

False Friends in French as a Third Language: Insights from a Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study investigates the phenomenon of false friends in the acquisition of French as a third language among students at a public university in Malaysia. False friends are pairs of lexical items that share similar forms or pronunciations across languages but differ in meaning, often creating confusion and misunderstanding. Since English is widely used as a second language in Malaysia, French–English false friends pose a particular challenge for learners when acquiring French. The main objective of this research is to investigate whether students who completed 3 levels of French lessons still struggle with French–English false friends. This study also explored the most common false friends among these French learners. The study employed a quantitative method in which 30 students who completed 3 levels of French lessons answered a set of questions requiring them to choose the correct translation for each French word. Data were collected through the participation of learners, focusing on the identification and analysis of common French–English false friends. Findings reveal that false friends indeed still exist among students and words such as *sympathique*, *maintenant* and *journal* got the highest percentage of wrong answers. Pedagogical recommendations include the use of visual materials and context based lessons in improving learners' comprehension and overall communicative competence.

Keywords: false friend, lexical items, French as a third language, misinterpretations

INTRODUCTION

The crucial part of foreign language learning is vocabulary. Not only learners, but educators also struggle in the process of teaching and educating foreign languages in regards to vocabulary. One of the challenges of vocabulary teaching is the presence of false friends.

According to Chamizo Dominguez & Brigitte Neirlich (2002), false friends are a case when a word from multiple languages possess similar pronunciation and/or spelling but hold different definitions. False friends are also defined as terms in two languages that appear and sound alike but possess distinct meaning and context. (Khalil et al. 2018)

False friends are seen to be actively occurring during foreign language lessons as students who are still in the early stage of learning might try to relate their current language knowledge with the newly learned language. A study of Laureanda (2024), has proved that students who are still in school made more mistakes of false friends as opposed to those in higher education level.

Notably, Malaysia is a country in which the people speak more than one language with English as the prevailing second language (Abu Bakar et al.2021). Despite the fact that most Malaysians are inherently multilingual, this does not hinder students from acquiring more foreign languages. Hussin et al.(2023) mentioned that the French language began to expand in Malaysia especially in Higher Learning Institutions..

Hence, this study is to investigate false friends French-English phrases occurring among Level 3 French language students in public universities and which words that learners still tend to confuse despite completing three levels of French lessons.

This investigation is done to answer the following questions;

- Do false friends happen in public universities French class?
- What are the common French false friends words among students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

False Friends/ Faux Amis/ False Cognates in learning foreign language

When learning French, some words appear and mean the same, like animal. These are identified as cognates. But some words, like *librairie*, which means bookstore, not library, can be misleading. These are known as false friends or faux amis. Students get easily confused when they encounter these words. So, how do we identify which words are friends and which are not?

Cognates are defined as "a word in one language that is very similar in form and meaning to a word in another language because both languages are related" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, as cited in Lengeling, 1996). In addition, Carroll (1992) defines cognates as "lexical items from different languages which are identified by bilinguals as somehow being 'the same thing.'" Moreover, cognates are proposed to have at least four main characteristics: they always have a set form, they are words, the words may or may not mean the same, and they always look a bit similar. For example, in French and English, the words "animal" and "excellent" are related. In other words, these cognates have a similar form, come from the same source, and have the same meaning in English and French or across different languages.

It is said that even though false cognates can be confusing because they have different meanings from words with similar spellings, cognates are still helpful in learning a foreign language (Lengeling, 1992). In addition, it is suggested that cognates and false cognates may create problems for students if teachers ignore them during lessons. This is because these words are often assumed to be very similar in both the native and target languages. As a result, teachers may overlook false cognates and pay little attention to them.

Recently, Abu-Snoubar et al. (2024) divided false friends into two types: absolute false friends and partial false friends while studying the concept in two unrelated languages, Arabic and English. They aimed to explore the sources of possible confusion found in modern Arabic and English. Furthermore, they pointed out that false friends can make communication difficult between students and teachers of a language.

Lengeling (1996) further suggested that, to stimulate vocabulary improvement in language learning, the instruction of cognates and false friends should be included. For instance, in the classroom, teachers can start by asking students to guess the meaning of cognates to help them build vocabulary and remember the words better. Moreover, knowing the problems with cognates can help students learn a language because they become more careful with similar words. Therefore, teachers should teach them, and students will benefit from the practice.

Similarly, Abu-Rabiah (2025) supported Lengeling's (1996) findings. The study explored how cognates, false cognates (FCs), and non-cognate translation equivalents (NCTEs) influence foreign language students' ability to recognize the correct meanings of words in their first language. It focused on two languages with different writing systems: Hebrew and Arabic. The study emphasized that it is valuable in vocabulary acquisition to highlight the connections between words in the students' native language and the target language. This process helps students expand their vocabulary faster. Besides, teachers would be able to monitor students, and at the same time, they can point out these similar words so students know when words from different languages mean the same thing and when they only appear the same but have different meanings. On top of that, Abu-Rabiah (2025) discovered that the confusing effect of false friends decreased with more second or foreign language learning, as students understood better phonological similarities.

In addition, Azieb, AL-Khanji, & Tarawneh (2021) supported Abu-Rabiah's (2025) and Lengeling's (1996) findings. They recommended that teachers include cognate recognition strategies in their teaching. The study attempted to answer whether Jordanian students were aware of cognates in English and French and whether knowing them made learning French easier. The findings suggest that students gained from their English background, and cognates helped them understand French. However, in translation, some students ignored the differences between English and French words. Thus, they misunderstood the text.

Past Studies on False Friends/ Faux Amis/ False Cognates in learning foreign language

The phenomenon of false friends (faux amis) in foreign language learning has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the context of cross-linguistic interference. Faux-amis, which share similar forms across languages but differ in meaning, pose significant aid as well as challenges for language learners.

The study by Hoang and Vo (2023) is done to investigate the influence of English language knowledge on French learning through false friends phenomena and errors caused by false friends in written production. This research examined English-major students learning French as a second foreign language at the University of Foreign Languages and International Studies (HUFLIS), Hue University. The study involved 30 English-major students whose French level was A2+ according to CEFR. The researchers collected and analyzed 150 written copies across 5 different writing topics (100-120 words each) and conducted interviews with students. The findings showed that English proficiency both facilitated French acquisition and hindered comprehension of lexical semantics due to false friends. Students made frequent errors with words like "actuellement/actually," "assister/assist," "attendre/attend," and "blessier/bless." The study found that students systematically relied on English words resembling French ones when they lacked vocabulary, leading to semantic confusion. The implications suggest that teachers should explicitly address similarities and differences between languages, emphasize contextual understanding, and provide translation exercises with false friends to develop linguistic awareness.

The study by Burkholder (2015) also looked at how false friend meanings interfere in L1 word processing and how this interference changes as a function of L2 proficiency. This research investigated lexico-semantic ambiguity across English and French using different types of false friends (Full False Cognates, Partial False Cognates, Full Interlingual Homographs, and Partial Interlingual Homographs). The study involved 39 participants aged 18-22: 17 functional English monolinguals, 12 mid-proficiency English-French bilinguals, and 10 high-proficiency English-French bilinguals. The instrument was a speeded semantic relatedness task where participants rated similarity between English word pairs on a 6-point scale, plus language background questionnaires, a French cloze test, and a translation post-test. The findings revealed that L2 French meanings significantly interfered with L1 English processing for bilinguals across most false friend types, with both bilingual groups showing similar interference effects regardless of proficiency level. The implications indicate that false friends cause cross-language lexical interference even in L1-only tasks, supporting models of integrated bilingual lexicons and suggesting that complete orthographic overlap is not necessary for cross-language activation effects.

These studies demonstrate that faux amis present a double-edged phenomenon in language learning: while lexical similarities between languages can facilitate initial vocabulary acquisition by providing familiar forms, they simultaneously create interference that leads to semantic errors and processing difficulties. The research reveals that learners benefit from the formal resemblance of false friends but struggle with their deceptive meanings.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is done to investigate the phenomenon of faux amis in the acquisition of French as a third language among 30 students at a public university in Malaysia. The instrument used was a list of words taken from level 1, 2, and 3 textbooks that were used by students throughout the 3 semesters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings for Demographic Profile

Table 1- Percentage for Gender

1	Male	53.3%
2	Female	46.7%

Based on Table 1, male respondents are 53.3% while female respondents are 46.7%.

Table 2- Percentage for Discipline

1	Science and Technology	30%
2	Social Sciences and Humanities	56.7%
3	Technology and Business	13.3%

Table 2 indicates that 30% of the respondents are from Science and Technology, 56.7% are from Social Sciences and Humanities and the remaining 13.3% are from Technology and Business.

Table 3- Percentage for false friends translation choices

Question (French)	Option (English)	% of Responses
1. Stylo	Pen	63.3%
	Style/Stylish	20%
	Pencil	13.3%
	Stiletto	3.3%
2. Crayon	Crayon	50%
	Pencil	40%
	Pencil colour	10%
	Pen	0%
3. Journal	Book	50%
	Journalist	23.3%
	Newspaper	20%
	Calendar	6.7%
4. Jolie	Pretty	50%
	Joy	30%
	Happy	16.7%
	Jolly	3.3%
5. Mince	Thin	66.7%

	Mince	20%
	Mice	10%
	Thick	3.3%
6. Gentil	Kind	60%
	Gentle	33.3%
	Soft	6.7%
	Gentlemen	0%
7. Sympathique	Sympathy	43.3%
	Sympathetic	40%
	Nice	16.7%
	Charming	0%
8. Cent	Hundred	60%
	Cent	23.3%
	Coins	13.3%
	Centimetre	3.3%
9. Regarder	Watch/Look	73.3%
	Walk	13.3%
	Regard	10%
	Regarding	3.3%
10. Dessiner	Draw	36.7%
	Designer	36.7%
	Design	16.7%
	Dance	10%
11. Maison	House	73.3%
	Mansion	23.3%
	Villa	3.3%
	Duplex	0%
12. Magasin	Magazine	63.3%
	Store	26.7%
	News paper	10%

	Diary	0%
13. Maintenant	Maintenance	66.7%
	Now	20%
	Maintain	6.7%
	Today	6.7%
14. Comme	Ask	46.7%
	As	36.7%
	Comma	10%
	Come	6.7%
15. Journée	Day	73.3%
	Journey	26.7%
	Journal	0%
	Year	0%
16. Pendant	During	63.3%
	Pendant	20%
	Necklace	16.7%
	Jewellery	0%
17. Stage	Internship	40%
	Stage	40%
	Step	10%
	Interview	10%
18. Licence	License	70%
	Bachelor degree	26.7%
	Ticket	3.3%
	Bill	0%
19. Roman	Novel	40%
	Romance	33.3%
	Romanian	20%
	Comic	6.7%
20. Travail	Work	60%

	Travel	36.7%
	Trivial	3.3%
	Trial	0%

Table 3 displayed all bolded words as the correct English translation to the French word. Based on Table 3, the word *sympathique* only has 16.7% students who answered it correctly as nice. Next, both French words of *maintenant* and *journal* results in 20% of correct responses which are now and newspaper respectively. Besides that, Table 3 also displays the French words of *regarder*, *maison*, and *journée* with the highest percentage of correct answers at 73.3%.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that despite completing three levels of French lessons, students still confuse false friends' French words. Table 3 shows that all 20 questions received multiple answers and none achieved 100% correct answers. Hence, false friends indeed happen in a French class. This is because these learners who are non-native speakers are still not familiar with their newly learned language and still mix up French words with English words due to their similar spellings and meaning as English words. This is in line with research made by Hong and Vo (2023) in which they found that students resort to English words that appear to be closely related with the French word whenever they forgot a meaning of a certain word.

Table 3 shows that French words with similar or closely similar spellings with English words, received considerably higher incorrect answers. For example, the French word of *sympathique* is the topmost word that student confused with as only 16.7% got it correctly. Most of them mistaken the answer as sympathy. Other than that, most learners also got the French word of *maintenant* and *journal* wrong. 80% from these 30 respondents answered incorrectly. The majority of the students chose a similar English spelling word or meaning as the answer which is maintenance and book.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Learning a foreign language requires a lot of memorisation, especially during the earlier stage of learning. Thus, this could result in false friends as learners might get confused about the meaning of the words and resort to the same spelling of French- English words whenever they couldn't remember the word's definition (Hong and Vo 2023).

As an educator, the lecturer should anticipate false friends during lessons in class. Common French words that students inclined to be mistaken should be noted by lecturers and more attention should be paid on these words especially words from this study that came up on the top list of the false friends percentage.

Visual learning is proven to be effective in memorisation (Pateşan et al 2018). This can enhance students' memory of words' definition and lessen wrong translation of words, mainly false friends. Teaching false friends in context could also help minimize false friends to happen, this is because students might understand the word better and so result in improved memorisation.

Future researchers could look into reasons behind false friends among students so that educators could tackle this issue more efficiently by diving into the roots of the problem. Besides that, more words could be included in studies apart from the 20 French words in this study to investigate more common false friends among learners.

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