yet, the data collected through the testimonies confirmed that the students appeared cognizant of the presence of *mélanges*. It also shed light on the impact of language colonial history, of representations, and on different personal viewpoints as far as the regional language is concerned. Multilingual awareness was associated to the awareness of the incidence of psychological factors on language learning. Many language portraits mentioned the usefulness of languages as well as pleasant or negative experiences.

Second, the data showed that a lot of cross-linguistic contacts were perceived; alas, it also confirmed that the relevance of the connections was at times questionable. Further research is needed to confirm it, yet this suggests that the identification of similarities may sometimes be replaced by less grounded assumptions.

While some focused merely on transparent words, others offered detailed analyses and fine distinctions to appreciate connections. It seems students successfully apprehended positive transfers, and identified more positive transfers than negative ones. Likeness stretched across different domains; it would be erroneous to consider that word resemblance only is spotted. In fact, a high number of grammatical connections were identified, with related and unrelated languages. The little mention of phonology probably stems from the fact that written documents were used; results would have probably been entirely different had the students been asked to perform listening tasks.

Yet, some missed even the most transparent words: eight students missed the connection between the English and French words "six"; five did not identify any French connection for "family" (family/famille); and six for "large" (large/large). Some similarities may have been quickly defined, hence the subtle difference between "histoires" (stories) and "history" was not mentioned. Inversely, some similarities were mentioned despite important semantic difference: the "case lontan" (house of yesteryear)/"better house" example mentioned above seems to illustrate a dire need to find resemblance. Two words that sometimes go together in a language were associated, yet the cross-linguistic association thus made bore little similarity. Unsurprisingly, the usual risks of inference strategies may arise when one tries to find associations, and risks takers may draw conclusions despite little proof.

Third, it seems that observing is not easy, and neither is making connections. If analysing and grouping are no innate skills, they need to be developed, maybe through explicit instruction. A flimsy use of metalanguage terminology also led at times to confusion. At this point, the only firm recommendation that can be given in terms of training and pedagogy is that, as is often the case with education, there is no turnkey solution. Whatever the direction, precautions need to be taken, and in-depth needs analyses are required. Identifying cross-linguistic similarities to nurture them in the classroom is a process which implies many steps, and defects may occur at all levels: pre-service teachers first need to have some knowledge of the languages; to have observation skills; the ability to make connections and to describe connections using adequate metalanguage.

CONCLUSION

Since all learners rely on similarities, and for all the reasons evoked above, acknowledging and discussing connections appear as necessities to facilitate language learning and empower learners. However, acknowledging similarities or wanting to nurture them is not enough. Teachers seem to encounter practical difficulties first to identify them, and probably also to integrate them within the classroom. If plurilingualism is to be encouraged, the objective should

then be two-fold: teachers need to be convinced of its benefits—which to some extent relies on the perception of cross-linguistic similarities, and teachers need to be accompanied to integrate its teaching. This calls for the endorsement of more action-research projects.

We have here suggested that proficiency in all languages was not required to identify cross-linguistic similarities. Acknowledging the presence of a plurilingual repertoire may raise fears, some are afraid the language teacher could become a Jack of all trades, the master of none. Rather, reflective skills and an awareness of similarities and differences are needed. This does not compromise on in-depth language teaching. Standing at a linguistic crossroads, the English as a Foreign Language teacher is in a prime location to look at multilingualism from a positive perspective.

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