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Cross-Linguistic Phonological Errors in French Vowel Production among Tamil-Speaking Learners with English as a Second Language

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Abstract This study investigates cross-linguistic phonological errors in the production of French oral vowels among Tamil-speaking undergraduate learners, with English as their second language. The research focuses on identifying pronunciation challenges influenced by the learners' mother tongue (Tamil) and prior exposure to English. Twenty second-year undergraduate students, each with a minimum of 120 hours of formal French instruction, participated in the study. Their pronunciation skills were assessed through a reading test, with each participant recorded for ten minutes. These recordings were systematically analysed to identify phonological errors resulting from cross-linguistic interference. The findings reveal frequent vowel mispronunciations attributable to phonemic differences across Tamil, English, and French. Based on the analysis, pedagogical strategies are proposed to help learners improve their phonetic accuracy and oral proficiency. The study underscores the importance of developing phonological awareness to overcome cross-linguistic barriers in French language acquisition among Indian learners.

Keywords Cross-linguistic influence; phonological errors; oral vowels; Tamil-speaking learners; French pronunciation; multilingual acquisition; phonetic interference

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1. Introduction

India's linguistic landscape is characterised by its remarkable diversity, with 22 officially recognised languages and a multitude of dialects spoken across the subcontinent. Multilingualism is a common phenomenon, as individuals frequently acquire and use multiple languages in their daily interactions. Among these, English plays a pivotal role as an official language, a medium of instruction in educational institutions, and a lingua franca facilitating communication across different states. Given the growing demands of globalisation and international mobility, there is an increasing interest in learning additional European languages, particularly French, to enhance academic and professional opportunities.

This study focuses on the multilingual context of Tamil Nadu, a South Indian state where Tamil serves as the mother tongue (L1), English is the second language (L2), and French is learned as a foreign language (L3). Tamil, a Dravidian language with an extensive literary and cultural heritage, contrasts significantly with English, a Germanic language introduced through British colonial rule. French, a Romance language of the Indo-European family, is widely studied in Tamil Nadu as an optional subject in schools and higher education institutions. However, despite the structured learning of French, many learners struggle to attain the linguistic competencies outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). One of the major challenges in third language acquisition (TLA) cross-linguistic transfer, where knowledge of previously acquired languages influences the learning of a new language.

Recent research in multilingualism and TLA has explored cross-linguistic influences and interlanguage phenomena, yet there remains a significant gap in studies examining the impact of Tamil (L1) and English (L2) on French (L3) acquisition. While much work has been done on the influence of Tamil on English, research on phonological cross-linguistic interference in French learning among Tamil speakers is limited. This study aims to address this gap by investigating phonological errors, particularly in the production of oral vowels, among Tamil-speaking learners of French who have prior exposure to English.

To achieve this objective, a group of undergraduate students who had completed at least 120 hours of French instruction participated in a pronunciation assessment. Their oral production was recorded and analysed to identify recurrent phonological errors and determine whether these errors stem from their mother tongue (Tamil) or their second language (English). The key research questions guiding this study are:

- Do Tamil-speaking learners of French exhibit recurring patterns of phonological errors in oral vowel production?
- Are these errors influenced by cross-linguistic transfer from Tamil (L1) or English (L2)?
- What pedagogical strategies can be implemented to mitigate these pronunciation difficulties?

Given the growing relevance of multilingual competence in the contemporary globalised world, understanding the phonological challenges faced by Tamil-speaking learners of French can contribute to the development of effective instructional strategies. By addressing the impact of cross-linguistic influence on pronunciation, this study seeks to enhance phonetic accuracy and overall oral proficiency in the French language classroom.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Third Language Acquisition and Cross-Linguistic Influence

Third Language Acquisition (TLA) is a growing field in language didactics that examines how multilingual learners use prior linguistic knowledge to acquire a new language. Unlike Second Language Acquisition (SLA), TLA involves complex cognitive and structural interactions between multiple languages (Cenoz, 2001; Otwinowska, 2023). According to Cenoz (2003), TLA refers to "the acquisition of a non-native language by learners who have previously acquired or are acquiring two other languages," either simultaneously or consecutively.

A central aspect of TLA is cross-linguistic influence (CLI), which explores the interaction between languages in a multilingual mind. Researchers have conceptualised CLI using terms such as "transfer" (Odlin, 1989) and "language mixing" (Selinker, 1972). Transfer can be positive, facilitating learning through shared linguistic features, or negative, leading to errors such as false cognates. Kellerman and Sharwood (1986) introduced the neutral term 'cross-linguistic influence' to describe how previously acquired languages influence later ones across lexical, semantic, phonological, and morpho-syntactic domains.

2.2 Phonological Transfer in Third Language Acquisition

TLA research has increasingly focused on phonological learning, which differs from L2 acquisition due to the dynamic interplay of multiple linguistic systems (Cenoz et al., 2001; Flynn et al., 2004). Studies highlight that phonological acquisition in an L3 is influenced by both L1 and L2, sometimes with mutual reinforcement or selective influence (Cenoz, 2001; Jessner, 2006; Wrembel, 2010). This phenomenon, termed "translinguistic transfer," explains how phonetic features from different languages interact in L3 pronunciation (De Angelis, 2007).

2.3 Typological Distance and Phonological Transfer

The extent of cross-linguistic transfer depends on the typological proximity between L1, L2, and L3 (Kellerman, 1983,). French (L3) and English (L2) both belong to the Indo-European language family, whereas Tamil (L1) belongs to the Dravidian family, making French typologically distant from Tamil. Research suggests that when acquiring an Indo-European L3, learners often rely on their knowledge of L2 (Singh & Carroll, 1979). English, despite being a Germanic language, shares significant lexical influences with French due to historical contact (Dewaele, 1998), leading Tamil-speaking learners to transfer phonetic elements from English to French.

2.4 Models of Phonological Transfer

Several theoretical models explain phonological transfer in multilingual learners. The Revised Speech Learning Model (Flege & Bohn, 2021) and the Perceptual Assimilation Model-L2 (Best & Tyler, 2007) highlight how phonological perception is shaped by previously acquired languages. According to these models, learners categorise new phonemes based on their existing phonetic inventory, often leading to pronunciation errors.

Wrembel (2011) examined phonological transfer in Polish (L1), English (L2), and French (L3) learners, finding that L3 phonology is influenced by a combination of L1 and L2. Similar patterns have been observed in multilingual learners of German and French, where voice onset time (VOT) values fall between the phonetic structures of prior languages (Wrembel, 2014, 2015). These studies suggest that L3 phonological acquisition involves restructuring the phonetic space rather than simply transferring features from a single source.

The Linguistic Proximity Model (LPM) (Westergaard et al., 2017) proposes that phonological transfer depends on the structural similarities between L1, L2, and L3. When L2 and L3 share phonetic features, positive transfer can facilitate learning. Conversely, when L3 phonology differs significantly from both L1 and L2, negative transfer effects emerge, reinforcing pronunciation errors.

2.5 Phonological Challenges for Tamil-Speaking Learners of French

Applying these frameworks to Tamil-speaking learners of French, it is evident that their L3 phonological acquisition is influenced by both Tamil (L1) and English (L2). Tamil lacks several phonemic distinctions found in French, particularly in oral and nasal vowels. Additionally, English phonetic patterns, such as diphthongisation and vowel lengthening, interfere with French pronunciation. Because both Tamil and English contain different phonemes, Tamil-speaking learners tend to replace French vowels illustrating negative transfer.

Studies on L3 phonology suggest that multilingual learners restructure their phonetic categories to accommodate new linguistic input (Wrembel, 2015). However, the degree of restructuring depends on the learner's exposure, proficiency, and phonetic awareness (Byram & Hu, 2013). Understanding these cross-linguistic phonological errors can aid in developing targeted pedagogical strategies, including phonetic training and auditory discrimination exercises, to enhance French pronunciation among Tamil-speaking learners.

In summary, research confirms that previously acquired languages play a crucial role in L3 phonological acquisition. While English serves as a bridge language for Tamil speakers learning French, it also introduces phonetic interferences. Addressing these challenges through tailored instructional strategies can significantly improve phonetic accuracy and oral proficiency in French classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study involved twenty second-year undergraduate students who had completed at least 120 hours of formal French instruction. These participants had attained the DELF A1 level and were currently studying at the DELF A2

level. Their linguistic backgrounds included Tamil as their mother tongue (L1) and English as their second language (L2).

3.2 Procedure

To analyse cross-linguistic phonological errors, participants were given a structured reading task consisting of selected French words and sentences featuring oral vowels. Each participant was required to read aloud the given text while their pronunciation was recorded. The recording process lasted ten minutes per participant, ensuring sufficient data for phonological analysis.

The study was conducted over the months of August and September 2024. The collected recordings were systematically examined to identify phonemic deviations, substitution patterns, and interference effects from Tamil and English.

The analysis was carried out using phonetic transcription and auditory assessment methods. Errors were classified based on recurring patterns of cross-linguistic interference. The findings were then used to formulate pedagogical recommendations aimed at improving phonetic accuracy among Tamil-speaking learners of French.

4. Observation

The following observations are the recorded data scrutinised and documented based on the subjects' reading of the French words and phrases. The observations are made for the pronunciation of selected vowels. The study identifies common phonetic errors among Tamil-speaking learners of French with English as their second language. The findings reveal recurring phonetic challenges influenced by the learners' native phonetic inventory and English pronunciation patterns.

/i/

Table 1

S.No	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation	Observed Pronunciation
1	/i/	isoler	/i.zɔ.le/	/aɪsɔle/
2	/i/	psychologie	/psikɔlɔʒi/	/saɪkɔlɔʒi/
3	/i/	cuisine	/kɥizin/	/kuizin/
4	/i/	puis	/pɥi/	/pui/

The study indicates that learners faced difficulties in accurately pronouncing the French phoneme /i/. A notable pattern emerged when /i/ was preceded by /y/, resulting in the glide /ɥi/ in French, as seen in words like *cuisine* (/kɥizin/) and *puis* (/pɥi/). Learners substituted this glide with /u/, leading to pronunciations like /kuizin/ and /pui/. Additionally, orthographic interference from English influenced the pronunciation of /i/, particularly in words like *isoler* and *psychologie*, where learners pronounced them with an English-influenced diphthongization (/aɪsɔle/, /saɪkɔlɔʒi/).

/y/

Table 2

S.No	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation	Observed Pronunciation
1	/y/	une	[yn]	[jun]
2	/y/	lune	[lyn]	[luːn]
3	/y/	rue	[ʁy]	[ʁui]
4	/y/	vu	[vy]	[ʋju]
5	/y/	unique	[ynik]	[juːniːk]

The observations reveal that learners frequently struggled with the pronunciation of the French phoneme /y/, primarily replacing it with /u/. This substitution occurred because /y/, a front rounded vowel, does not exist in either Tamil or English, leading learners to approximate it with the more familiar /u/, as seen in *lune* (/lyn/ →

/luːn/). Additionally, in word-initial positions, /y/ was sometimes pronounced as [j] due to English influence, as in *unique* (/ynik/ → /juːniːk/). This pattern suggests segmental mismatching, where learners disregarded the fronted nature of /y/ and replaced it with /u/ based on English pronunciation tendencies.

/e/

Table 3

S.No	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation	Observed Pronunciation
1	/e/	ainé(e)	[ene]	[eɪne]
2	/e/	aider	[ede]	[eɪde]
3	/e/	aimer	[eme]	[eɪme]

The observations indicate that learners often diphthongised the French monophthong /e/ to [eɪ], influenced by English pronunciation patterns. This phonetic adaptation suggests an overgeneralisation of English orthographic conventions, where vowels followed by the letter "i" frequently create diphthongs. As a result, words such as *ainé* (/ene/) and *aider* (/ede/) were mispronounced as /eɪne/ and /eɪde/, respectively. Furthermore, learners misread the graphemes /ai/ and /aie/ as /ai/ instead of the correct /e/, reinforcing these pronunciation errors.

/ɔ/

Table 4

S. No.	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation (French)	Observed Pronunciation (English Influence)
1	/ɔ/	pomme	[pɔm]	[pom]
2	/ɔ/	école	[ekɔl]	[ekol]
3	/ɔ/	encore	[ɑ̃kɔʁ]	[ɑnkoʁ]
4	/ɔ/	album	[albɔm]	[albam]
5	/ɔ/	maximum	[maksimɔm]	[maksimam]

The observations reveal that learners frequently replace the open-mid back rounded vowel /ɔ/ with /o/ and /a/, influenced by both spelling conventions and the phonetic structures of their native and second languages. This vowel shift results in a higher and more closed articulation, as seen in words like *pomme* (/pɔm/ → /pom/) and *école* (/ekɔl/ → /ekol/). The influence of spelling further reinforces this substitution, as learners tend to pronounce the letter "o" as /o/, following familiar orthographic patterns. Additionally, English lacks a strict distinction between /ɔ/ and /o/, leading learners to approximate the pronunciation based on their existing phonetic knowledge. In some cases, as in *album* and *maximum*, the vowel is replaced with /a/, suggesting further misinterpretation of French vowel quality. These systematic substitutions highlight the challenges learners face in accurately perceiving and reproducing the French /ɔ/ sound.

/œ/

Table 5

S. No.	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation (French)	Observed Pronunciation
1	/œ/	heure	[œʁ]	[ɛʁ]
2	/œ/	jeune	[ʒœn]	[ʒɛn]
3	/œ/	sœur	[sœʁ]	[sɛʁ]
4	/œ/	seul	[sœl]	[sɛl]
5	/œ/	œuvre	[œvʁ]	[ɛvɹ]

The observations from the table highlight that learners systematically replace the French open-mid front rounded vowel /œ/ with the unrounded vowel /ɛ/. This substitution occurs because /œ/ is absent in both English and Tamil phonetic inventories, leading learners to approximate it using a more familiar sound. Words such as *heure* (/œʁ/)

and *jeune* (/ʒœn/) are mispronounced as /ɛʁ/ and /ʒɛn/, respectively. Spelling interference also plays a role, as the French grapheme "eu" is often misread based on English reading habits, reinforcing the replacement of /œ/ with /ɛ/. Additionally, since English lacks a direct equivalent to /œ/, learners simplify its pronunciation by choosing a known vowel. The absence of lip rounding further contributes to this substitution, as learners are not accustomed to producing rounded front vowels.

/ɛ/

Table 6

S. No.	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation (French)	Observed Pronunciation
1	/ɛ/	chaise	[ʃɛz]	[ʃeɪz]
2	/ɛ/	air	[ɛʁ]	[eɪʁ]
3	/ɛ/	chaîne	[ʃɛn]	[ʃeɪn]
4	/ɛ/	paraître	[paʁɛtʁ]	[paʁeɪtʁ]

The observations from the table indicate that learners frequently replace the open-mid front unrounded vowel /ɛ/ with the close-mid front unrounded vowel /e/, reflecting a phonetic influence from their native languages, where this distinction does not exist. This results in pronunciations such as *chaise* (/ʃɛz/ → /ʃeɪz/) and *air* (/ɛʁ/ → /eɪʁ/), where English diphthongisation further alters the pronunciation. The influence of English phonetics is particularly evident in the insertion of the diphthong /eɪ/, leading to systematic mispronunciations. Additionally, it is worth noting that in contemporary French, the distinction between /e/ and /ɛ/ in stressed open syllables is gradually disappearing among native speakers, which may further contribute to learners' difficulties in acquiring this contrast.

/a/

Table 7

S. No.	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation (French)	Observed Pronunciation
1	/a/	femmes	[fam]	[fem]
2	/a/	camarade	[kamɑʁad]	[kameʁad]
3	/a/	Canada	[kanada]	[kaneda]

The observations from the table reveal that learners often replace the French vowel /a/ with /e/, primarily due to the influence of English spelling and pronunciation rules. This substitution is evident in words like *femmes* (/fam/ → /fem/) and *Canada* (/kanada/ → /kaneda/), where learners misinterpret the letter "a" as /e/ based on English orthographic patterns. The divergence between French and English vowel correspondences leads to confusion, causing learners to apply familiar pronunciation rules incorrectly. Additionally, since French orthography does not always align with pronunciation in a way that matches learners' native language expectations, they may instinctively opt for sounds that seem more natural to them. This pattern highlights the role of orthographic interference in pronunciation difficulties when acquiring French vowel sounds.

/ə/

Table 8

S. No.	Phoneme	Word	Actual Pronunciation (French)	Observed Pronunciation (Learners)
1	/ə/	Besoin	/bəzwɛ̃/	/bezwɛ̃/
2	/ə/	Demain	/də.mɛ̃/	/de.mɛ̃/
3	/ə/	Vendredi	/vɑ̃.dʁə.di/	/vɑ̃.dʁe.di/
4	/ə/	Fenêtre	/fənɛtʁ/	/fenɛtʁ/
5	/ə/	Revenir	/ʁəvəniʁ/	/ʁevəniʁ/

The observations indicate that learners frequently substitute the French schwa /ə/ with the vowel /e/, as seen in words like *besoin* (/bəzwɛ̃/ → /bezwɛ̃/) and *fenêtre* (/fənɛtʁ/ → /fenɛtʁ/). This substitution occurs because /ə/ does not exist as a distinct phoneme in the learners' linguistic repertoire leading them to replace it with a more familiar

vowel. English-speaking learners, in particular, tend to map /ə/ to /e/ or omit it altogether, influenced by English phonetic patterns, where unstressed vowels often become schwa or disappear in rapid speech. The neutral *e* (*e caduc* or *e muet*) in French presents additional challenges, as its pronunciation varies depending on linguistic and regional factors. While it may be retained to prevent the clustering of three consonants or for clarity in certain accents, it is frequently omitted in casual speech. This instability makes it difficult for learners to determine when to pronounce or drop /ə/, leading to inconsistent pronunciations and further pronunciation errors.

5. Analysis and Classroom implications

The study highlights the challenges Tamil-speaking learners face in acquiring accurate French pronunciation. Common errors arise from diphthongisation, substitution of unfamiliar vowels with phonetically closer ones, and interference from English spelling conventions. Targeted phonetic training can significantly enhance pronunciation accuracy and help overcome cross-linguistic influences.

While some vowels posed no difficulty due to their presence in Tamil and English, significant challenges were observed with French vowels that lack direct equivalents in these languages. Notably, 80% of the participants struggled to distinguish between the following phonemic pairs:

- /ɥ/ and /u/
- /ɔ/ and /o/
- /ɛ/ and /e/
- /œ/ and /ɛ/
- /y/ and /u/

Learners frequently substituted unfamiliar French vowels with the closest available phoneme in their linguistic repertoire. This phonemic substitution stems from the absence of corresponding vowel sounds in Tamil and the influence of English phonology. Additionally, Tamil lacks reduced vowels and certain rounded vowels found in French, prompting learners to approximate these sounds using familiar alternatives.

English orthographic rules also exerted considerable influence, leading learners to pronounce words based on English spelling rather than French phonetic conventions. This interference resulted in systematic mispronunciations, particularly in cases where French graphemes differ in pronunciation from their English counterparts. During the reading-aloud task, participants mispronounced several graphemes and digraphs, reinforcing the impact of English orthographic influence.

A key challenge was the complexity of French grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences. Unlike English, where spelling inconsistencies are frequent but familiar to learners, French employs a variety of graphemes and diacritical markers to represent distinct vowel sounds. A single phoneme in French can correspond to multiple graphemes, causing confusion. Moreover, the same graphemes may represent different sounds in English, further complicating pronunciation.

The phonological errors observed underscore the impact of cross-linguistic influence from both Tamil and English on learners' oral vowel production in French. These findings highlight the need for structured phonetic instruction, including explicit training in vowel distinction and articulation. Phonetic drills, auditory discrimination exercises, and articulatory practice can help Tamil-speaking learners overcome pronunciation difficulties and achieve greater accuracy in spoken French.

6. Conclusion

This study confirms that Tamil-speaking learners of French exhibit systematic phonological errors influenced by both Tamil and English, with English exerting a stronger impact due to its typological similarities with French and its dominant role in education. Learners often apply English phonological and orthographic rules, leading to pronunciation errors, while Tamil influences articulatory habits. These findings highlight the significance of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) in multilingual acquisition, demonstrating that learners rely on familiar linguistic systems when acquiring an additional language.

To improve pronunciation, targeted phonetic instruction should integrate explicit phonology training, minimal pair exercises, auditory discrimination tasks, and audiovisual resources. A multilingual approach that considers learners' linguistic backgrounds and provides corrective strategies can enhance phonetic accuracy and oral proficiency.

Future research could explore advanced phonetic training programmes tailored to multilingual learners, assess its impact on pronunciation, and expand the study to a larger sample with detailed linguistic proficiency evaluations. These insights are valuable for linguists, educators, and curriculum designers in developing effective teaching strategies while promoting multilingualism.

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