

A Blooming Mind Speaks Many Languages: Turning Multilingualism Into a Superpower in the EFL Classroom

Vladislava-Mónika Radicević  and Tijana Zdravković 

https://doi.org/10.21862/tesol-hun/2026_7_radicevic_zdravkovic

Introduction

Over many years of studying and teaching foreign languages (in this case, specifically French and Hungarian to Serbian L1 students in bilingual Vojvodina), we have observed that language learning is most effective when it is not approached in isolation, but rather within a broader cultural and social framework. Our experience has shown that linguistic competence develops more fully when learners are exposed to the cultural contexts in which a language functions. In this regard, English, as a global language, provides broad access to international educational resources and intercultural communication, thereby supporting learners' understanding of diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

The starting point for our reflection was the idea that English can be viewed as a “bridge” between languages as it is spoken worldwide and functions as a universally accepted, tacit agreement. English is commonly used as a *lingua franca*, which is defined as “a language adopted by speakers whose native languages are different” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015, as cited in Barančicová & Zerzová, 2015, p. 31).

This perspective inspired us to reflect on our own classroom practice. We became aware that, on numerous occasions, we had unconsciously used interlinguistic connections—that is, learners' knowledge of one language to support the learning of another—to facilitate language acquisition among learners from diverse social backgrounds and age groups. From primary and secondary school students to adult learners, this approach proved to be effective in supporting the learning process.

English as an Intermediary Language

We explored two ways in which English can be used as an intermediary language in foreign language classes (French and Hungarian, in this case): **code-switching** and **language transfer**.

In linguistics, it is widely acknowledged that **code-switching**, or language alternation, occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversation or communicative situation. In the classroom context, code-switching often occurs when the teacher aims to clarify meaning and provide explanations more efficiently, or to ensure that learners have fully understood the content. This practice is particularly common at lower proficiency levels, where students' knowledge of the target language is still limited. In such cases, code-switching serves a clear pedagogical purpose, especially in the explanation of grammatical concepts (Rengur et al., 2023).

Language transfer, on the other hand, refers to the process by which learners apply previously acquired linguistic knowledge and skills from one language to another. Transfer can occur from a learner's first language (L1) to a second language (L2), or even between two additional languages. There are two types of language transfer: **positive** and **negative**, both of which are natural and expected phenomena in the language learning process and may occur within the same classroom (Odlin, 1989).

Negative transfer occurs when a learner applies a structure from their mother tongue or from a more familiar foreign language, resulting in an error. For example, in English, age is expressed using the verb “to be” (e.g., “*I’m 34 years old*”). Transferring this structure directly into French leads to an incorrect form as French uses the verb “avoir” (e.g., “*J’ai 34 ans*”).

Positive transfer, however, occurs when similarities between languages facilitate learning. This can be observed, for instance, in word order. English and French share a similar subject–verb–object sentence structure, which can support learners in forming correct sentences. This is not the case in Hungarian, whose syntactic structure differs significantly, making transfer less straightforward.

English–Hungarian Positive Transfer

Hungarian may be regarded as a challenging language to learn, a view sometimes shared even by native speakers. Learners frequently encounter difficulties when grappling with Hungarian grammatical rules, which can initially result in confusion and cognitive overload. However, our classroom observations indicate that learners of Hungarian tend to experience greater clarity and relief when certain grammatical constructions are explained not through the framework of their first language, but by drawing on structures from English.

One contributing factor to this is that many adult learners do not possess explicit or well-developed knowledge of the grammar of their native languages. This may be the result of extended periods away from the schooling system. When English is used as a reference language, it often creates a sense of familiarity and shared knowledge. This, in turn, can reduce anxiety and support more efficient grammatical processing and acquisition.

This comparative approach appears to be particularly effective in cases where Hungarian grammatical structures lack clear equivalents in the learners’ native languages.

The following examples highlight grammatical phenomena for which explanations based on English constructions can facilitate understanding and accelerate learning. Some of the most frequently used grammatical constructions that can be explained more effectively through reference to English include the following examples:

- **possessive constructions** (e.g., “az enyém” – “mine”), where possession is more transparently explained through possessive pronouns in English;
- the use of “**(nem) túl**”, which closely corresponds to the English adverb “too”;
- the verbs “**van**”/“**nincs**” in descriptive sentences, which can be clarified through comparison with the English “there is”/“there isn’t” structure;
- the future markers “**majd**” and “**fog**”, which align well with the distinction between “going to” (intention) and “will” (predictions) in English;
- the use of **definite and indefinite articles**, where English provides a clear and familiar reference system for learners.

These examples illustrate how English can serve as an effective mediating language when introducing Hungarian grammatical concepts that lack direct equivalents in the learners’ native languages.

English–French Positive Transfer

In terms of good classroom practice, English may support the process of learning French. Many of the similarities between the two languages exist due to their shared history. We believe that this comparative approach can be particularly helpful in several areas such as:

- **Dates** – “le 5 octobre” = “the 5th of October”. In both languages, we use a definite article (i.e., “le”/“the”) before the date.

- ***Futur proche versus futur simple*** – *Futur proche* often corresponds to “going to”, while *futur simple* corresponds to “will”.
- **Modal and phrasal verbs** – The modal + infinitive structure works similarly in both languages. For example: “I can sing”. = “Je peux chanter”. This similarity can facilitate the learning process.
- **Definite and indefinite articles** – The usage and differentiation of articles are largely similar in both languages.
- **Cognates** – Cognates are words in different languages that share a similar form and meaning, for example: “nation” = “nation”, “information” = “information”.
- **Grammar comparisons (SVO order)** – As mentioned previously, both languages use a similar Subject–Verb–Object word order. For example: “I visited France last year”. = “J’ai visité la France l’année dernière”. This similarity can be used to learners’ advantage.

English–French Negative Transfer

However, there are some pitfalls to avoid when comparing French and English. Their similarities can sometimes be misleading and may result in misunderstandings or embarrassing situations. We find that it is important to highlight a few potential dangers:

- **False friends** – Many words look and sound similar but have different meanings. These are called false friends. For example, “actually” in English means “in fact”, whereas “actuellement” in French means “at the moment”. We strongly recommend checking the meaning of false friends, no matter how similar they appear.
- **Relying too heavily on English** – In our experience, some students who are native English speakers or have a very high level of English (C1–C2) tend to

depend too much on English when learning French. While it can be encouraging to see English support learning, relying solely on one language creates a one-way street and may limit true mastery of French.

- **Assuming similarity equals ease** – Sometimes, when students feel that learning is going smoothly, it may actually indicate potential pitfalls. There are many exceptions in French and even exceptions to these exceptions. We advise double-checking structures before internalising them. Similarity does not necessarily mean simplicity; learning something incorrectly can lead to fossilised errors that are difficult to correct later.
- **Ignoring French sounds** – French phonology includes sounds that do not exist in Serbian, Hungarian, or English. Our speech apparatus is not naturally adapted to these sounds, so consistent practice is essential. Ignoring them will result in pronunciation that sounds “off” to native speakers.
- **Underestimating cultural context** – Language learning always comes with cultural context. It is crucial to understand the norms, gestures, and nonverbal communication patterns of French culture. Differences between French and English in this regard are significant and should not be overlooked.

While overcoming these comparative challenges requires careful attention, the broader cognitive and cultural benefits of early multilingual exposure can be enriching, outweighing the risks of temporary confusion.

Conclusion

Building on the discussion of cultural interconnectedness between the languages taught, it is important to note that the historical relationship between Hungarian and English is minimal. However, the broader sociolinguistic context plays a far more significant role in

the teaching of these two languages. We work in Vojvodina, which—as part of the former Yugoslavia and the wider Balkan region—represents one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse areas in Europe. In such an environment, bilingual and even trilingual families are a natural and long-established phenomenon.

Growing up in a multilingual setting fosters an early and almost intuitive openness to language learning. Within this context, English has emerged as a universal means of communication, and its acquisition is rarely perceived as a cultural or psychological barrier. Rather, it is approached as a familiar and accessible linguistic resource.

All this having been said, multilingualism—which we try to foster both in our classrooms and in our private lives—matters more today than ever before. It should be seen as an asset rather than an interference. No one can speak too many languages, and as the saying goes, “we live a new life for every language we speak”. Viewed from this perspective, multilingualism becomes a powerful tool: It opens doors, creates opportunities, and enriches our lives. It encourages empowerment, connection, and, most importantly, the personal growth of individuals—a topic that was also highlighted at the 2025 TESOL-Hungary Conference in Siófok, Hungary.

Multilingualism can foster academic and professional growth as knowledge of foreign languages can facilitate working abroad, changing careers, or improving overall quality of life. This, in turn, leads to social and cultural enrichment: We gain new experiences and meet interesting and inspiring people whom we might never have encountered otherwise. Finally, multilingualism also benefits cognitive health. Research shows that bilingualism might even delay the onset of dementia (Alladi et al., 2013).

In our classrooms, we strive to impart the multilingualism mindset and perspective, and we strongly encourage educators to adopt this goal with their own students as well.

References

- Alladi, S., Bak, T. H., Duggirala, V., Surampudi, B., Shailaja, M., Shukla, A. K., Chaudhuri, J. R., & Kaul, S. (2013). Bilingualism delays age at onset of dementia, independent of education and immigration status. *Neurology*, 81(22), 1938–1944.
<https://doi.org/10.1212/01.wnl.0000436620.33155.a4>
- Barančicová, J., & Zerzová, J. (2015). English as a lingua franca used at international meetings. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, 3(3), 30–51.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/jolace-2015-0018>
- Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524537>
- Rengur, Z. A., Putri, P. A., Fatima, F., Mansur, N., Zulfikri, Z., Kuliahana, A., & Fatimawali, F. (2023). Code-switching in EFL classrooms: A tool for comprehension or a hindrance in fluency. *Datokarama English Education Journal*, 6(1), 68–78.
<https://doi.org/10.24239/dee.v6i1.121>