



## KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH CAUSES SOME CONFUSION TO BEGINNERS IN FRENCH

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### Abstract

Previous knowledge of English poses some problems to the beginners in French. Even a short rapid comparison between English grammar and that of French has allowed us to establish that the knowledge of English grammar becomes a stumbling block in the learning of French grammar. Beginning with the comparison of the articles, we have dealt with the method of contractions, capitalisation of letters, negative expressions, tenses, sound system, including vowels and consonants, vocabulary etc. of French and English.

**Keywords:** Definite/indefinite/partitive articles, contractions, capitalise, negative expressions, positive sentences, passé composé and imparfait

The teaching of French at Punjab Agricultural University began way back in 1965 when a proficiency course in French was introduced for the PhD students and for the teachers of this premier institution. A provision in the admission rules also allowed the residents of the city to enroll for this course. This course attracted a good number of students of the university and from the city and the number of seats had to be increased from time to time by the university authorities. With the passage of time, the French course became more and more popular amongst the students and certificate and diploma courses in this major European language were added to the foreign language teaching in our university, well known for bringing about Green Revolution in India.

Most of the students who come to learn French at our university have already learnt two or three languages earlier, notably English which is thought to be a language of national unity and international understanding. It has been noticed that the previous knowledge of English poses some problems in the process of learning French. Even a short rapid comparison between English grammar and that of French allows us to establish that the knowledge of English grammar becomes a stumbling block in the learning of French grammar. For that one can begin with the comparison of the articles.

### a) Use of the articles

The English and French are important languages of Europe, and their origin falls in Latin. However, there exist several differences between them if one compares the grammar of the two languages. The articles in French (definite/indefinite/partitive) agree in gender and number with the nouns that they qualify. The definite articles *le, la, les, l'* are equivalent to 'the' in English. In this way, they have a single exact equivalent in English. The indefinite articles *un, une, des* are used like English articles *a/* and some while speaking of the quantity of something. The use of these different articles in singular or plural, masculine or feminine forms in French is quite different from that in English and sometimes create confusion in the minds of the beginners.

### b) Method of contractions

The concept of French contractions is also new to beginners. In English, the contractions are informal and not compulsory. But in French they are absolutely necessary. In fact, in English, there are simple contractions like *that's, it's* etc and in French, the contractions like *au, aux, du, des* are used in a systematic manner. The concept of Elison also talks about the same theme. According to this method if the first word ends in 'e' or 'a' and the following word begins with a vowel, y or h silent, one removes the vowel of the first word and in its place, one adds an apostrophe. Ex: *C'est, l'orange, lorsqu'on*, etc. This concept of contractions, so important in French is not found in English. Sometimes one feels that it is easier to speak these contractions orally than to write.

### c) Capitalisation of letters

One observes that capitalisation is more common in English than in French. Our students often make a mistake in writing the days of the week or the months of the year. They have to be reminded several times that the days of week, languages, nationalities or geographic words cannot be capitalised. For example, they write generally the French language as *Français* in place of *français*. In the same manner, they capitalise the first person subject pronoun 'je' in a direct speech. Since *I* in English is always capital, they capitalise 'j' of 'je' even in the continuation of the sentence. Ex: *Marie dit« Je suis jolie»*. Here 'j' must be small and not capitalised as in the example, this is a mistake. Even if this is a mature student learning French, the knowledge of English often raises many ifs and buts in the mind of the student. In spite of the best efforts of the teacher, there is always a comparison between the two languages in the mind of the student.

### d) Negative expressions

If we look at the negative expressions in English and French, we find that the French negative is much more complex. In French, one often reads the negatives like *ne... pas, ne... personne, ne... rien, ne... jamais, n'importe quoi, pas beaucoup*, etc. For a negative construction of a question, the answer is *Si* (Yes) and for a positive question, one can say *Non* for no. The students often confuse between the two usages and make a wrong choice. The double negatives in French reinforce the negative element while in English two negatives give us a positive result. Ex: *Je n'ai jamais entendu personne chez lui.* (I have never heard anyone at his place.)

**e) Tenses**

Moreover, there is a clear difference of tenses between English and French. In French, each verb is conjugated using different subject pronouns. Therefore, there are different forms of the verb for each subject pronoun. But in English, only the form of verb which comes with the third person singular subject differs. Ex: I go/He goes. So 'go' and 'goes' are the only two possibilities in present tense. In addition to the conjugations, each student in the first year of study finds the difference confusing between Passé composé and Imparfait. The English tenses cannot always be compared with the French tenses. The subjunctif which is very often used in French is rare in English. In order to learn the language well, the students must revise the lessons from time to time. Since there are not many occasions to speak French, the vocabulary does not support at the time of practising the language.

**Sound System of French****a) Vowels**

The French Sound System is different from that of English. French and English have the same 26 letters of the alphabet, but their sound system is different. The vowel sounds given in the table below are the most difficult to pronounce in French. They are shorter than in English and finish generally a syllable. Nearly all these sounds have an equivalent in English.

**French Vowels**

French	Symbols	As in English	French Words
a	ah	card	la tasse
â			la pâtisserie
à			là-bas
e	uh	dull	le petit
eu			la fleur
é	ey	may	les cafés
ez			le nez
er			parler
è	eh	set	la mère
ê			la fenêtre
ai			clair
ei			la neige
et			le secret
î	ee	feet	vite
î			la gîte
y			le/les pays
o	oh	boat	le mot
ô			les côtes
au			aujourd'hui
eau			l'eau
o	ohh	love	la pomme ; les bottes
ou	ooh	you	l'amour
où			où
oi	wah	watch	la soie
oy			moyein
u	ew	aucun equivalent anglais	salut

However the sound of ew in letter 'u' is not there in English. The students often make a mistake in producing this sound. When letter 'e' is found at the end of the word, it is normally not pronounced. So 'e' is not pronounced in words 'grotte' and 'samedi'. But the beginners give sound even to the last 'e'. The nasal sound which is very common in French does not exist in English. In the expression 'bon vin blanc', all the three nasal sounds are there. This is on account of their long association with English that the students find all kinds of problems. The influence of English on a student who has learnt this language since childhood, does not allow the student to accept the new language as it is. This is the reason for which they pronounce 'h' in French words which is, however, generally silent. In fact, influence of English often makes a student pronounce this letter.

**b) Consonants**

In fact, the French consonants are pronounced nearly like in English, except that one does not prolong them. One allows them to explode and very rapidly, it is important to pronounce them clearly, otherwise they lose pass on to the vowel which follows. As the consonants are pronounced very rapidly, it is important to pronounce them clearly, otherwise they lose themselves and the word is difficult to understand. The consonants at the end of the words are silent but c, f, l, r preceded by a vowel are pronounced. In the same manner, the correct sound for 'r' is truly difficult to master.

**Difficult Consonants**

French Letters	Symbols	As in English	French Words
c	k	college	le collègue
ç (in front of a, o, u)	s	sole	le garçon
c (in front of e and i)	s	sole	le ciel
ch	sh	ship	le chapeau
g (in front of a, o, u)	g (in front of e and i)	greed	le gâteau
gn	ny	canyon	la montagne
gu (in front of e and i)	g	greed	la guerre; la guitare
j,g (in front of e and i)	zh	leisure	le jour, le genou
s (at the beginning of word)	s	sole	le soleil
s (between two vowels)	z	civilisation	la civilisation
ss(between two vowels)	s	sole	le poisson

**Vocabulary**

England and France are neighbouring countries separated by English Channel. It is said that once French was the language of the English court and that is why there are so many similar words in the two languages. Many French words have been borrowed by English and vice-versa. Several words (Bon allié) are spelt in the same manner and are used in the same sense as their English homologue, though pronounced differently in French. Here are a few words of this kind : la culture, excellent, le parent, le guide, la nation, le moment, brave, différent, important, la condition, etc. It is also necessary to note that there are identical words in these two languages having different sense. For example: la lecture is taken in the sense of 'lecture' (la conférence); 'la librairie' signifies bookstore' and is often taken for 'la 'bibliothèque' (library); la bague (ring) is thought as a French equivalent of sac (bag) just as 'sympathique' (nice) is taken for 'sympathetic and 'la place' (seat) is taken for 'endroit' (place).

As pointed out above, there are numerous differences between English and French at various levels and the previous knowledge of English poses some problems, to the beginners, in the learning of French.

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