
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Moroccan Arabic on the Acquisition of French C'est-Cleft Constructions

Ayoub Zrari

Doctoral student, Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts (FLLA), Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Ayoub Zrari, **E-mail:** Ayoub.zrahi@uit.ac.ma

| ABSTRACT

This study explores how Moroccan Arabic (MA) learners acquire French c'est-cleft constructions, emphasizing both syntactic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness. A quantitative, quasi-experimental approach was employed with 132 MA learners (levels A2–C1) and 33 native French speakers who completed acceptability judgment tasks evaluating cleft use in contrastive and new-information contexts. The findings highlight substantial difficulties for MA learners, notably their frequent acceptance of non-standard cleft structures missing essential elements or pragmatically unsuitable forms. These issues arise primarily from negative L1 transfer, as MA does not have equivalent cleft structures and instead uses more flexible word-order patterns. Learners often overlooked discourse constraints, particularly failing to properly differentiate between subject and object clefts in new-information contexts. Results support the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, 2011), indicating persistent challenges at the syntax–discourse interface even among advanced learners. Nevertheless, increased proficiency and greater exposure to French significantly enhanced learners' accuracy. The study emphasizes the complexity involved in mastering interface-related structures and advocates targeted instruction combined with extensive authentic exposure to foster near-native competence in French clefts among MA learners.

| KEYWORDS

French c'est clefts; contrastive focus; new-information focus; syntax-pragmatic interface; L1 transfer; Moroccan Arabic focus strategies; second-language acquisition.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 19 July 2025

PUBLISHED: 12 August 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.8.8

1. Introduction

French holds a special status in Morocco's linguistic landscape. Despite post-independence Arabization efforts, French has remained deeply embedded in domains such as education, government, science, and media. This sustained French–Arabic bilingualism provides both motivation and a rich environment for second language acquisition research. Within this context, the acquisition of complex French structures by Moroccan Arabic (MA) speakers raises important theoretical questions. Second language (L2) learners must navigate not only new grammar but also new pragmatic conventions. In particular, structures at the syntax–pragmatics interface – where grammatical form and discourse function intersect – pose a well-known challenge in L2 acquisition. According to the Interface Hypothesis (IH) (Sorace, 2011), linguistic phenomena that require integrating syntax with pragmatic context (external interfaces) tend to be especially difficult for L2 learners to fully master. Learners, in this respect, may achieve near-native syntactic knowledge yet still struggle with contextually appropriate use, exhibiting residual optionality or non-native patterns in discourse (Tsimpili & Sorace, 2006; Sorace, 2011). This challenge is often attributed to factors such as first-language (L1) transfer (applying L1 patterns where they do not fit the L2) and the cognitive demands of mapping form to function in real-time communication. Moreover, the role of language contact and input cannot be ignored: learners in environments with rich exposure to the target language often show improved intuitive grasp of these interface structures. Extensive L2 input can mitigate persistent pragmatic difficulties (Rothman, 2009), highlighting the importance of the Moroccan

context where French exposure varies widely (e.g. formal schooling, daily media use, etc.). Investigating how Moroccan learners acquire a syntax–discourse interface construction in French thus illuminates the interplay of universal interface challenges, L1 influence, and the moderating effect of immersion or contact.

The present study focuses on French *c'est*-cleft sentences – a prototypical example of a syntax–pragmatics interface construction – and how they are acquired by native speakers of Moroccan Arabic. *C'est*-cleft constructions in French are biclausal sentences of the form *C'est X qui/que Y*, used to highlight a particular constituent *X* in context. Pragmatically, a *c'est*-cleft can convey contrastive/corrective focus, new-information focus, exhaustivity, or other discourse functions depending on context (Lambrecht, 2001; Kiss, 1998; Clech-Darbon et al., 1999). Therefore, mastering this construction requires L2 learners to handle both the complex syntactic form and the nuanced pragmatic conditions of use. For Moroccan Arabic speakers, this poses a unique challenge because their L1 lacks a formal equivalent to clefting. MA generally does not employ a fixed “it is *X* who *Y*” structure to mark focus; instead, focus is conveyed by other strategies including fronting the focused element or using particles. Learners must therefore acquire a completely new mapping between form and meaning: they cannot rely on a familiar L1 structure to express the same discourse function. From a cross-linguistic influence perspective, the absence of clefts in the L1 means negative transfer may occur – learners might avoid clefts or use them infelicitously due to uncertainty about their syntax or appropriate context. Additionally, as a biclausal construction, *c'est*-clefts are syntactically complex, potentially leading to developmental errors (e.g. misuse of *qui/que*, omission of *c'est*, or word order mistakes in the focused element). All these factors make *c'est*-cleft acquisition an illuminating test case for the Interface Hypothesis and for understanding how learners grapple with novel L2 form–function mappings.

Despite the importance of this topic, *c'est*-clefts in L2 French – especially by Arabic speakers – remain under-researched. The present study aims to fill this gap by providing empirical data on how Moroccan Arabic learners acquire and use *c'est*-cleft constructions. We examine both the structural aspect (syntax) and the functional aspect (pragmatics) across different proficiency levels and exposure backgrounds. In doing so, the study contributes to our understanding of L1–L2 contrasts at the syntax–discourse interface and the extent to which immersive contact with the L2 can overcome interface-related difficulties. The findings also have implications for second language acquisition (SLA) theory (e.g. evaluating the Interface Hypothesis in a new domain) and for language pedagogy in similar bilingual settings.

In pursuit of these goals, the study addresses the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1.** *To what extent do Moroccan Arabic learners accept non-target like cleft constructions (e.g., clefts missing *c'est* or *qui/que*), SVO structures or non-cleft fronted structures, in contexts requiring contrastive focus?*
- RQ2.** *To what extent do Moroccan Arabic learners accept French *c'est*-cleft constructions in discourse contexts requiring contrastive focus and new-information focus? Do Moroccan Arabic learners of French distinguish between subject and object *c'est*-clefts – and their reduced variants – in terms of their appropriateness across different discourse contexts? Specifically, do they show target-like sensitivity to the restriction that only subject clefts (and subject reduced clefts) are acceptable in new-information focus contexts?*
- RQ3.** *Which specific aspects of *c'est*-cleft usage remain most problematic for Moroccan Arabic learners (e.g. structural formation vs. contextual deployment), and to what extent are these difficulties attenuated at higher proficiency levels?*
- RQ4.** *Does richer exposure to French (through education or daily use) lead to more native like judgments of *c'est*-cleft constructions in both syntax and discourse? In other words, do learners with greater French contact rate cleft structures in ways that more closely align with native speaker judgments?*

By answering these questions, the study provides insight into how L2 learners acquire a complex structure absent in their L1, and how they develop the interface between syntax and pragmatics in an L2. Below, we review relevant literature on French cleft constructions and attempt to account for focus-marking strategies in Moroccan Arabic, as well as the theoretical framework

guiding our hypotheses. We then describe the methodology of the study, present the results, and discuss the findings in light of the research questions. Finally, we conclude with implications for theory and pedagogy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Focus in linguistic theory

In linguistic theory, “focus” refers to the most informationally prominent element of a clause – the part of a sentence that answers the current *question under discussion* or contrasts with alternatives (Halliday, 1967; Rooth, 1992; Roberts, 1996). Early functionalist linguists in the Prague School introduced the idea that sentences divide into *given* vs. *new* information (theme vs. rheme) and that intonation or word order can highlight the new, important part (Mathesius, Firbas; see Raynaud, 2020). Halliday (1967) formally defined *focus* as the *marked* information in a clause, often realized by prosodic emphasis or special constructions, distinguishing it from backgrounded or given information. In generative grammar, focus has been linked to specific syntactic operations: for example, Chomsky (1972) noted that transformations like clefting or fronting serve to emphasize a constituent, making it the focus of the sentence. Rooth’s (1992) Alternative Semantics framework further formalized focus by proposing that a focused element evokes a set of alternatives. For instance, in a sentence “*It’s Jean who called*,” focusing “Jean” implies alternatives such as {Pierre called, Marie called, ...}, which are relevant for interpretation. The focused constituent thus introduces a contrastive or selective meaning component. Roberts (1996), in turn, situated focus in discourse pragmatics via the Question Under Discussion (QUD) model: focus indicates the part of the sentence answering an implicit question in the discourse. Using the same example, “*Who called?*” is the implicit question, and “*It’s Jean who called*” explicitly marks Jean as the answer, while also excluding other possible answers. In sum, focus is a multi-faceted notion involving syntax (special word orders or constructions), phonology (stress/intonation), semantics (alternative sets), and pragmatics (relation to discourse questions).

2.2. French c’est cleft constructions

2.2.1. The syntactic structure of the c’est cleft constructions

A *c’est*-cleft in French is often described as consisting of four core components (Dufter, 2008): The cleft pronoun (*ce*), the copula (*est*), the clefted constituent (*X*), and (*QU*) a subordinate clause. Authors vary in how they label these components. (Lambrecht, 2001), for instance, speaks of a matrix subject, a copula, a focus phrase, and a relative clause, whereas (Hedberg, 2000) distinguishes the cleft pronoun, the copula, the clefted constituent, and the cleft clause. For the purposes of this study, we adopt Hedberg’s (2000) terminology – cleft pronoun, copula, clefted constituent, and cleft clause – since it provides a clear, function-based delineation of the structure.

<i>C’</i>	<i>est</i>	<i>Jean</i>	<i>qui a réparé la voiture.</i>
<i>CE</i>	<i>EST</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>QU</i>

Beyond the consistent structural framework described above, *c’est*-clefts exhibit significant functional flexibility, allowing speakers to highlight a variety of grammatical roles – including subjects, objects, and adjuncts (Bourgoin, 2017). By isolating the clefted constituent in the main clause, these constructions ensure that element receives prominence, while the remaining portion of the sentence is backgrounded. Still, a key element of the *c’est*-cleft is the obligatory presence of *C’EST*, which functions as a syntactic marker akin to identificational clauses (Harris-Delisle, 1978). Unlike null-subject Romance languages, which allow the omission of subjects, French systematically requires *CE* in clefts across all historical stages. This feature sets it apart from other Romance languages, in which *CE* can be omitted.

Syntactically speaking, several syntactic analyses of French *c’est*-clefts fall into two fundamental categories. On one side is the movement-based analysis, which posits that the clefted constituent originates in a lower position within the cleft clause and subsequently moves to the left periphery to occupy a focus position. Taking our previous example into account, “*Jean*” is initially generated in the embedded clause and then moves to a fronted position – leaving behind a trace or copy; thus, satisfying focus requirements. This analysis, led by scholars such as (Kiss, 1998), helps account for restrictions on which syntactic categories can be clefted. In contrast, the base-generated analysis treats a *c’est*-cleft as a specificational copular structure formed entirely in surface position. In this view, the matrix is an identificational IP headed by *c’est*, whose complement is the pivot XP; the clause introduced by *qui* or *que* is a relative CP right-adjoined to that IP. Therefore, because the cleft clause is base-generated as a modifier of the identificational sentence, no focus-driven movement is posited, and the pivot is not assumed to occupy a dedicated focus position.

The picture becomes even more complex with reduced clefts. These constructions, which simply present the copular *c'est* and the clefted constituent omit the cleft clause. Yet despite their streamlined form, reduced clefts still perform essential focus-marking functions. Their existence also suggests that the underlying mechanisms – whether involving movement or base-generation – can be further economized in the syntactic representation.

In this study, we adopt a synthesis of these perspectives by considering key properties such as the left-peripheral placement of the clefted constituent, the role of the cleft clause, and the syntactic behavior observed in reduced clefts. This approach allows us to capture the diversity of syntactic evidence and provides a coherent framework for analyzing French cleft constructions (see also Lambrecht, 1994).

Another important syntactic aspect that underpins the frequent use of clefts in French is the interaction between word order rigidity and focus assignment constraints. As Carter-Thomas (2009) points out, both English and French exhibit relatively rigid word order. However, English allows greater flexibility in focus assignment. In English, preverbal elements can often be interpreted as focal based purely on discourse context, making structural modifications like clefting less necessary. In contrast, French does not easily permit grammatical subjects in preverbal theme position to receive a focal interpretation. (Lambrecht, 1994) formalizes this restriction, arguing for a strong constraint against the co-mapping of the pragmatic relation focus and the grammatical relation subject. This means that French often resorts to cleft constructions as a strategy to circumvent focus-initial SV structures, ensuring that focus is explicitly marked rather than inferred through context.

Historical syntactic developments have further reinforced the reliance on clefting. As (Dufter, 2008) illustrates, Old French had greater word order flexibility, allowing preverbal objects (OV) and postverbal subjects (VS) to appear in declarative sentences. These alternative structures naturally accommodated argument focus, reducing the need for explicit syntactic focus-marking devices. However, as SVO word order gradually became fixed in Modern French (Marchello-Nizia, 1995), these flexible configurations became increasingly restricted, limiting the available options for in-situ focus marking. By the sixteenth century, prosodic focus alone was no longer a sufficient strategy, and clefting emerged as the primary means of encoding focus in French discourse.

The correlation between word order rigidity and the use of clefts aligns with a broader cross-linguistic principle proposed by (Lambrecht, 2001), in which he states that: *"The occurrence of cleft constructions in a language correlates with the degree of positional freedom of prosodic accents and syntactic constituents in that language."* (Lambrecht, 2001, p. 488). This principle highlights why French, with its relatively rigid word order exhibits a significantly higher reliance on cleft constructions than English. In contrast, languages with greater syntactic flexibility – such as English – have less structural pressure to develop obligatory clefting strategies.

Perhaps this also explains why Moroccan Arabic does not have cleft constructions in the first place. Moroccan Arabic, like many other Arabic varieties, maintains relatively flexible word order, allowing focused elements to be fronted, for instance, without requiring additional syntactic restructuring. Given this freedom in constituent positioning and focus realization, Moroccan Arabic does not need to rely on a dedicated clefting strategy to encode focus, as French does. This further supports Lambrecht's cross-linguistic generalization, reinforcing the idea that the emergence of clefts is not universal but rather a syntactic adaptation to word order constraints.

Having shed light on the syntactic aspects of *c'est*-clefts, the following section turns to their pragmatic features. This next part explores how these constructions function in discourse, highlighting their role in focus marking, contrast, and the overall management of information within discourse.

2.2.2. The pragmatic features of the *c'est* cleft constructions

French *c'est*-cleft constructions are widely recognized for their ability to encode various discourse functions including contrastive/corrective focus (Declerck, 1988; Kiss, 1998; Scappini, 2013) and new-information focus (Clech-Darbon et al., 1999; Bourgoïn, 2022).

2.2.2.1. The contrastive and corrective function

In a contrastive use, the clefted constituent is highlighted as the chosen alternative against a set of possible candidates, thereby *excluding other alternatives*. This contrastive effect is not just a byproduct of context or prosody but is structurally encoded by the cleft construction itself: the focused element is fronted and linked to a cleft clause, inherently indicating a selection from among alternatives. Such structural focus marking aligns with Kiss's (1998) notion of *identificational focus*, which conveys an exhaustive listing of the true candidate to the exclusion of others. Under this view, clefts trigger a strong inference that *no other alternative makes the sentence true*, effectively yielding a contrastive interpretation. This inference has been likened to a *presupposition or conventional implicature* of clefts in earlier accounts (see Horn, 1981; Kiss, 1998), though the status of this inference (semantic vs. pragmatic) remains debated in the literature.

Alternative perspectives, however, challenge the idea that contrastive meaning is inherent to all clefts. As we have discussed in previous sections, *c'est*-clefts are functionally versatile. Rather than uniformly encoding contrast or exhaustivity, their interpretation often *emerges from context*. (Lambrecht, 2001), for example, emphasized that clefts carry an *"open proposition"* (the presupposed cleft clause content) which must be in the common ground, but the presence or absence of *contrast* depends on whether alternative values for that open proposition are contextually relevant. In other words, if the discourse context makes a set of alternatives salient (e.g. who repaired the car, among several candidates), the cleft naturally yields a contrastive, exhaustive reading; if not, the cleft can simply present new information in a structurally marked way. Thus, there is a theoretical tension between views: one camp posits that contrastiveness/exclusivity is *intrinsic* to the cleft construction, while another contends it is a *context-driven implicature* and that clefts are not categorically limited to contrastive focus.

The corrective function of clefts is a specific, highly contrastive subtype that has attracted close attention. Corrective clefts (sometimes called counter-presuppositional clefts or contre-assertions) occur when a speaker uses a cleft to refute or correct a prior statement in the discourse. A classic scenario is a dialogue where one interlocutor makes an assertion, and the other responds with a cleft to substitute the correct information. For example, if Speaker A asserts that (1a), Speaker B can counter with a sentence such as (1b). Here the cleft not only highlights Jean in contrast to Marie (1c) but also explicitly signals a correction of A's mistaken assumption (1b).

- (1)
- (a) Marie a réparé la voiture.
Marie AUX repair.PST car.DEF.F
'Marie repaired the car.'
 - (b) Non, c'est Jean qui a réparé la voiture.
No, it be Jean REL AUX repair.PST car.DEF.F
'No, it is Jean who repaired the car.'
 - (c) C'est Jean qui a réparé la voiture, pas Marie.
it be Jean REL AUX repaire.PST car.DEF.F NEG Marie
'It is Jean who repaired the car, not Marie'

According to Scappini's (2013) framework, corrective clefts (*clivées correctives*) are functionally distinct from ordinary contrastive clefts. In other words, they do more than contrast alternatives – they *rectify a specific wrong claim* in the common ground. Several studies concur that French speakers frequently resort to clefts in corrective contexts because the cleft structure overtly encodes the focus-background partition required for correction, with the focused element providing the true value and the presupposed clause confirming the scope of the correction (Declerck, 1988; Rouquier, 2007; Scappini, 2013). Moreover, the literature notes that corrective clefts often carry an additional implicature of *"It is not X, it's Y"*, even if the negation of the alternative is not fully articulated. This is seen in examples where the cleft is followed by an explicit *"pas X"* phrase as in (1c) or can be inferred from context when such a phrase is absent. In essence, the corrective cleft format inherently sets up a contrastive pair: the incorrect alternative vs. the correct focal element.

While the effectiveness of clefts for corrections is well documented, there is also a debate on whether corrective clefts represent a structurally unique subtype or simply a pragmatic usage of the general cleft format. Scappini (2013) argues that corrective clefts have particular properties distinguishing them from regular contrastive clefts. Specifically, they may allow a broader range of focused constituents – not only noun phrases or standard arguments, but also adjectives, adverbs, or entire propositional content – since whatever element was wrong in the prior utterance must be replaced in the cleft focus. This accounts for observations that French corrective clefts can focus predicate adjectives or prepositional phrases (e.g., (2) to correct someone who assumed a different emotion), which are less typical in non-corrective clefts.

- (2) *C'est triste que tu partes.*
It be sad REL you leave.SUBJ
'It is sad that you are leaving.'

Furthermore, as Lambrecht (2001) notes and Scappini elaborates, corrective clefts come with heavy presuppositional demands. The content of the cleft clause in a corrective cleft must represent given information – specifically, the prior discourse must have established that the proposition (somebody repaired the car, in the example) is true, albeit attributed to the wrong agent. In Lambrecht's terms, the cleft's clause evokes a *knowledge presupposition* (the interlocutors accept that "someone repaired the car") and a *consciousness presupposition* (the interlocutors are aware that this proposition is under discussion at the moment). These conditions ensure that a corrective cleft indeed connects to a shared discourse context that it is correcting.

In summary, contrastive and corrective uses of French clefts highlight the interplay between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in focus marking. On the one hand, there is robust evidence that *c'est*-clefts inherently lend themselves to marking contrast – by syntactically isolating a focus and implying exclusion of alternatives. On the other hand, a critical examination of diverse data and frameworks reveals that clefts are not monolithic in function: their ability to convey contrast or correction is context-dependent and subject to *pragmatic modulation*. As for the corrective cleft, it can be seen, while pragmatically distinctive, either as a specialized sub-type with unique properties, or simply as one end of a spectrum of contrastive focus usage.

2.2.2.2. The new-information function

Traditionally, *c'est*-clefts have been associated with narrow focus, i.e. marking a single constituent as the focus, while presupposing or backgrounding the rest of the proposition (Lambrecht, 1994; Karssenbergh & Lahousse, K, 2018). However, recent literature challenges the notion that French clefts are only narrow-focus structures. An emerging view is that subject clefts in French can also encode broad focus, functioning in all-new statements where the entire proposition is in focus. This section, therefore, critically examines the evidence for broad-focus *c'est*-clefts, drawing on Clech-Darbon et al. (1999) and other studies, and addresses counterarguments from scholars who maintain that *c'est*-clefts cannot convey broad focus.

The skepticism about broad-focus clefts stems from the cleft's inherent biclausal form and associated presupposition. In a *c'est*-cleft like *C'est X qui Y*, the cleft clause (*qui Y*) is often said to carry a presupposition that "Y happened (with someone/thing)" – a proposition that, in principle, should be part of the common ground or at least inferable as we have discussed in previous sections. Given this, traditional analyses contended that a cleft must divide old vs. new information: the cleft clause provides the old information frame, and the clefted constituent provides the new information. By this reasoning, a truly broad-focus usage (where nothing in the sentence is presupposed or previously mentioned) would be anomalous for a cleft.

Indeed, many descriptions of French clefts emphasize their use in marking a particular constituent as focus and exclude the possibility that the entire sentence is focal. For example, it is often argued that French *c'est*-clefts *prototypically* realize a focus-background articulation (Karssenbergh & Lahousse, 2018). Lambrecht's (2001) influential framework treats the narrow-focus cleft as the prototypical cleft structure, essentially equating the function of *c'est*-clefts with answering a constituent question like (3a) (Karssenbergh & Lahousse, 2018). Under this view, if the discourse question is something broad like (3b), one would not expect a *c'est*-cleft in response, since there is no single narrow element to focus – instead a simple sentence or an existential construction would be used. Some authors have thus implicitly or explicitly claimed that *c'est*-clefts are inappropriate for all-new contexts. In French, an existential cleft (or presentational) construction with *il y a* (e.g., sentence (3c)) has been seen as the natural strategy for

broad focus (presenting a new event or participant), whereas *c'est*-clefts were thought to require a narrower focus (a specific *value* for an implied variable). This perspective would predict that *c'est*-clefts should not be used out of the blue or to introduce entirely new situations.

(3)

- (a) *Qui a fait X ?*
Who AUX do.PST X
'Who did X?'
- (b) *Que s' est- il passé ?*
What REFL have 3SG happen.PST
'What happened?'
- (c) *Il y a un homme qui arrive.*
3SG there be DEF.M.SG.man REL arrive.3SG. PRES
'There is a man arriving.'

Against the narrow-focus-only view, numerous studies have documented *c'est*-clefts occurring in broad-focus contexts. Clech-Darbon et al. (1999) were among the first to explicitly argue for the existence of broad-focus clefts in French, providing clear examples and functional analysis. They demonstrate that a *c'est*-cleft can answer a question such as (4a) by supplying a cleft sentence whose focus is effectively the entire proposition. For instance, if someone asks a question such as (4b), an appropriate reply might be an answer such as (4c). Here, pragmatically, the speaker is not contrasting "*la petite*" with anyone else, nor presupposing that someone fell and just specifying who. Rather, the entire event ("*la petite qui est tombé dans l'escalier*") is new information introduced into the discourse. The cleft form, however, allows the speaker to package this event in a structure that superficially looks like focus on *la petite* (the subject). Clech-Darbon et al. (1999) use this kind of examples to illustrate *clivée à focus large*, showing that the construction can be used even when the cleft clause (e.g. "*qui est tombé dans l'escalier*") is not previously known in the discourse. In such cases, the so-called "presupposition" of the cleft is *informative* (Prince, 1978), meaning it introduces new information rather than reiterating old information.

(4)

- (a) *Qu' est ce qui se passe?*
What be it REL REFL happen.3SG.PRES
'What is happening?'
- (b) *Tu sembles inquiète. Qu'est-ce qui se passe?*
You seem.2SG worried. What be it REL REFL happen.3SG.PRES
'You look worried. What's going on?'
- (c) *C'est la petite qui est tombé dans l'escalier.*
It be the little REL be fall.PST in the stairs
'It's the little one who fell down the stairs.'

Beyond constructed examples, broad-focus *c'est*-clefts appear in authentic usage across various contexts. One notable domain is storytelling and jokes. Scappini (2006, as cited in Karssenbergh & Lahousse, 2018) observes that many French jokes begin with a *c'est*-cleft in an all-new context. A familiar template is *C'est un [NP] qui...*, for example (5) as the opening line of a joke. There is no prior discourse setting up this scenario – the first thing the listener hears is the cleft. Clearly, the clause "*qui va en Corsica*" is not shared knowledge; the entire situation is being introduced. The *c'est*-cleft here functions to introduce a new protagonist ("un Français") and the initial action of the story, framing the discourse in a particular way. Notably, Clech-Darbon et al. (1999) also cite such examples, and Karssenbergh & Lahousse (2018) point out that the broad-focus *c'est*-cleft with an indefinite NP pivot is

especially common in joke narrative. These observations reinforce the view that *c'est*-clefts are not limited to marking contrast or selection from known alternatives.

- (5) *C'est un Français qui va en Corse.*
'It's a Frenchman who goes to Corsica.'

(Karssenbergs & Lahousse, 2018; p. 523)

Given the above evidence, the claim that *c'est*-clefts do not encode broad focus is no longer tenable. Counterexamples from Clech-Darbon et al. (1999) onward show that French speakers do use subject clefts when the entire proposition is informationally new. To reconcile this with the cleft's structure, it is important to distinguish semantic presupposition from pragmatic presupposition. Semantically, a cleft sentence like *C'est X qui Y* entails that "Y happened" (with someone unspecified) – this is part of its meaning. But pragmatically, the speaker need not assume the listener already knows "Y happened." In broad-focus usage, the speaker introduces "Y happened" as new information, effectively *accommodating* that clause into the discourse on the fly. Thus, the apparent paradox of a "broad-focus cleft" is resolved by recognizing that the cleft's presupposition can be pragmatically inert – it does not always signal old information in context, especially if the speaker uses the construction to introduce a scenario (Bourgoin, 2022).

In this respect, scholars who argued against broad-focus clefts often did not deny the data outright, but rather were coming from a theoretical stance that clefts are designed for narrow focus. For instance, some might acknowledge broad-focus examples but treat them as marked or special cases. However, as the studies indicate, such cases are not exceedingly rare or highly marked. Additionally, modern analyses (e.g. Karssenbergs & Lahousse, 2018) treat broad-focus clefts as part of the French information-structure repertoire, rather than an aberration.

In fine, the literature reviewed here converges on the idea that French *c'est*-clefts, including subject clefts, are not limited to narrow focus contexts. While the prototypical function of a cleft is indeed to focus a specific constituent against a presupposed background, French exhibits considerable pragmatic flexibility in how clefts are deployed.

2.3. Alternative strategies in Moroccan Arabic

This section explores how focus is marked in Moroccan Arabic (henceforth MA). The language under scrutiny employs numerous strategies; hence, not all focus-marking mechanisms will be discussed. Instead, the discussion will center on those that are most relevant to the acquisition of French *c'est*-clefts. In other words, though this section, we aim to establish a foundation for understanding the potential transfer effects from Moroccan Arabic to French in second language acquisition.

2.3.1. Fronting

Fronting involves moving a constituent to the beginning of a sentence to convey contrast or emphasis. In Moroccan Arabic, this syntactic strategy plays a crucial role in marking focus. However, for understanding the functioning of fronting as a focusing strategy, there must be a solid understanding of MA word order. This is because movement for focusing inherently involves altering a sentence's unmarked syntactic configuration.

The word order of MA has been the source of ongoing debate, with scholars being divided between those who argue that the unmarked order of the language is SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) and those who argue that the unmarked order of the language is VSO (Verb-Subject-Object), with SVO been derived from movement of the verb. Traditional accounts classify MA as a VSO language, in line with Classical Arabic (CA) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This view is supported by research emphasizing that VSO is structurally neutral, whereas SVO emerges only under certain discourse conditions (El-Yasin, 1985, as cited in Announi, 2021; Brustad, 2000; El Kadi & Kably, 2025). Research in this respect argues that, since CA is unambiguously VSO, then MA inherits this syntactic pattern and, hence, becomes the most frequent and default order of the language. Besides, the flexibility of the post-verbal subject of MA and the inclination of the verb for appearing sentence-initial also coincide with research classifying Arabic dialects generally as being predominantly VSO (Brustad, 2000).

Other researchers, however, propose that SVO is the unmarked word order in MA, with VSO emerging through verb movement (Announi, 2021). From this perspective, the derivation of SVO follows a subject movement process, similar to English, where the subject moves from the Specifier of vP to the Specifier of TP while the verb moves from v to T. This claim draws on Greenberg's (1963) typological classification¹, which implied that VSO languages are a minority worldwide, and thus, MA may be undergoing a natural shift toward an SVO configuration. Furthermore, this perspective aligns with analyses of other Arabic dialects, such as Jordanian Arabic (El-Yasin, 1985, as cited in Announi, 2021), Lebanese Arabic (Shlonsky, 1997, as cited in Announi, 2021), and Tunisian Arabic (Mahfoudhi, 2002, as cited in Announi, 2021), where SVO is argued to be the basic word order, with VSO derived via movement.

Despite the arguments in favor of SVO as the unmarked order, this claim has not gained widespread acceptance. Recent studies continue to support VSO as the basic word order of MA (El Kadi & Kably, H, 2025). In this respect, the claim that VSO remains the default order is reinforced by observations that SVO is restricted to marked discourse contexts, such as focus and topic-shift constructions. This suggests that while both VSO and SVO are possible word orders in MA, the latter is employed primarily for emphasis or contrastive purposes, rather than being the default order.

Since fronting alters the typical word order, understanding which structures are marked or unmarked is essential in identifying how MA marks focus syntactically. While VSO is neutral, alternative structures such as SVO, OSV, and OVS are marked and used for focus and emphasis. The SVO structure, although marked, is more natural than OSV or OVS, as it requires no additional syntactic modifications aside from fronting the subject. This means that, while the subject moves to the beginning of the sentence, the rest of the sentence remains structurally intact, maintaining fluency. In contrast, OSV and OVS require morphosyntactic adjustments, particularly through the use of object pronouns or clitics as we shall see below, making them less frequent and more constrained by grammatical rules.

SVO fronting is a widely used focus-marking strategy in MA, particularly in answering wh-questions. For example, in response to a question such as (6a), the focused answer would be a sentence such as (6b). Here, the fronting of the subject "John" marks it as the focal element, signalling that it is the most salient piece of information in the discourse. In contrast, the neutral VSO structure shown in (6c) lacks any overt focus-marking and functions as a default declarative statement. Moreover, in a contrastive/corrective context, an SVO structure such as both (6d) and (6e) with a resumptive pronoun after a negation marker – is acceptable, whereas a VSO structure cannot achieve the same effect.

- (6)
- (a) *Shkun lli kla l-banana?*
Who REL eat.PST.3SG.2M banana.DEF
'Who ate the banana?'
 - (b) *John kla l-banana.*
John eat.PAST.3SG.M banana.DEF
'John ate the banana' (El kadi & Kably, 2025)
 - (c) *Kla John l-banana.*
eat.PAST.3SG.M John banana.DEF
'John ate the banana.' (El kadi & Kably, 2025)
 - (d) *La, Matthew kla l-banana.*
NEG Matthew eat.PAST banana.DEF
 - (e) *La, Matthew kla-ha.*
NEG Matthew eat.PAST.3SG.M RP²

¹Greenberg's classification was based on a limited sample of languages. Therefore, we cannot simply take his generalization to deduce our underlying structure.

At first glance, we notice that the SVO fronting is relatively straightforward. However, not all structures are that simple. Object fronting (OSV and OVS), for instance, do require additional syntactic modifications. In both structures, the verb must be accompanied by a resumptive pronoun (i.e., '-ha'). This ensures acceptability as illustrated in (7a) and (7c). Without it, as in (7b) and (7d), the sentence becomes unacceptable.

- (7)
- | | | |
|-----|--|-------|
| (a) | <i>L-banana John kla-ha.</i> | (OSV) |
| | <i>banana.DEF John eat.PAST.3SG.M.RP</i> | |
| (b) | <i>*L-banana John kla.</i> | (OSV) |
| | <i>banana.DEF John eat.PAST.3SG.M</i> | |
| (c) | <i>L-banana kla-ha John.</i> | (OVS) |
| | <i>banana.DEF eat.PAST.3SG.M.RP John</i> | |
| (d) | <i>*L-banana kla John.</i> | (OVS) |
| | <i>banana.DEF eat.PAST.3SG.M John</i> | |

These structures are primarily used in contrastive focus constructions, where the speaker emphasizes the object as the primary discourse element. The need for object clitics in OVS structures aligns with findings from El Kadi and Kably (2025), who emphasize that object fronting in MA requires cliticization to maintain grammatical coherence.

In this respect, both OSV and OVS word orders in Moroccan Arabic serve the primary function of fronting the object to signal contrast or discourse-new focus. However, their distinct structural arrangements suggest a hierarchical distribution of focus. In OSV, the subject retains a relatively strong presence, maintaining a secondary prominence after the object, while the verb is backgrounded, adhering to a focus-background partition in which new information is emphasized early in the sentence. In contrast, OVS not only foregrounds the object but also shifts additional prominence to the verb, effectively de-emphasizing the subject, which aligns with patterns of verb focus found in various languages. This distinction follows a structured hierarchy where one element dominates while others retain secondary prominence based on syntactic position and discourse relevance. Though this study does not aim to argue for or against specific focus strategies, we have observed that focus in these constructions is distributed rather than strictly linear, with different word orders encoding subtle pragmatic contrasts, such as emphasis on the action versus emphasis on the agent. The prominence of the verb in OVS constructions suggests that focus is strategically redistributed rather than cyclically assigned, aligning with Alternative Semantics (Rooth, 1992) and Information Structure Theory (Lambrecht, 1994). Thus, the contrast between OSV and OVS is best understood as a pragmatic restructuring of prominence, where word order manipulations interact with discourse salience to highlight different aspects of the sentence.

Overall, fronting in MA serves multiple discourse functions including marking focus, expressing contrast, and organizing information within a sentence. By fronting a subject (SVO) or an object (OSV, OVS), speakers create a hierarchical structure that prioritizes the fronted element as the focal point. This process is particularly relevant in contrastive discourse, where competing referents are being distinguished, or in topic continuity, where a speaker shifts the focus to a new referent within the discourse.

2.3.2. The use of the [huwa.. lli..] construction

Another important focus marking in Moroccan Arabic is the *huwa... lli...* construction which we argue serves as an emphatic device. This structure, which includes the pronouns *huwa* (masculine) or *hiya* (feminine) along with the relative marker *lli*,

² RP stands for Resumptive Pronoun.

highlights a specific constituent within the sentence. At first glance, it appears to resemble French cleft constructions. However, it does not conform entirely to standard cleft syntactic properties, as we shall discuss in this section.

The *huwa... lli...* construction enables speakers to emphasize different sentence elements, including subjects, objects, and adjuncts, as (8) illustrates.

- (8)
- | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------|
| (a) | <i>Huwa Hamza lli dar had ši.</i>
He Hamza REL did.PFV.3SG.M this.DEM thing | (Subject focus) |
| (b) | <i>Hamza huwa lli dar had ši.</i>
Hamza he REL did.PFV.3SG.M this.DEM thing | (Subject focus) |
| (c) | <i>Hamza lli dar had ši.</i>
Hamza REL did.PFV.3SG.M this.DEM thing | (Subject focus) |
| (d) | <i>Huwa had ši dar-o Hamza.</i>
He this.DEM thing did OBJ.3SG.M RP Hamza | (Object focus) |
| (e) | <i>#Huwa had ši lli dar-o Hamza.</i>
He this.DEM thing REL did OBJ.3SG.M RP Hamza | (Object focus) |
| (f) | <i>Huwa had ši lli dar Hamza.</i>
He this.DEM thing REL did OBJ.3SG.M Hamza | (Object focus) |

These examples highlight an important observation. *That is, huwa... lli...* frequently follows a pattern similar to cleft constructions as in (8a). Nevertheless, its syntactic flexibility makes it distinct. The fact that some formations are grammatical with or without *huwa* (e.g., (8a), (8b) and (8c)), and that *lli* itself is sometimes optional (e.g., (8d)), challenges the claim that Moroccan Arabic clefting follows a strict pattern. Crucially, the grammatical distinction between examples (8e) and (8f) hinges on the presence of the resumptive pronoun -o. In (8e), the structure is perhaps unacceptable precisely because the relative marker *lli* co-occurs with the resumptive pronoun -o. Conversely, example (8f) is acceptable, as it excludes the resumptive pronoun, thereby conforming to Moroccan Arabic syntactic norms.

Ennaji et al. (2005), in this view, argue that *huwa... lli...* should be classified as a cleft construction. Their reasoning relies on three primary claims. First, the presence of thematic and focal prominence. They assert that *huwa... lli...* provides both thematic and focal emphasis by moving a constituent from its original position to the left periphery. Secondly, they claim that the addition of *lli* introduces a cleft clause, making the construction biclausal, akin to cleft structures in French (*c'est... qui/que...*). Thirdly, they propose that *huwa... lli...* constructions consistently follow a strict clefting pattern “*XP (huwa/hija) lli ... XP = NP, AP, PP, AdvP, Rel. Clause*” (p. 122), with *huwa* marking focus, followed by *lli* introducing the clefted clause.

While these claims seem plausible at first glance, there are several arguments against treating *huwa... lli...* as a true cleft construction. A major counterargument to Ennaji et al.'s (2005) analysis is that the presence of *lli* is not obligatory. True clefts, such as those found in French (*c'est Jean qui...*), require a fixed structure where the cleft clause is necessary (Dufter, 2008). However, in Moroccan Arabic, the omission of *lli* does not always result in unacceptability, as the example (8d) shows. But the structure (8e) is unacceptable, breaking the supposed fixed pattern of clefting. Moreover, unlike French clefts, where *c'est* is required (Dufter, 2008; Bourgoïn, 2017), the pronoun *huwa* can often be omitted in MA while maintaining the same focus reading, as (8c) illustrates.

To this end, we recommend that future research should further investigate the syntactic and pragmatic behavior of *huwa... lli...* constructions in spontaneous discourse. As for this study, though we fully understand the drawbacks, we shall adopt the author's understanding of this strategy as a native speaker MA, prioritizing the difference between MA and FR.

2.4. Theoretical framework and affecting factors

This study adopts a theoretical framework centered on the Interface Hypothesis (IH) and cross-linguistic influence, specifically L1 transfer. The IH (Sorace, 2006, 2011) proposes that linguistic phenomena situated at the interface between syntax and discourse-pragmatics pose persistent challenges for second language (L2) learners. While learners often achieve near-native proficiency in purely syntactic structures, they frequently exhibit residual optionality or delayed mastery of constructions that require integrating grammatical knowledge with pragmatic and contextual information (Tsimpli & Sorace, 2006; Sorace & Serratrice, 2009). French *c'est*-clefts exemplify such interface phenomena; they require learners to manage a complex syntactic construction – consisting of the cleft pronoun (*ce*), the copula (*est*), the clefted constituent, and the relative clause – and simultaneously employ it appropriately for pragmatic functions such as contrastive or corrective focus (Lambrecht, 2001; Destruel, 2013). According to the IH, even advanced learners may experience persistent difficulties in contexts that demand real-time integration of syntactic forms with discourse constraints, resorting instead to simpler, often L1-driven strategies when faced with communicative pressure (Sorace, 2011; Belletti & Guasti, 2015).

Another crucial factor in understanding these acquisition challenges is cross-linguistic influence, particularly L1 transfer (Odlin, 1989). L1 transfer refers to the phenomenon where learners apply linguistic patterns from their native language to the target language, especially during early developmental stages or when faced with unfamiliar structures. In the context of French *c'est*-clefts, the distinctiveness of MA in its approach to marking contrastive and corrective focus significantly influences learners' interlanguage development. Unlike French, MA does not employ dedicated cleft constructions but rather relies on flexible word-order adjustments and the use of *huwa...lli* construction. Consequently, Moroccan learners of French may transfer these familiar patterns into French, resulting in errors such as omitting obligatory elements (e.g., *c'est*, *qui/que*) or inappropriately accepting sentences structurally permissible in MA but ungrammatical in French.

The extent and nature of L1 transfer and interface-related challenges are moderated by two key factors: language proficiency and language contact. Language proficiency profoundly impacts the degree to which L1 transfer manifests. Learners at lower proficiency levels rely heavily on their native language structures, often resulting in pronounced negative transfer. As proficiency increases, however, learners gain greater sensitivity to the nuances of the target language and gradually inhibit inappropriate L1 influence, aligning more closely with native norms (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

Language contact, or the extent and richness of learners' exposure to the target language, also critically influences L2 acquisition outcomes. Greater exposure to French through formal education, media consumption, and daily interactions provides learners with abundant input, facilitating the acquisition of syntactic forms and their appropriate pragmatic uses. Extensive language contact allows learners more opportunities to observe and internalize native-like usage of *c'est*-clefts in various contexts, thus diminishing negative transfer effects and enhancing their ability to navigate complex interface phenomena (Rothman, 2009).

In summary, this study employs the Interface Hypothesis and L1 transfer theory to explore Moroccan Arabic speakers' acquisition of French *c'est*-clefts. By examining the interplay of these theoretical perspectives and considering how proficiency level and language contact modulate learners' performance, the research aims to elucidate the persistent challenges at the syntax–pragmatics interface, contributing valuable insights into second language acquisition theory and pedagogical practice.

2.5. Hypotheses generation

Drawing on the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace, 2011; Tsimpli & Sorace, 2006) and research on L1 transfer (Odlin, 1989; Gass & Selinker, 2008), we derive the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Moroccan Arabic learners are expected to show greater acceptance of non-target structures, such as clefts lacking *c'est*, cleft missing the complementizer (*qui/que*), or of fronted structures in contexts where canonical clefts are typically required.

- **Hypothesis 2:** They will show reduced sensitivity to the contrastive-focus licensing conditions that restrict cleft choice in native usage; and they will over-extend clefting to mark new-information focus in objects.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Increasing proficiency will yield large gains on formal-syntactic judgments (error types in H1) but only modest gains on discourse-pragmatic judgments (H2), in line with Interface Hypothesis predictions that external-interface mappings remain vulnerable at advanced levels.
- **Hypothesis 4:** Variation in the amount, richness, and contextual authenticity of learners' French contact will moderate their acceptability-judgment ratings on both (a) the formal syntactic properties and (b) the discourse-pragmatic appropriateness of c'est-cleft constructions, without a priori assumptions about whether greater contact will raise or lower those ratings.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

The study employed a quantitative, quasi-experimental cross-sectional comparative approach. This design allows for examining naturally occurring differences among groups without manipulation of variables. By comparing linguistic behaviors across distinct proficiency groups, it enables insights into developmental trajectories and interface-related acquisition difficulties, consistent with previous SLA research practices (Kumar, 2011).

3.2. Participants

Participants (n=213) were recruited via convenience sampling among French natives and MA learners of French either enrolled in French institutions or having recently completed the Test de Connaissance du Français (TCF). After data cleaning and addressing missing responses through listwise deletion, an equal-N random sampling procedure resulted in five balanced groups (n=165, 33 per group): one native French (FR) control group and four MA learner groups stratified by proficiency levels (A2, B1, B2, C1).

3.3. Research instrument

An acceptability judgment test (AJT) was administered to both MA learners and French native speakers. The test consisted of 14 experimental conditions (see Table 1), each containing three items, assessing grammaticality and naturalness judgments. However, to avoid fatigue (42 items is a lot for one person) and to prevent participants from seeing multiple variations of essentially the *same* context which might prime them or make the manipulation obvious, we split the items into three versions of the questionnaire (Version A, B, C). Each participant completed only one version, thus seeing only one item per condition. Additionally, 14 filler items were included to obscure the study's intent and reduce response bias. Additionally, MA learners completed a supplementary language contact Likert-scale questionnaire to quantify their exposure to French and self-reported their proficiency level based on the TCF.

Table 1. The judgment acceptability task conditions.

	Condition	Description
Contrastive/corrective focus	1	Subject cleft
	2	Object cleft
	3	SVO order, focus on the subject
	4	SVO order, focus on the object
	5	#Subject fronting
	6	#Object fronting
	7	*Subject cleft; missing the comp qui
	8	*Object cleft; missing the comp que
	9	*Subject cleft; missing c'est
	10	*Object cleft; missing c'est
New-information focus	11	Subject cleft

12	#Object cleft
13	Subject reduced cleft
14	#Object reduced cleft

3.4. Data analysis procedures

Initial data screening involved tests for normality, which justified the use of non-parametric analyses. Consequently, Friedman's test assessed within-group differences across conditions, while between-group differences were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests. Correlational analyses between language contact and acceptability judgments employed Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient, providing robust insights into the relationship between exposure and pragmatic-syntactic mastery.

3.5. Validity and reliability

Instrument validity was established through face validity by an expert in second language acquisition and linguistics, ensuring the AJT measured intended linguistic phenomena. Reliability for the AJT was assessed by examining internal consistency – specifically, comparing mean rating consistency within each experimental condition among the native French group. Reliability of the language contact questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, confirming its appropriateness for measuring participants' exposure to French.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Descriptive results – natives vs. learners' acceptability

Overall rating patterns for native speakers aligned with theoretical expectations of French *c'est*-cleft usage, whereas learner patterns showed several deviations. *Native French speakers* overwhelmingly judged well-formed clefts in appropriate contexts as fully acceptable, while malformed or pragmatically odd variants were roundly rejected. For example, native speakers gave near-ceiling mean ratings ($M \approx 5.0$, $SD \approx 0.0$) for canonical subject cleft sentences in both a corrective focus context and a new-information context, indicating unanimous grammaticality and naturalness. In contrast, sentences with missing obligatory elements were deemed unacceptable by natives: e.g., a cleft missing the copula *c'est* or the complementizer *qui/que* received mean ratings around the floor of the scale ($M \approx 1.2$ – 1.8) with minimal variance. Native judgments also reflected expected discourse constraints. They strongly preferred subject clefts for new information focus, while showing skepticism toward object clefts in those same contexts (mean naturalness ~ 3.5 – 4.0 , with some disagreement). Moreover, natives found left-fronted focus constructions (simple topicalization without *c'est*) highly unnatural (mean naturalness ~ 1.3 – 1.6) even if grammatically possible, especially for object focus. These native-speaker baselines establish that (a) a correctly formed *c'est*-cleft is both grammatical and appropriate in context, (b) omitting *c'est* or *qui/que* is categorically ungrammatical, and (c) using non-cleft word order to mark focus is disfavored pragmatically.

The L1-MA learners, in contrast, exhibited broader acceptability across structures and contexts, indicating areas of divergence. Learners *agreed* with natives on some basic points: notably, they too rated standard SVO word order sentences as fully acceptable, and they correctly recognized that a well-formed cleft is acceptable. For instance, learners gave near-perfect ratings ($M \approx 4.9$ – 5.0) to a prototypical *c'est*-cleft focusing a subject in a contrastive context, mirroring native judgments. However, learners over-accepted several non-target-like constructions. They were far more tolerant of “incomplete” clefts missing obligatory elements and of atypical focus-marking strategies than native speakers were. For example, MA learners on average rated a *subject cleft missing the copula* (*c'est*) as moderately acceptable ($M \approx 3.3$ on grammaticality) whereas natives uniformly rejected it ($M \approx 1.2$). Similarly, an *object cleft missing the complementizer* (*que*) was judged fairly acceptable by learners ($M \approx 4.3$ grammatically), despite natives' near-total rejection ($M \approx 1.6$). These discrepancies suggest that many learners did *not* fully recognize the ungrammaticality of clefts lacking the copula or complementizer – an important structural influence of L1, since Moroccan Arabic has no equivalent fixed copula in focus constructions. Learners also showed a high acceptance of fronted focus constructions (e.g. OSV word order to highlight an object) that natives found pragmatically infelicitous. A striking example is subject-fronting for contrastive focus: learners rated sentences with a fronted subject (and no *c'est*) as natural in a corrective context ($M \approx 4.5$ on naturalness), whereas natives gave the same sentences the lowest possible rating ($M \approx 1.4$). In sum, whereas natives applied strict syntactic and discourse criteria in their judgments, L2 learners displayed a lenient acceptance of any “plausible” focus construction – including those that are grammatically illicit or contextually odd in French. This broad-strokes

profile already implicates L1 transfer and developing interface sensitivity: learners seem to accept sentences that align with Moroccan Arabic's more flexible word-order and optional particle strategies for focus, even when those sentences violate French norms.

4.2. Group differences and statistical analyses

Non-parametric tests confirmed that acceptability judgments differed significantly across the 14 conditions and between groups, underpinning the descriptive trends above. A Friedman test on the combined sample ($N = 165$) showed a highly significant effect of condition on ratings ($\chi^2(13) > 1200$, $p < .001$ for both grammaticality and naturalness), i.e. certain conditions were significantly rated higher than others overall. Crucially, post-hoc Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the FR and MA groups on each condition revealed that the groups diverged on exactly those non-canonical constructions highlighted before. In terms of grammaticality judgments (structural well-formedness), learners differed most from natives on five sentence types: (1) Subject focus fronting (SVO without *c'est*), (2) Object focus fronting, and clefts missing (3) the complementizer in subject clefts, (4) the complementizer in object clefts, and (5) the copula in subject clefts. All these differences were statistically significant ($p < .001$ in each case) with large effect sizes (r ranging ~ 0.28 to 0.63) favoring higher learner acceptance. For example, Condition 05 (contrastive context requiring a cleft, but realized as a fronted SVO without *c'est*) had $U = 554.5$, $p < .001$, with MA learners rating it far more grammatical (mean rank 95.3 vs 33.8 for natives). Likewise, missing-*que* clefts showed large disparities: learners rated a cleft missing *qui/que* as grammatical much more often than natives did (e.g., Condition 07, $U = 1222$, $p < .001$, $r \approx .59$). In contrast, no significant group differences appeared on fully grammatical, pragmatically normal clefts – e.g., both groups equally accepted a standard object cleft in a contrastive context (Condition 02, $p > .01$ after correction) and both rejected an object cleft missing *c'est* (Condition 10).

Turning to discourse-appropriateness (naturalness) judgments, a similar analysis found that 8 of the 14 conditions showed significant FR–MA differences in contextual acceptability. The learners were overly permissive in both focus contexts. In contrastive focus contexts, L1-MA learners rated several sentence types as more natural than natives did: notably object clefts ($U = 1285$, $p < .001$, $r \approx .35$), object-focused SVO sentences ($U = 1314$, $p < .001$, $r \approx .45$), and fronted focus constructions – both subject-fronting ($U = 24.5$, $p < .001$, $r \approx .73$) and object-fronting ($U = 1604$, $p < .05$, $r \approx .19$). These results confirm that Moroccan learners find non-cleft strategies far more acceptable for expressing contrastive/corrective focus than natives, who strongly prefer clefting or canonical order in such contexts. Learners even judged ungrammatical cleft variants as pragmatically fine: for instance, an object cleft missing *que* in a contrastive context was rated much more natural by learners (mean rank 94.3 vs 37.7; $U = 683$, $p < .001$, $r = .50$). In new-information focus contexts, where French usage dictates that only a subject cleft (or a non-cleft neutral sentence) is felicitous, learners again failed to show the native constraint. They rated object clefts in new-information contexts as entirely acceptable, significantly more so than natives. For a full object cleft introducing new information (Condition 12), $U = 703.5$ ($p < .001$, $r \approx .52$), and for a reduced object cleft (Condition 14), $U = 1251$ ($p < .001$, $r \approx .40$). In contrast, learners and natives did *not* differ on the standard subject cleft in a new-information context (conditions 11 and 13., both groups rated it highly appropriate). Together, these findings indicate that learners broadly “over-accept” cleft constructions across contexts: they do not distinguish much between subject vs. object clefts or between full vs. reduced clefts in terms of when each is pragmatically licit. The largest FR–MA gaps in naturalness ratings appeared in precisely those cases requiring fine discourse discrimination – e.g. fronting vs. clefting, or object cleft usage in new-information contexts – with effect sizes up to $r = .73$. These results reinforce that the syntax–pragmatics interface is a persistent hurdle: MA learners, focused on conveying the intended meaning, often overlook subtle infelicities that native speakers pick up on.

4.2.1. Proficiency effects

We next examined how learners' performance varied across proficiency levels, to identify which aspects of *c'est*-cleft usage improve with proficiency and which remain difficult (RQ3). Non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed significant proficiency-group differences on nearly all conditions where learners as a whole had diverged from natives. In general, higher proficiency was associated with more target-like judgments on both grammatical form and discourse function, though the rate and shape of improvement differed by condition. Many patterns were monotonic, showing steady convergence toward native norms: As learners' proficiency increased from A2 → B1 → B2 → C1, their acceptance of deviant forms declined, and their sensitivity to contextual constraints sharpened. For example, for a sentence like a *subject cleft missing qui* (Condition 07_g), A2 beginners often failed to recognize the error – rating it as relatively acceptable – whereas C1 advanced learners correctly judged it unacceptable,

yielding $\chi^2(3) = 99.01$, $p < .001$ across the four groups. Likewise, acceptance of an *object cleft without c'est* dropped significantly from the lower levels to the higher ($H \approx 98$, $p < .001$); by B2 or C1, most learners understood that the copula is obligatory. These findings suggest that basic syntactic knowledge of cleft structure (the requirement for *c'est*, *qui/que*) is largely acquired by the upper-intermediate level. Indeed, on some simpler items even A2 learners performed near ceiling – e.g. all groups knew that a correctly formed object cleft in a contrastive context (Condition 02) was grammatical and appropriate, so no proficiency differences arose there. The persistent trouble spots, rather, were those involving either finer-grained syntactic errors or pragmatic nuance. Here proficiency effects were pronounced, but not always strictly linear. For instance, object-fronted sentences in a contrastive context (Condition 06_n) showed a dramatic drop in acceptability between the A2 group and all higher groups: beginners often did not perceive the pragmatic oddity and rated them as natural, whereas by B1/B2 the learners had become much more critical (A2 vs. B1/B2 differences $p < .01$). By contrast, an object *c'est*-cleft in a contrastive context (Condition 02_n) showed a *U-shaped* pattern: the B1 learners were *more* accepting than either beginners or advanced learners. This anomaly (B1 > C1 acceptance) suggests that learners may go through an overgeneralization phase – possibly around intermediate level – where they briefly overuse or over-accept clefts before “retreating” at higher proficiency. Despite a few such non-linear quirks, the overall trajectory was clear. By the C1 level, learners’ judgments on most conditions had moved much closer to native speakers’. For example, C1 learners strongly rejected clefts missing *que* or *c'est* (much as natives did), and they showed sharply reduced acceptance of using object clefts in broad-focus contexts (penalizing those nearly as much as natives by C1). That said, even C1s did not *completely* converge on natives for every discourse judgment – a few subtle interface divergences lingered, consistent with the idea that near-native speakers may still exhibit residual optionality at the syntax– pragmatics boundary (per the Interface Hypothesis). Notably, no proficiency effect was found for the one clearly acceptable alternative strategy: using a simple SVO sentence in a contrastive context focusing the object (Condition 04_n) had uniformly high naturalness ratings across all learner levels (and natives). This indicates that even low-level learners correctly recognized when a non-cleft sentence could pragmatically suffice (likely because the context made the focus clear without clefting). In summary, proficiency gains led to broad improvements, especially in filtering out L1-based forms that are ungrammatical or pragmatically infelicitous in French. Lower-level learners (A2/B1) made many non-target judgments – e.g. accepting reduced/object clefts in the wrong contexts and missing obligatory elements – but these *decreased sharply* by the advanced stage. The data thus depict a developmental progression in which syntax is mastered earlier than pragmatics: foundational grammar rules (word order, presence of *c'est/que*) show up by intermediate levels, whereas full sensitivity to discourse context emerges only at advanced proficiency, in line with the idea that interface knowledge requires extensive experience.

4.2.2. Language contact effects

Finally, we investigated whether learners with greater French exposure/contact exhibited more native-like judgments on the cleft tasks (RQ4). To quantify language contact, a composite score was used (based on how frequently learners engage with French outside class, via media, social interaction, etc.). We first computed Spearman rank correlations between contact scores and acceptability ratings for each condition. This analysis revealed a robust pattern: more exposure to French correlates with more target-like performance. In particular, contact was strongly *negatively* correlated with the acceptance of deviant forms. Learners who reported rich French contact were far less likely to tolerate ungrammatical or infelicitous clefts. For example, the correlation between contact and grammaticality ratings for *subject clefts missing qui* was $\tilde{r} = -0.805$, $p < .001$, indicating that high-contact learners almost categorically rejected that error, whereas low-contact learners were more split. Similarly large correlations were found for other missing-element conditions (e.g. *object cleft missing que*: $\tilde{r} \approx -0.65$; *cleft missing c'est*: $\tilde{r} \approx -0.68$ to -0.77). In essence, heavy exposure learners behaved more like natives by penalizing these inappropriate uses. There were also a few modest *positive* correlations in expected directions: for instance, contact slightly *increased* certainty on obviously correct forms (e.g. $\tilde{r} \approx +0.19$, $p < .05$, for rating a standard subject cleft grammatical). This suggests that extensive contact may boost learners’ confidence or consistency in applying L2 norms – they fully accept what should be accepted, and strongly reject what should be rejected.

To further interpret contact effects, we must note that language contact was itself tightly linked to proficiency in our sample. A follow-up analysis (Kruskal–Wallis) showed that higher proficiency groups tended to have much higher contact scores ($H(3) = 107.3$, $p < .001$), with mean contact ranks increasing almost linearly from A2 through C1. This is unsurprising – those who reached advanced levels likely did so via more frequent use and immersion in French. It does mean, however, that contact and proficiency effects are interwoven. We cannot completely disentangle whether “extra contact” independently causes improved

performance, or if more proficient learners simply seek out or accumulate more contact. In practice, both are probably true and mutually reinforcing: greater exposure leads to learning opportunities, and higher proficiency enables learners to engage in more complex interactions (creating a virtuous cycle of input and development). In our data, the bottom line for RQ4 is that learners with rich L2 exposure deviate less from native speaker norms. They have internalized the need for *c'est* and *qui/que*, and they better grasp when clefts are appropriate or not, compared to peers who use French only in limited settings. This underscores the role of input-driven learning and immersion: meaningful contact provides learners with repeated evidence of correct cleft usage (and perhaps feedback on errors), gradually tuning their intuitions to more native-like settings. Thus, while classroom instruction lays the groundwork, it appears that extensive real-world exposure is crucial for mastering a complex interface structure like the French cleft.

5. Discussion of main findings

In light of these results, we now address each research question and interpret the findings within the broader context of second language acquisition theory. The discussion draws on our statistical patterns from the analysis above, connecting them to known concepts such as cross-linguistic transfer and the Interface Hypothesis. We also consider how increased proficiency and input help learners approach target-like use of clefts, and what challenges tend to persist.

5.1. Mastery of cleft syntax (RQ1)

Our findings reveal that Moroccan Arabic learners face substantial difficulties in mastering the formal syntax of French clefts, often accepting cleft constructions that native speakers categorically reject. Specifically, learners showed a significantly higher tolerance for deviant cleft forms lacking obligatory elements. For example, L2 learners frequently *accepted sentences missing the copula c'est* or the complementizer (*qui/que*), whereas native speakers uniformly judged such sentences ungrammatical (with a large divergence, $r \approx .60$). This indicates learners have *only partially acquired* the strict structural template of the French *c'est*-cleft. Instead, learners seem to rely on simplified structures reminiscent of L1 patterns. In Moroccan Arabic, focus is marked by strategies that do not require an invariant copular element – for instance, using particles like *rah* or constructions like *huwa... lli...* ("it is X that...") where the copula is not a separate morpheme. The relative particle *lli* can even be optional in some Arabic focus constructions. Thus, MA learners often do *not perceive the absence of c'est* or *qui/que* as fatal, projecting their L1's looser requirements onto French.

In contrast, learners and natives showed *strong agreement* on canonical word order sentences. Both groups rated simple SVO sentences (with no cleft) as fully grammatical and acceptable when used in a context that does not strictly demand clefting (e.g. a broad-focus or neutral context, or even some contrastive contexts). This alignment (all mean ratings ~ 4.8 –5) suggests that where French and MA share structural similarities – such as basic subject–verb–object order – L1 transfer does *not* pose a problem. Moroccan Arabic's canonical order is SVO as well; thus, learners had no trouble recognizing a standard French sentence like *Nadya a acheté le livre* as grammatically correct, even in a corrective-focus scenario. In these simpler contexts, L1 interference is minimal and learners perform on par with natives.

However, when it came to alternative focus-marking structures, learner judgments diverged sharply from native intuition. MA learners displayed a *remarkably high acceptance of fronted focus constructions without c'est* – sentences that native speakers find ungrammatical in French. For instance, learners considered a fronted subject construction (e.g., *Le professeur, il a corrigé le devoir* to emphasize "the professor") an acceptable way to mark contrast, whereas natives overwhelmingly rejected that structure in the given context. Statistically, this was one of the largest group differences ($r \approx .63$) in our analysis. The pronounced learner acceptance of word-order fronting strongly suggests L1-driven transfer: Moroccan Arabic commonly allows fronting of a focused constituent (often accompanied by a particle or a change in intonation) to express contrast or emphasis. MA learners carried this permissive stance into French, essentially treating *c'est* as optional and seeing nothing wrong with a left-dislocated focus. In their interlanguage, a sentence like *Marie, Ø a chanté la chanson* ("Marie, [she] sang the song") might seem acceptable because in MA an equivalent structure could be used for focus. Native French grammar, of course, does not license such a structure – a focused element typically requires the *c'est... que* frame or else remains in situ with prosodic emphasis. The learners' failure to impose the French-specific requirement indicates an incomplete acquisition of cleft syntax rules. They appear to conflate grammatically acceptable focus constructions with any *functionally* plausible strategy. In short, if a sentence gets the focus meaning across (even by L1 methods), many learners will judge it acceptable, missing the fine point that French clefts have non-negotiable structural elements.

Taken together, RQ1's findings highlight that Moroccan learners struggle with the formal assembly of cleft sentences. Missing elements (copulas, complementizers) that instantly alarm native speakers often slip past learner judgments. Also, learners overgeneralize acceptable focus strategies, approving structures like simple fronting that are grammatical in MA but not appropriate in French. These issues underscore the role of negative L1 transfer at the syntactic level: because Moroccan Arabic lacks a direct analogue to the *c'est*-cleft, learners default to familiar L1 patterns (flexible word order, optional particles) and consequently misjudge French-specific requirements. In theoretical terms, this outcome aligns with classic cross-linguistic transfer theory (Odlin, 1989), which predicts that L2 elements absent in the L1 will be difficult to acquire and may lead to *substitution or omission errors* based on L1 habits. Here we see learners omitting *c'est* or *que* (since no equivalent exists in MA clefting) and substituting French clefts with fronting structures (since MA often fronts to mark focus).

Notably, despite these syntactic lapses, learners did fine on structurally simpler sentences, confirming that not all areas are equally affected. It appears that core syntax vs. interface-heavy syntax is a crucial distinction. Learners can master "pure" syntax (like basic SVO order) relatively well, but syntax that interfaces with discourse (like cleft constructions) remains shaky. This pattern is predicted by the Interface Hypothesis of Sorace (2011) and colleagues. According to the IH, purely syntactic properties are acquired to near-native levels, whereas structures that require integrating syntax with pragmatics cause *persistent difficulty* even for advanced learners. Our results strongly support this view: L1-MA learners had little trouble with straightforward French syntax in isolation, but struggled at the syntax-pragmatics juncture, as evidenced by their patchy performance on clefts (which require knowing not just how to form them, but when to use them). In essence, mastering syntax alone is insufficient – learners must internalize the pragmatic conditions that govern that syntax. The MA group's frequent acceptance of inappropriate or ill-formed clefts illustrates that they have not fully connected the dots between form and function. They might know the surface syntax of a cleft to some extent, but they *overextend* alternative forms due to incomplete interface knowledge. This finding is a clear instantiation of an IH scenario: residual optionality in learner judgments precisely where syntax and discourse intersect, long after core grammar might be in place.

5.2. Pragmatic use of clefts in discourse (RQ2)

Our results indicate that Moroccan Arabic learners readily accept *c'est*-clefts in both types of focus contexts, but they do not consistently apply native-like pragmatic restrictions on when and how clefts should be used. In many cases, learners exhibited a pattern of over-permissiveness in discourse: they treated virtually any structure that conveys focus as acceptable, whereas native speakers were more discerning.

In contrastive-focus contexts (where one element is highlighted in opposition to an alternative), the L1-MA learners judged all varieties of focus constructions to be acceptable. They gave high ratings to target-like *c'est*-clefts (as expected), but also to forms that natives found less natural in such contexts. For example, learners had no qualms about using left-dislocated or fronted constructions to express contrast: a sentence with a fronted object or subject (without using *c'est*) was rated very appropriate by learners for conveying a contrastive meaning, yet native speakers gave such forms much lower naturalness scores (often near the bottom of the scale). Learners even accepted some non-target cleft variants – e.g. a cleft missing a necessary element – as long as the sentence seemed to carry the contrastive intent. In other words, learners did not restrict themselves to the specific focus-marking constructions that natives prefer in contrastive contexts. Instead, they appeared to operate with a broader definition: *if the sentence contrasts the right information, it's acceptable*. This stands in stark contrast to native speakers, who, for instance, would insist on a proper *c'est*-cleft (or a stressed canonical sentence) for a corrective focus, and who would find a malformed cleft or simple topicalization inadequate or odd.

L1 transfer is a likely explanation for this breadth of acceptance. Moroccan Arabic has a highly flexible discourse syntax – word order can be quite fluid, and fronting an element is a normal strategy to mark focus or contrast (often accompanied by a *lli*). Crucially, MA does not enforce a rigid cleft construction for contrastive focus; any structurally "plausible" way to emphasize the element (including just moving it to the left) can work. Therefore, MA-speaking learners tend to judge fronted constituents as perfectly fine to mark contrast, essentially *projecting their L1 discourse strategy onto French*. If a French sentence has the focused element at the left (even without *c'est*), many learners feel it achieves the communicative goal – not realizing that a French listener would consider the form odd. Similarly, when learners encountered a cleft that was missing *que* or *qui*, they may have still focused on the intended contrastive meaning ("It is X (who) did Y") and overlooked the formal error, giving the sentence a

pass for pragmatics. In short, learners prioritized the communicative function (contrast) over exact form, consistent with their L1 experience where focus-marking is form-flexible.

Summarizing the contrastive context findings: MA learners accepted a wider range of structures than natives for expressing contrastive focus, including many that are *infelicitous or ungrammatical in French*. This over-acceptance reflects a still-developing sense of French pragmatic conventions. It echoes the idea in SLA research that learners often exhibit optional use of multiple forms at the interface, unsure of the narrow conditions where natives would choose one form over another. Indeed, the Interface Hypothesis provides a lens here as well – even highly proficient L2 learners can display *optionality* or non-native judgments in contexts requiring integration of syntax and discourse cues (Sorace, 2011). Our learners' willingness to accept "anything that highlights the focus" – be it a proper cleft, a fronted phrase, or a cleft missing a particle – exemplifies this kind of optionality at the syntax–discourse interface. They have not yet narrowed down the discourse-appropriate options to the native-like set, instead leaving many possibilities open. This broad tolerance is a double-edged sword: it shows communicative openness, but also indicates that learners have not *fully acquired the pragmatic filters* that natives apply.

Moving to new-information focus contexts, we see a related pattern. In such contexts (broad focus, all-new information being introduced), native French usage typically does not favor object clefting. A *subject* cleft or simply a non-cleft sentence is appropriate, but an *object* cleft sounds odd if there is no contrast or given information preceding it (object clefts are usually associated with contrastive or specificational focus in French). In our data, native speakers indeed showed more caution with object clefts in all-new contexts – while they did not outright reject them (some rated them moderately acceptable, indicating that context and interpretation matter), on average natives were less enthusiastic about object clefts for new information (mean naturalness ratings around 3.5–4, vs. ~5 for subject cleft). Learners, however, did not display this native-like restraint. They over-accepted object clefts in new-information contexts, often rating them as highly natural sentences to introduce new information. Quantitatively, MA learner ratings for an object cleft in a new information context were significantly higher than native ratings (as seen in Conditions 12_n and 14_n, where learners' mean ranks far exceeded natives') not recognizing that natives perceive a subtle infelicity when an object is clefted without a contrast or given-QUD motivation.

This suggests that learners have not fully internalized the discourse constraint that "object clefts are marked and typically not used for broad, all-new focus." They know that clefts *can* be used to focus information, but they have not grasped the more granular rule that *subject* clefts (and their reduced forms) have a broader pragmatic usability than *object* clefts. In our tasks, many learners treated subject and object clefts as interchangeable in new information focus scenarios, whereas natives did not. The consequence is that learners appear to misuse clefts pragmatically: they might deploy an object cleft where a native speaker would simply use a canonical sentence or a subject cleft, thereby sounding odd or overly contrastive. From the data, it's clear that some advanced learners did start to catch this distinction – e.g., the C1 group's ratings for object clefts in new contexts dropped closer to native levels – but as a whole, the learner group lacked consistent sensitivity to the subject-only preference in neutral contexts.

Compounding this, learners did not meaningfully distinguish between cleft types (subject vs. object) or cleft forms (full vs. reduced) in their contextual judgments. The MA group tended to rate *all* cleft constructions positively across contexts, showing little differential treatment. For instance, if a context demanded contrastive focus, learners found both subject-cleft and object-cleft sentences equally acceptable – essentially assuming "any cleft will do" so long as something is clefted, whereas native speakers would naturally use an object cleft for contrastive focus on an object, and a subject cleft for focus on a subject, etc. In new-information contexts, learners were almost as happy with object clefts as with subject clefts. Natives, by contrast, showed the expected preferences: they were fine with subject clefts in either context, but showed hesitation or lower ratings for object clefts in broad-focus use, and they recognized subtle differences between a full cleft and a reduced cleft depending on context. The learners' failure to mirror these fine-grained distinctions indicates an oversimplified interlanguage rule – perhaps something like "*c'est*-clefts can always be used to focus something (regardless of what or why)." They have not yet acquired the contextual *nuances* that natives command, such as knowing that an object cleft signals a more contrastive or specific focus and can seem out of place when no contrast is present.

In summary, RQ2's answer is that L1-MA learners use and accept clefts in a pragmatically undifferentiated way compared to natives. They over-use clefting (or any focus structure) in contexts where natives would be selective, and they under-appreciate

the differences between types of clefts. This reflects a general difficulty at the syntax–discourse interface: learners are not reliably applying discourse constraints to their syntactic choices. Even when their grammar knowledge is sufficient to form a cleft, their sense of when a cleft is discourse-appropriate is underdeveloped. This finding is once again consonant with the Interface Hypothesis, which posits that appropriate use of structures in context remains problematic in L2 acquisition. The MA learners' behavior – treating all clefts as equally acceptable in any focus context – exemplifies the pragmatic over-generalization and optionality predicted by IH for external interface properties. It also underscores the lasting influence of the L1. Moroccan Arabic's discourse system does *not* impose an object-vs-subject cleft distinction (since clefts per se are absent); hence, learners do not import a restriction that they never had. Everything is fair game until the L2 eventually teaches them otherwise. Our results suggest that, absent extensive input or instruction, learners may fossilize or long remain in this state of pragmatic permissiveness – one where they communicate the right focus meanings but with forms that a native might judge infelicitous.

5.3. Proficiency and differential accuracy (RQ3)

Our cross-sectional findings show a clear developmental trend: as proficiency increases, learners' cleft judgments become more native-like, but the syntax-related accuracy improves faster and earlier than pragmatics-related accuracy. Lower-proficiency learners (A2–B1) displayed wide gaps from native norms on both grammatical and contextual measures, whereas higher-proficiency learners (B2–C1) showed significant improvement, especially in core syntax. However, even some C1 learners retained minor pragmatic deviations, indicating that the final hurdles in cleft acquisition are at the interface rather than in basic syntax.

By the intermediate level, many structural issues are resolved. We observed that even B1 learners had largely grasped the canonical form of clefts: for instance, all proficiency groups knew that a properly formed cleft sentence (*C'est X qui...*) is grammatical, and by B2 most learners uniformly recognized that *c'est* and *qui/que* cannot be omitted. The dramatic proficiency effects on conditions like "missing *que*" or "missing *c'est*" demonstrate this progression: A2 beginners might accept such errors (not fully seeing them as errors), but C1 learners overwhelmingly reject them, converging with native judgments. This suggests that with sufficient instruction and exposure, learners do acquire the formal syntax rules—they learn that *c'est* is obligatory, that *que* cannot be dropped in standard clefts, etc. By the time they reach advanced levels, their grammaticality judgments on these points are almost indistinguishable from natives. This pattern aligns with the general notion in SLA that "narrow syntax" is relatively teachable and learnable. Classroom input likely reinforces these rules, and by B2/C1, learners have internalized them.

Pragmatic appropriateness, on the other hand, lags behind. The more subtle, contextual aspects of cleft usage only show substantial improvement at later stages, and even then not as uniformly. For example, recognizing that an object cleft might be infelicitous in a new-information context is something that only the C1 learners in our sample consistently demonstrated. B2 learners still tended to accept an object cleft in a broad-focus context quite often, whereas C1 learners began to penalize it strongly (closer to native behavior). Similarly, the prohibition on using OSV fronting for contrastive focus was grasped gradually: A2 learners thought nothing was wrong with an object-fronted sentence, but by B1/B2 some learners started to sense the oddness, and by C1 a majority found it inappropriate (though even at C1 a few learners might still accept it). We also saw that certain discourse distinctions saw non-monotonic development – an interesting case being the B1 "overcorrection" or spike in accepting object clefts (Condition 02_n) noted earlier. This suggests the path to mastering pragmatic nuances is not strictly linear; learners might oscillate or overgeneralize at intermediate stages (perhaps experimenting with clefting more, before refining their understanding). Such U-shaped developmental patterns are common in SLA, where initial exposure leads to conservative use, intermediate knowledge prompts overuse, and advanced proficiency brings fine-tuning.

Crucially, by the C1 level, most learners had made major strides in pragmatic judgment, even if not perfect. Many C1s responded very similarly to natives on contextual suitability – for instance, strongly disfavoring fronted constructions in formal contexts and preferring subject clefts for new information. However, the magnitude of change from B2 to C1 was larger for pragmatic judgments than for grammatical ones. That is, pragmatic competence needed more proficiency gains to catch up. This is consistent with our interpretation that pragmatic aspects are harder and take longer. It was evident that C1 learners still were not 100% at native-like performance in pragmatics (some still rated, say, an object cleft in a new context as acceptable), which echoes Sorace's (2011) claim that even near-natives can retain subtle interface differences. Nonetheless, the improvement from A2 to C1 on these items was dramatic – showing that with enough proficiency (and likely the concomitant greater exposure), learners do eventually *approach* native norms on when to use clefts. In fact, the relative gap between learners and natives shrank much more for pragmatic knowledge between A2 and C1 than it did for pure syntax (since syntax was near-native fairly early).

This suggests that while interface issues are persistent, they are *not insurmountable*: advanced learners can attain a high degree of pragmatic accuracy, even if a slight optionality may linger.

From a theoretical standpoint, these proficiency effects reinforce the idea that syntax and pragmatics in L2 develop on different timelines. Early on, learners focus on structural rules – which many can master given instruction and practice – whereas mapping those structures to context-appropriate use remains shaky until extensive experience accrues. The Interface Hypothesis is exemplified here: internal interface (syntax proper) is largely resolved by intermediate stages, but external interface (syntax–discourse) continues to pose challenges into advanced stages. Our data also resonate with usage-based and input-driven models: proficiency gain often correlates with more exposure, which provides the learner with more instances to observe how natives use (or do not use) clefts in context. Only after hearing many examples in varied contexts might a learner inductively learn, for instance, that object clefts are rare unless contrast is intended, etc. This is why time and proficiency (which usually entail more input) lead to pragmatic refinement.

Another lens is cross-linguistic transfer over time. At low levels, the negative L1 transfer was very strong – beginners basically applied Moroccan Arabic strategies wholesale, resulting in many non-native acceptances. As proficiency grew, we saw those L1-based patterns recede: learners received input and feedback that certain L1-like forms are incorrect, and they gradually “unlearned” their transfer-induced habits. This is in line with classic Stage models of SLA where initially L1 influence is heavy, but with development (and the accumulation of L2 knowledge) many transfer effects diminish (Odlin, 1989). By C1, many learners have “shed” the majority of their L1 interference in cleft usage, especially on the syntactic side – they no longer omit *c'est*, no longer accept fronting so readily, etc. The persistence of some pragmatic transfer (e.g., lingering acceptance of object clefts broadly) at C1 suggests that complete convergence may require near-native immersion or remain variable for some learners, but the trajectory is clearly toward reduction of L1 effects. This underscores the need for advanced-level focus on these subtle points – something often lacking in formal instruction, meaning only those who reach high proficiency and interact extensively in French truly iron out the interface wrinkles.

In sum, higher proficiency very much attenuates the difficulties identified in RQ1 and RQ2, but not all at once and not all equally. Structural formation of clefts ceases to be a major issue by upper-intermediate levels (learners by then “know” what a proper cleft looks like). Contextual deployment – knowing which cleft to use when, or whether to cleft at all – remains a challenge much longer, though it steadily improves and can approach native-like judgments by the advanced stage. This differential improvement pattern (syntax first, pragmatics later) reinforces the importance of addressing interface skills in advanced L2 instruction. Learners may need targeted practice and feedback on *using* structures in context even after they've *learned* the structures in principle.

5.4. Influence of language contact (RQ4)

Our findings indicate yes – extensive language contact is associated with more native-aligned performance, though it is intertwined with proficiency. Learners who engaged more with French outside the classroom tended to reject deviant cleft forms more decisively and honor discourse constraints more closely than those with minimal exposure. Essentially, heavy-contact learners behave like “accelerated” versions of their proficiency peers, likely because meaningful input and interaction fine-tune their intuitions about cleft usage.

Quantitatively, we saw strong correlations between contact and judgment accuracy. High-contact learners were far less likely to accept ungrammatical clefts: for instance, a learner who uses French daily would almost never accept “*C'est Paul qui Ø a acheté le livre*” (missing *que*), whereas a low-contact learner might shrug at that error. The Spearman rho correlations for such cases were extraordinarily high (–0.65 to –0.80 range), implying that as contact increases, acceptance of those errors plummets. Likewise, in pragmatic terms, learners immersed in French showed more native-like skepticism toward odd clefts. A learner who frequently hears French conversations is more likely to sense that using an object cleft to introduce a story sounds off – and indeed our data show a negative correlation ($\bar{r} \approx -0.47$ to -0.49) between contact and acceptance of object clefts in new-information contexts. Meanwhile, contact had mild positive correlations with confidently accepting *correct* clefts and neutral sentences. In plain terms, more exposure helps learners draw the line more like natives do: permissible forms are reinforced and become more consistently accepted, whereas impermissible forms are experienced as infrequent or nonexistent in the input and thus become disfavored.

These findings resonate strongly with input-driven learning theories (e.g., Long's Interaction Hypothesis, 2007). Rich exposure likely provides two things: (a) a robust statistical signal of how clefts are typically used and (b) opportunities for feedback and noticing. A learner who regularly reads French or speaks with natives will observe, for example, that native speakers virtually never drop *que* in a cleft – thus the learner's internal grammar adjusts to treat dropping *que* as a glaring error. They might also get corrected if they themselves omit *que* in conversation, reinforcing the point. Over time, these experiences lead to the "recalibration" of intuitions we see: high-contact learners mirror native judgments in disallowing such omissions. Similarly, through exposure, learners may notice that object clefts are seldom heard except in contrastive answers or special contexts, and therefore they start assigning a lower naturalness to an object cleft used out-of-the-blue. Low-contact learners, in contrast, rely more on their incomplete internal rule system (and L1 habits) because they have not had enough exposure to counter those assumptions. This explains why a student who only encounters French in class might think fronting is fine (since they have not heard enough authentic French to know it's marked), whereas someone who watches French TV or lives in a Francophone environment has a better grasp of what "sounds odd" in discourse.

It must be noted, however, that "contact" in our study was not an entirely independent factor – it went hand-in-hand with proficiency. The most proficient learners generally also had the highest contact hours. So one could argue it's actually their proficiency doing the work. We addressed this by noting that contact and proficiency form a virtuous cycle: more contact leads to higher proficiency, and higher proficiency enables more meaningful contact. In practice, this means we cannot say *contact alone* magically fixes cleft usage, but we can say contact is a crucial component of achieving high proficiency, which in turn is needed to master clefts. In fact, when controlling for proficiency, contact still showed some specific influences (e.g., among learners of similar proficiency, those with more outside use performed a bit better on pragmatics), suggesting that extra contact accelerates interface acquisition. This aligns with the common pedagogical intuition that classroom learning (often limited in hours and context range) might instill explicit knowledge, but only immersion or extensive real-world practice fully consolidates intuitive, context-sensitive command of structures. Our results bear this out: learners immersed in French moved closer to native-like cleft usage on both fronts – syntax and discourse – underscoring the value of study abroad, frequent communication with native speakers, consuming French media, etc., in attaining near-native pragmatic finesse.

In summary, RQ4 confirms that richer exposure to French correlates with more native-like judgment patterns for *c'est*-clefts. While part of this effect is mediated by overall proficiency, it is clear that learners who go beyond the classroom and engage deeply with the language have a notable advantage in acquiring complex, interface-sensitive structures. They are more likely to intuit the need for *c'est* and *qui/que*, and to feel when a cleft is pragmatically odd, compared to peers whose French experience is shallow or purely academic. This finding supports the call for providing L2 learners with ample authentic input and interaction. It suggests that some aspects of pragmatic competence (like the fine context usage of clefts) may not fully develop without the richness of real-world language use. In pedagogical terms, encouraging learners to increase their French contact – through media consumption, conversation partners, or immersion programs – could greatly help them overcome the remaining hurdles in cleft acquisition. Ultimately, extensive language contact appears to be a key ingredient in moving learners from competent to truly near-native in managing the syntax–discourse interface of French clefts.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that L2-MA learners acquire French *c'est*-cleft constructions through a gradual process of balancing structural form with discourse function. Learners initially show strong L1 influence: they simplify cleft syntax and accept pragmatically infelicitous variants consistent with Moroccan Arabic discourse patterns. As proficiency and exposure to French increase, however, learners steadily move toward targetlike cleft use in both form and context. These results portray the interlanguage as evolving from L1-driven approximations to more targetlike patterns with increased L2 experience.

Persistent difficulties remain at the syntax–pragmatics interface. This aligns with the Interface Hypothesis (IH) (Sorace, 2011), which posits that structures requiring integration of syntax with context are acquired later. In our data, advanced learners mastered cleft formation but still showed variability in contextually appropriate use. As Sorace (2011) notes, "*language structures involving an interface between syntax and other cognitive domains are less likely to be acquired completely*" (p. 3). The present findings exemplify this pattern: even proficient learners sometimes misjudge the pragmatic conditions for using *c'est*-clefts, highlighting the continued challenge of interface structures in L2 acquisition.

Importantly, initial L1 transfer proved not to be permanent. With richer French input and practice, learners replaced early L1-like strategies with targetlike patterns. This outcome is consistent with input-sensitive theories of acquisition, which posit that sustained exposure to meaningful L2 input facilitates restructuring of interlanguage forms (Long, 2007; Ellis, 2008). In line with Long's (2007) emphasis on intensive L2 exposure, abundant and meaningful French input enabled learners to notice and correct L1-based errors. Methodologically, these results point to the importance of evaluating both grammatical accuracy and discourse appropriateness in SLA research. By linking empirical patterns to theoretical constructs such as the Interface Hypothesis, this study provides deeper insight into how formal and pragmatic aspects of L2 competence develop asynchronously in adult learners.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

ORCID iD (if any): 0009-0009-4658-4439

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Announi, I. (2021). The problem of word order and verbal movement in Moroccan Arabic. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 4(4), 34-54. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijlt.2021.4.4.6>
- [2] Belletti, A., & Guasti, M. T. (2015). The acquisition of Italian morphosyntax and its interfaces in different modes of acquisition. John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lald.57>
- [3] Bourgoïn, C. (2017). The role of the English It-cleft and the French c'est cleft in research discourse. *A Journal of linguistics, psycholinguistics and computational linguistics*, 21, 1-31. <https://doi.org/10.4000/discours.9366>
- [4] Bourgoïn, C. (2022). A corpus-based study of the prosody and information structure of English it-clefts and French c'est-clefts. Cardiff University. [unpublished doctoral dissertation].
- [5] Brustad, K. E. (2000). The syntax of spoken Arabic: A comparative study of Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian, and Kuwaiti dialects. Georgetown University Press.
- [6] Carter-Thomas, S. (2009). The French c'est-cleft: Function and frequency. In D. Banks, S. Eason, & J. Ormrod (Eds.), *La linguistique systémique fonctionnelle et la langue française* (pp. 127-157). L'Harmattan.
- [7] Clech-Darbon, A., Rebuschi, G., & Rialland, A. (1999). Are there cleft sentences in French? . In G. Rebuschi, & L. Tuller (Eds.), *The Grammar of Focus* (pp. 83-118). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [8] Declerck, R. (1988). Studies on copular sentences, clefts and pseudo-clefts. Foris Publications.
- [9] Declerck, R., & Seki, S. (1990). Premodified reduced IT-clefts. *Lingua*, 82(1), 15-51. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841\(90\)90054-O](https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841(90)90054-O)
- [10] Destrue, E. (2013). An empirical investigation of the meaning and use of the French c'est-cleft. University of Texas at Austin. Unpublished PhD dissertation.
- [11] Dufter, A. (2008). On explaining the rise of c'est-clefts in French. In U. Detges, & R. Waltereit (Eds.), *The paradox of grammatical change: Perspectives from Romance* (pp. 31-56). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.293.03duf>
- [12] El Kadi, A., & Kably, H. (2025). A comparative analysis of word order in simple sentences: Berber Tarifit and Moroccan Arabic. *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, 5(1), 45-50. <https://doi.org/10.55544/ijrah.5.1.6>
- [13] Ellis, R. (2008). The study of second language acquisition (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [14] Ennaji, M., Makhouch, A., Es-saiydy, H., Moubtassime, M., & Slaoui, S. (2005). A grammar of Moroccan Arabic. Publications of the Faculty of Letters Dhar El Mehraz, Fes.
- [15] Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (2008). Second language acquisition: An introductory course (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- [16] Greenberg, J. H. (1963). Some universals of grammar with particular reference to the order of meaningful elements. In J. H. Greenberg (Ed.), *Universals of language* (pp. 40-70). MIT Press.
- [17] Halliday, M. A. (1967). Notes on transitivity and theme in English, part 2. *Journal of Linguistics*, 3(2), 199-244. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022226700016613>
- [18] Harris-Delisle, H. (1978). Contrastive emphasis and cleft sentences. *Universals of human language*, 4, 419-486.

- [19] Hedberg, N. (2000). The referential status of clefts. *Language*, 76(4), 891–920.
- [20] Horn, L. (1981). Exhaustiveness and the semantics of clefts. In V. Burke, & J. Pustejovsky (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 11th Annual Meeting of NELS* (pp. 125-142). Amherst: GLSA.
- [21] Jarvis, S., & Pavlenko, A. (2008). *Crosslinguistic influence in language and cognition*. Routledge.
- [22] Karssenbergh, L., & Lahousse, K. (2018). The information structure of French *il y a* clefts and *c'est* clefts: A corpus-based analysis. *Linguistics*, 56(3), 513–549.
- [23] Kiss, K. E. (1998). Identificational focus versus information focus. *Language*, 74, 245–273.
- [24] Kumar, R. (2011). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners* 5th edition, Kindle Edition (3th edition Ed.). New Delhi: Sage.
- [25] Lambrecht, K. (1994). *Information structure and sentence form: Topic, focus, and the mental representations of discourse referents*. Cambridge University Press.
- [26] Lambrecht, K. (2001). A framework for the analysis of cleft constructions. *Linguistics*, 39, 463-516.
- [27] Long, M. H. (2007). *Problems in SLA*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- [28] Marchello-Nizia, C. (1995). *L'évolution du français: Ordre des mots, démonstratifs, accent tonique*. Colin.
- [29] Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524537>
- [30] Prince, E. F. (1978). A comparison of *wh*-clefts and *it*-clefts in discourse. *Language*, 54(4), 883–906.
- [31] Raynaud, S. (2020). Moving words. *Gestalt Theory*, 42(1), 17-30. <https://doi.org/10.2478/gth-2020-0004>
- [32] Roberts, C. (1996). *Information structure in discourse: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics*. OSU Working Papers in Linguistics, 49, 91-136.
- [33] Rooth, M. (1992). A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics*, 1(1), 75-116.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02342617>
- [34] Rothman, J. (2009). Pragmatic deficits with syntactic consequences?: L2 pronominal subjects and the syntax-pragmatics interface. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(5), 951-973. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.07.007>
- [35] Rouquier, M. (2007). Les constructions clivées en ancien français et en moyen français. *Romania*, 125(497/498), 167–212.
<https://doi.org/10.3406/roma.2007.1394>
- [36] Scappini, S. (2013). Un sous-type de la construction clivée en “C’est...qu” : La structure d’enchaînement: “Et c’est pour ça que...” et d’autres exemples. *Studia UBB Philologia*, 58(4), 81–95.
- [37] Sorace, A. (2011). Pinning down the concept of “interface” in bilinguals. *Linguistic Approach to Bilingualism*, 1(1), 1-33.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006909339810>
- [38] Sorace, A., & Serratrice, L. (2009). Internal and external interfaces in bilingual language development: Beyond structural overlap. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 13(2), 195-210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006909339810>
- [39] Tsimpli, I., & Sorace, A. (2006). Differentiating interfaces: L2 performance in syntax-semantics and syntax-discourse phenomena. *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development*, 2, pp. 653-664.