

## Reviving a First Language in Later Life: A First Person Account

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筆者は60歳前半に、約一年をかけ、幼少期に身につけたフランス語・英語バイリンガル（二言語使用）を再度そのレベルを考査しよう試みた。筆者は、18歳になるまで通常的にフランス語を使用していた。しかしながら日本で26歳より生活しているので、18歳以降は徐々にフランス語を使う機会を失っていった。そして、東京において2014年2月から2015年3月まで、フランス語のライティング・ワークショップに参加し、17の作文（平均231語）を書き、そのエラー分析を行った。それとともに、自分のフランス語の表現事項を精査した。これによって判明したことは、幾分正確さを文法上のジェンダーと共に失っていた。加えて、英語からの転移による間違いが見つかった。しかし、筆者は現在も若い頃身につけた多くの初歩的文法を正確に使い分けることができる。フランス語の理解度は、フランス語母語話者に近いが、産出的フランス語の単語には限度がある。時々日本語がフランス語の代わりに出てしまった。この現象は、特に数字に現れる。筆者は現在も、幼少の頃身につけたフランス語を長い期間使用していなかったにもかかわらず、比較的用意に正しく使用することができる。

Key Words : childhood bilingualism, case study, French, L3 interference, language attrition

### Introduction

This is an account of a year-long attempt, in my early 60s, to revive my French speaking, writing and reading ability, and to examine the processes involved. I was brought up in England as a simultaneous Eng-

lish and French bilingual. I was a balanced bilingual until the early years of primary school, and reached my most literate level in French at the age of 18. I had less contact with France and French family through the next two decades, and very little after the age of 40. Since the age of 26, I have lived mostly in Japan, and speak, read and write Japanese.

I attended a French writing workshop for a year from early 2014 to early 2015, run by a native-speaking professor of French. This study is based on analysis of the error correction of writing assignments, and on journaling from notes taken during and after the workshops of my reactions to writing, speaking and reading French. I read outside the workshop, and reviewed French grammar using grammar reference books.

## **Background**

Duff (2008) lists advantages and disadvantages of case studies compared with experimental studies. Thorough and rich descriptions of one subject are possible, which may include detailed histories of family background, previous education, and language learning. A large variety of data may be used, including writing samples, transcripts and journal notes. A disadvantage of case studies is that findings are not necessarily generalizable. Another is the possible bias and subjectivity of the researcher.

Two well-known studies of their own language learning were carried out by researchers in the 1980s. Bailey (1983) studied her emotional reactions in an elementary French class. She included a lengthy defense of case studies. Schmidt (Schmidt & Frota, 1986) recorded his beginning learning of Portuguese during a five-month stay in Rio de Janeiro, both inside and outside the classroom, and the contribution of both kinds of learning to his progress.

There is a broad range of definitions of bilingualism. One strict view is that of Bloomfield (1933, p.56) who defines bilingualism as “native-like control of two or more languages,” a view also widely held by the general public. Grosjean (1985, p.10) gives a more inclusive definition based on use: “Bilingualism is the regular use of two or more languages (or dia-

lects), and bilinguals are those people who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives.” In Grosjean’s view, a bilingual is not “two monolinguals in one person” (Grosjean, 1989): bilinguals usually use their two languages for different purposes, and balanced bilingualism is rare. The dominance of one language over the other may “wax and wane” over a lifetime (Grosjean, 2010).

Romaine (1995, p.183–185) lists six types of childhood bilingual acquisition. In Type 1, the parents have different native languages and speak their own language to the child. In Type 2, the parents have different native languages, and both parents speak the language of the parent whose language is not that of the community. The child is exposed to the other language only outside the home, usually in nursery school. In Type 3, the parents have the same native language which is not the language of the community. Three other types are listed. My type of childhood bilingual acquisition was Type 2.

Birdsong (2014) reviewed research on dominance of the languages of bilinguals through the lifespan. The earlier a second language (L2) is acquired, the higher the level of proficiency the speaker is likely to reach. If there is attrition of the L1, the earlier it starts before the age of about ten, the more complete it is likely to be. If attrition starts after about ten years old, the language is not likely to be completely lost. In the second part of his study, he reviewed research into the effects of aging on language, and whether it affects the non-dominant language of bilinguals more than the dominant language. He reports that studies of monolinguals have shown that naming speeds of numbers, colors, forms, objects and animals decline with age, the greatest slowing occurring after the age of 70. In studies of naming speeds of bilinguals, the non-dominant language showed more slowing than the dominant language, but balanced bilinguals showed less slowing than monolinguals across both languages. Balanced bilinguals have shown advantages in inhibitory control, an ability involved in controlling attention, which is necessary for choosing the correct language to speak (Bialystok, 2001).

Pierce et al. (2014), using Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), showed

that during a lexical tone discrimination test, the brains of internationally adopted Chinese children with an average age of twelve showed activation of the same parts of the brain as Chinese speakers, despite having been adopted by French-speaking families at one year old, and having no conscious recollection of Chinese. This suggests that early language learning experience may remain in the brain and influence subsequent language learning indefinitely.

### **Aims**

During the year of this study, I aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Where had language loss occurred?
2. What interference was there from my L3, Japanese?
3. What remained later in life from a bilingual upbringing?

### **Language Learning History**

My mother was French and my father was English and I was the first child. My mother came to England on marriage, a year and a half before I was born. My father was a proficient speaker of French, and only French was spoken in the home. He believed strongly in bringing up his children bilingually and was convinced that there were no disadvantages of childhood bilingualism, such as mixing of languages. The first language I spoke was French, but I presumably heard English before starting nursery school at age three, because my parents told me that I was late starting to speak because of exposure to two languages. I started speaking English after starting nursery school and then spoke English to my younger brother. Soon after, English became the language of the home.

Until I was 17, my family spent six weeks every summer in France with my grandparents who spoke no English. My father had a strict no-English rule for the six weeks in France, even outside the home when we were not with our grandparents. We played with local children and spent some of the holidays with a cousin of the same age who spoke no

English. I read children's novels while in France. Before secondary school, my experience of writing was limited to "thankyou" letters to relatives. My grandparents visited us in England for two weeks a year, during which the language of the home returned to French. My parents had French friends living in England, so we had regular exposure to French throughout the year.

There were two occasions when my father was concerned that I had disproved his belief that we would not mix languages. I said that water was "cooling" when I meant "running." The French is *couler*. I presume the mix occurred because hot water can cool down, but I had "running" in mind. Schmid uses the term "convergence" for this kind of merging of two words from the two languages of a bilingual (2011). The only other example where my father thought I was confusing my two languages was when I employed left-dislocation in English. (For example: *Mon frère, il s'en va demain*. ("My brother, he's leaving tomorrow.") This feature is common in conversational French (Finegan, 2014), but also exists in English. My mother remarked that I never made mistakes with grammatical gender in French whereas my brother did. She thought it was because I spoke French first while he spoke English first.

I started studying French at secondary school at the age of 11. I did not need to pay attention to grammar instruction, except for learning verb inflections. We kept verb notebooks with all the verb conjugations, and I needed to study them in a similar way to second language learners. I had trouble with spelling the many unpronounced endings of verbs and of other words.

By the age of 13, I was aware that I was no longer a balanced bilingual, and that my French pronunciation was no longer native-like, but I was surprised, when I picked up milk from a local shop for my grandmother using my grandparents' German surname, (they were not German speakers), to learn that my accent was not only foreign but noticeably English. The owners of the shop were from eastern France with German family connections. The father said on first hearing me, "You have a German name. You're not French are you?" and the son added,

“She’s English.” As a younger child, I had been proud of being a perfect bilingual, and I was disappointed to learn that I now sounded not only like a non-native speaker, but like an English speaker of French. A problem I noticed from my mid-teens was that I was unable to speak in any other than a child’s register. I could not speak polite French to adults in the way that my cousin did. However, I believed I could understand spoken French of all registers as easily as English.

From the age of 16, I studied French for the Advanced Level of the General Certificate of Education. At the time, it was usual to study only three subjects, so I spent a third of the last two years of school studying French language and literature. This included studying full length books and translating into and out of French. I also read French novels for pleasure. By the age of 18, I was at my most literate in French.

From the age of 18 to about 40, I spoke to my grandparents frequently on the telephone and went for frequent short stays in France. In the 20 years after that, I rarely spoke French and rarely went to France as I had little family remaining there. I had intermittent friendships with French speakers, but possibly became what Grosjean has termed, a “dormant bilingual” (Grosjean, 1999, cited in Butler & Hakuta, 2004).

Other languages I have learned were Spanish in secondary school for six years, including for Advanced Level (G.C.E.), Chinese at university for a joint degree in Chinese and Far East History, and a little Portuguese during a one-year stay in Brazil when I was 32. Since the age of 26, I have lived mostly in Japan and have learned to speak, read and write Japanese. I use both English and Japanese on a daily basis inside and outside the home.

Since about 40, I have noticed that when I want to speak French, I frequently speak Japanese by mistake. In Brazil, I had the same experience with Spanish and Portuguese, but I had never mixed French with another language any more than I would speak English by mistake when trying to speak another language. Until about 40, French still felt more like a first than a second language. When this mixing started, I felt that it was possible that French had become more like a language

learned as a second language. Mixing is a phenomenon which has been found to increase with age in a non-dominant language (Bialystok, 2001). However, during one of the French writing workshops, when I described myself as more like a second language learner, French participants did not agree. Their perception may be like mine, that my French is not native-like but not typical of a second language speaker.

### **Method**

This study was carried out over a one-year period starting in February 2014 and ending in March 2015. I attended 20 three-hour French writing workshops in Japan conducted by a native-speaking university professor of French who was also a friend. I attended one smaller workshop of about five participants, which included one or two native French speakers, and sometimes attended another with the same leader with between 10 and 20 intermediate to advanced Japanese speakers of French, some of whom had received several years of education in France.

The workshops consisted of one or two readings of literary or journalistic texts and two in-class writing assignments. There were about 10 choices of writing assignment closely or loosely connected to the topic of the reading. We had a total of 70 minutes for two writing assignments. We read out our compositions and commented on each other's work. I submitted my writing for correction irregularly at first, and then regularly from September 2014. The writing used in this study for error analysis was 17 compositions averaging 231 words in length. I took notes of my reactions to speaking, reading and writing during and after the workshops, and re-wrote them in a journal. I spent about 30 minutes before and after each workshop talking with the workshop leader on the way to and from the workshops, and an hour with her at lunchtime before about half the workshops, sometimes alone and sometimes with another participant. Nearly all speaking with other participants before and after the workshops, and at a few social occasions, was in French.

I resumed reading novels for the first time in 40 years, and read news

magazines and newspapers. I kept a vocabulary notebook and reviewed the vocabulary periodically. I reviewed French grammar using a grammar reference book (Hawkins & Towell, 2010).

## Results

Data collected during the year of the study were of two types:

1. Errors in compositions.
2. Journal entries about French speaking in and out of the workshops, and study of French outside the workshops.

### *Errors in Compositions*

#### *Verbs*

Errors involved misspelling of unpronounced inflectional endings, and misspelling of different inflections with the same sound. In the early part of the year, I frequently confused the past participle and infinitive, for example, *donné* and *donner*, which have the same pronunciation. I remembered this mistake from the early days of secondary school. It is also a spelling mistake which French speakers make, according to contributors on various Internet forums (for example, [reddit.com/r/French](https://www.reddit.com/r/French/)). As in secondary school, during the year of this study I reduced this mistake quite quickly but still occasionally made it through the year. It is a similar spelling problem to English speakers' confusion of *there*, *their*, and *they're*, and other similar errors which involve different spellings of the same sounds.

Early errors with future and conditional forms were easy to learn to avoid, probably because the pronunciation of the forms is different and I could check the sound in my head. However I had to relearn to write conditional sentences using textbooks. I made some errors in the use of the *passé composé* and the imperfect, doubtless because of the lack of an imperfect tense in English. I needed to review the forms of many of the conjugations of verbs using a grammar reference book. I made mistakes with agreement of past participles, and with verb endings. French speakers also make errors with these, but those with past participles were most likely caused by there being no agreement in English be-

tween past participles and their objects.

I made errors with negation, omitting *ne*, but not with the basic form *ne ... pas*. One exception was after the third person pronoun *on* before a vowel. There is a liaison, so that when *on is* followed by an initial vowel, the pronunciation is the same with or without *ne*, for example, \**On a pas* is pronounced the same as the correct *On n'a pas*. Omission of *ne* is common in informal French speech, but I was corrected as a child if I omitted it.

#### *Other Spelling Errors*

As with verbs, spelling of words with the same sound but different spellings caused problems, for example words such as *c'est/ces/ses, mes/mais*, and *a/à*. I remembered making mistakes with these in the early years of studying French at school. I avoided them after the early workshops with a little concentration on meaning. Another common error was unpronounced “s,” but I hypercorrected it by adding it where it was not necessary, for example: \**parmis* (see Appendix for other examples).

#### *Gender*

I was surprised, in the early workshops, to find myself unsure of which article to use and making mistakes. As a child, I occasionally checked the sound before choosing the masculine or feminine article, but in the workshops, I was unsure after checking several times. This improved after the early workshops, but I sometimes made mistakes with words with an initial vowel because I could not use the definite article to check, for example, *l'exercice*. I used the indefinite article to check, but I would have had less exposure to the noun with a feminine article, and therefore more difficulty with the gender of these nouns. I made mistakes with agreement of gender, particularly if a word or words intervened between the noun or pronoun and the word modifying it, for example, *Pour être bien \*sûr de ne pas se tromper, elle....* (“To make quite sure not to make a mistake, she....”). I made mistakes with the gender of *personne*, probably because of the unfortunate perception that the default gender is masculine.

### *Vocabulary*

During the early workshops, I was wary of making mistakes with false cognates, (for example, “actually” and *actuellement*), but I made fewer than I expected to make. When looking through a list of false cognates on the Internet, I remembered that the different meanings of many false cognates were conspicuous as a child, and this may be why they were less of a problem than I expected. Another problem I had was with French words which have English translations which only partly cover the same semantic ground, or which have different frequencies or different registers from the English translations. One example was *élever* and *éduquer* for British English “to bring up.” I was told that *l'élevage des enfants* is not correct because *élevage* refers to animals, but I remembered that the translation for a child who is badly brought up is *mal élevé* or *mal éduqué*. Some other pairs were *terminer* and *compléter*, *accident* and *hasard*, and *recommandations* and *conseils* (see Appendix).

### *Articles*

I omitted the definite article in some cases where it is used in French but not in English. The errors were mostly with generic uses referring to a general class of phenomena or an abstract quality (Hawkins & Towell, 2010, p. 28), for example, *les réunions des professeurs* (\**de professeurs*), “teachers’ meetings,” and *plus que la normale* (\**plus que normal*), “more than normal.” I did not have difficulty in other cases where French uses the definite article but English does not, such as names of countries, languages, parts of the body, and seasons.

### *Prepositions*

Prepositions of place or movement presented no difficulty, despite there not being a one-to-one correspondence between translations; for example, *à* can be translated as “to,” “at,” or “in.” However, I made errors with prepositions after verbs, for example *obligé de*, (*obligé \*à*), “obliged to,” and in phrases, for example, *d'un air fâché* (\**avec un air fâché*) “with an angry expression.”

### *Hypercorrection*

In the last two months of the study, I made a number of hypercorrec-

tions. In some cases where a direct translation from the English would have been correct, I felt it could not be so straightforward to produce the correct French, so I made the following mistakes, among others: *\*Les parents s'étaient divorcés*, instead of, *Les parents avaient divorcé*, for "The parents had divorced," and, *\*Je fais membre*, instead of, *Je suis membre*, "I am a member." There are many more reflexive verbs in French than in English, but because many of them are frequent in conversation, I mostly had little difficulty with them (but see Appendix).

#### *Observations from Journal Entries*

##### *Register*

When I listened to the French speakers in the workshops reading their compositions, I was struck by how different written style is from spoken, and felt that without training, I would not be able to produce it. Advanced Japanese speakers of French who had submitted dissertations in French to French universities, were able to write in this style. When I chose from among the writing assignments, I avoided impersonal topics and chose those which required me to relate personal experiences. They are the easiest to write about because the writer does not have to produce language beyond what is needed for conversation (Hinkel, 2004). After several workshops, I occasionally chose topics where I had to write in the third person. These were challenging, and during the rest of the workshops, I mostly continued to choose personal topics.

When looking over my writing, I was surprised by how much vocabulary and grammar I remembered and found myself thinking, "I didn't know that I knew that." When the workshop leader reviewed errors for the whole group, I felt I still had some native speaker intuition as I could hear that most of the errors sounded wrong and knew how to correct them, although very proficient second language learners of French would probably have a similar facility. When I reviewed grammar using a grammar reference book (Hawkins & Towell, 2010), except for verbs, I found only a few topics in each grammar section that I needed to review.

##### *Vocabulary*

I was aware from adolescence that my French vocabulary was limited and largely restricted to vocabulary used by a child within the family. During the year of the study, when talking with the workshop leader or other participants, I noticed that I lacked vocabulary needed by an adult living in France. For example, I did not understand the French word for “estimate,” *devis*, when my French friend asked me if I had asked for an estimate for the cost of a house repair. I noticed that I lacked vocabulary for living in an urban environment, such as the words for “rush hour” and “escalator,” modern vocabulary, such as *supérette* for “convenience store,” and vocabulary connected with the Internet. (Living in Japan, this has also become a problem in my best language, English.) I even found that I did not know the expression for “turn on the television,” *allumer la television*, as my grandparents only bought one shortly before I stopped spending summer holidays in France in the late 1960s. Other gaps I found were vocabulary connected with education, for example, “first period class,” *le premier cour*, and vocabulary connected with language, for example, “noun,” *substantif*.

### *Reading*

When reading my first novel during the year of the study, I found that I had a low tolerance for unknown words and felt compelled to check them all in the dictionary. I was surprised that this prevented me from enjoying the novel, “Le Grand Meaulnes,” which I had enjoyed reading as a child. Most of the words I checked were connected with 19th century life, and I would not have known them as a child, but I was obviously not disturbed by them at the time. The need to check in the dictionary diminished, but I chose to read 20th century novels, which were easier. Among the texts we read in the workshops, articles from newspapers were easier to understand than literary texts. The French in newspaper articles is probably nearer to spoken French. Another kind of difficulty in reading was lack of cultural background. I had to search the Internet for information, for example about French literary figures referred to in texts.

### *Speaking*

Mixing French and Japanese was a problem. When I wanted to speak one or the other, I sometimes spoke the wrong language. As noted above, this was a problem that I had first noticed soon after the age of 40, when I no longer had French-speaking family. It was mostly a problem of speaking Japanese instead of French, especially numbers. I found myself saying numbers in Japanese in the writing workshop. It is well known that bilinguals favor counting in the language of their childhood or in the language in which they were taught arithmetic (Pavlenko, 2015), and I always do mental calculations in English. When I said numbers in Japanese instead of French, it felt like hitting the wrong second language switch, and was doubtless a result of having vastly more, especially recent, experience of saying numbers in Japanese than in French. However, my switches of language were not all from French into Japanese. On the way to the workshop, after speaking with the workshop leader in French, I once spoke to a shop employee in French instead of Japanese. In addition, when some of the Japanese participants wanted to change to speaking Japanese from French, the switch from French to Japanese felt effortful.

In conversations outside the workshop with some of the Japanese participants when speaking Japanese, if I had difficulty saying what I wanted to say, I searched for an alternative way to say the same thing. When speaking French, however, I felt I did not have the resources to do this and either immediately gave up or said something different instead. It is likely that outside a French-speaking environment, I lack the resources to develop my productive French.

### *Listening*

I understand far more in French than I can produce. There is very little French that I hear that I do not understand. I remember vocabulary when I hear it that it would be impossible for me to produce spontaneously. Comparing my French and Japanese, I have far more receptive knowledge of French than of Japanese. I frequently lose the thread of conversations with groups of Japanese speakers but never with groups of French speakers. I have no difficulty in understanding French news

broadcasts or French films, but my understanding of Japanese news broadcasts and Japanese films is much more limited.

## Discussion

I had several surprises during the year-long process of reviving my French, some to do with remembering more than I expected, and some involving language loss or English transfer. One of the surprises was loss of confidence with the gender of nouns. Use of correct gender must have been automatic as a small child, while occasional checking in later childhood may have been the start of attrition. Other errors which surprised me were English-influenced mistakes such as with prepositions, for example after verbs. As a child, I may have used prepositions correctly after high frequency verbs such as *obliger*. As for longer phrases with English influence, it is possible that I was expressing myself at an adult level that I did not use as a child. However, when reviewing grammar, I found that most of the English-speaker errors listed in grammar reference books (for example, Hawkin & Towell, 2010) were errors I have never made and would almost certainly never make.

Among the problems with speaking, the most intrusive was choosing the wrong language and speaking in Japanese. I did not, however, mix languages within the same utterance. In my late thirties, I interpreted for a friend who was fluent in both French and Japanese but who spoke no English. Despite feeling strain using three languages, I never used the wrong language. The difference may have been more recent practice in using all three languages, or that choosing the wrong language is age-related (Bialystok, 2001), or both.

Some of the participants in the writing workshops who had started learning French in adolescence were excellent speakers and writers of French, with wide vocabularies, good pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. Their French ability made me question whether I had an advantage from being a childhood bilingual. Very few second language speakers, however, reach a near-native level, and those who do are likely to have the language as central to their career, or to live in the country

where it is spoken. Without these two conditions, it may be difficult to revive a second language after a long period of disuse to the point where it is useful. My experience from the year of this study suggested that much of my French remained accessible from having learned it as a first language. The dormant bilingual may find it easier than most second language learners to use a language in later life after a long period of disuse.

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6. Articles*Incorrect*

l'âge de majorité

Elle porte du sang royal dans les veines.

Un était cher, donc elle a acheté l'autre.

*Correct*

l'âge de la majorité

...porte le sang...

L'un était cher...

7. Hypercorrections*Incorrect*

environs

parmis

mis-temps

langue secondaire

Elle est allée par un long chemin.

*Correct*

environ

parmi

mi-temps

seconde langue

Elle a pris un long chemin.

8. Division of words*Incorrect*

en suite

quelquechose

dabord

*Correct*

ensuite

quelque chose

d'abord

9. Negation*Incorrect*

On le ressent que pendant.....

Elle n'avait pas l'air de comprendre,

ou de savoir.....

avant que l'aéroport soit nommé

*Correct*

On ne le ressent...

...ni de savoir...

... l'aéroport ne soit nommé