

## **AN ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE MISTAKES MADE BY SRI LANKAN STUDENTS WRITING IN FRENCH**

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This paper addresses the issue of language mistakes made by Sri Lankan students when they write in French. The common explanation provided by the French language teacher for these recurrent “mistakes” is interference from English and, hence, mistakes that cannot be avoided or corrected in French language learners. An error analysis undertaken by me of written work produced by students shows that, on the contrary, these mistakes cannot and should not only be classified as those resulting from interference because many of them cannot be analyzed as resulting from interference.

This conclusion was reached on the basis of an analysis of fifty essays written by students. My target group was the 17-19 age group who spoke Sinhala at home. They had all studied English at school for the past 10 years and therefore had a fair command of the language, that is, they could read, write and speak the language with varying degrees of competence. The group had also been studying French for the past 15 months and had gone through 240 hours of language learning. The essays I retained for my analysis were written in an exam situation in class and the time given was one hour. The students did not have access to Dictionaries or to their class textbooks.

The following types of mistakes were identified after analysis of these scripts:

1. Morphological, syntactic and semantic mistakes that do not result from interference from the language spoken at home by the student or from their second language.
2. Mistakes that do not show as direct translations from the language spoken at home to French or from the second language English, to French.

An important point to make here is that in spite of the language mistakes, the message the student is trying to convey is totally comprehensible to the reader. The written answer may contain language mistakes but this does not hinder the understanding of the written text. This phenomenon poses a profound challenge to the researcher. I have arrived at the conclusion that these language mistakes made by students when they write in French occur within an interlanguage, which is being *created unconsciously* by them to get their message across to the reader. The message or meaning conveyed by this interlanguage is perfectly comprehensible to the reader even though it may not have a linguistically acceptable structure. Language mistakes are therefore not merely interferences from English and certainly need to be looked at from a wider perspective.