

The grammatical and discursive competencies in written French in upper secondary and tertiary education

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Abstract: This article investigates the acquisition of grammatical and discursive competence by Danish second language (L2) learners of French in the transition between the last year of the Danish secondary school (*gymnasium*) and the first year at university. Focus is made on challenges encountered by both sets of learners in relation to their written productions. In terms of writing, learners can be categorised according to the well-known distinction between inexperienced and experienced writers. This study is qualitative with certain quantitative elements. Data were collected during the spring term 2020 and represented different tasks. The written samples from the secondary school level were mid-term papers consisting of different types of creative writing, whereas the written productions from the university level were term papers consisting of two essays related to French colonial history and literature. The main results of the study reveal that grammatical competence constitutes the domain where learners at both educational levels encounter most challenges. Moreover, negative transfers from Danish and English are detected. As far as the discursive level is concerned, both sets of learners employ connectors from a range of different lexical areas, although the inventory is qualitatively and quantitatively more remarkable among university students. This study has several implications for practice. Since both sets of students seem to struggle with grammatical competence, it is important that a form-based focus is maintained and strengthened at both educational levels to reinforce students' communicative skills. Furthermore, as the exam question at secondary school invites students to use an inexperienced writing approach, the exam question ought to be changed to allow students to write in a more academic way. Furthermore, writing should have a predominant role at university, also in content disciplines, if students' academic writing skills are to increase.

1. Introduction

Writing is a complex activity in L1 in contrast to orality; writing in an L2 adds a layer of complexity, since students' linguistic competence is reduced compared to their L1. Consequently, writing is the most challenging of all the four linguistic skills but nevertheless "one of the most powerful means of promoting language learning" (Wolff 2000: 213-214).

Through a qualitative approach, this article investigates the acquisition of grammatical and discursive/textual competence (Hymes 1972; Canale 1983; Lund 2019) by Danish second language (L2) learners of French in the transition between the last year of the Danish secondary school (*gymnasium*) and the first year at university. Focus is made on challenges encountered by both sets of learners in relation to their written productions. Even though the case is French, the results can be transferred to other foreign languages, especially Italian and other Romance languages.

Since discursive/textual competence plays a highly important role in written assignments, especially at the university level, this contribution will also investigate learners' written competences. In this regard, learners will be categorised according to the well-known distinction between inexperienced writers, or *knowledge tellers*, and experienced writers, or *knowledge transformers* (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1987). Experienced writing competences are especially important at the university level, but at some point, secondary school learners also need to master such writing strategies to be able to pass the written assignment in their L2.

This article is organised in the following way. First, some key concepts relevant to this study are outlined, more precisely the concepts of grammatical and discursive/textual competence and different writing approaches. Subsequently, the corpus leading us to examine learners' written competences are outlined, followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings before the concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical concepts

2.1. Grammatical and discursive competence

Grammatical and discursive competence constitutes, together with sociolinguistic and strategic competence, the concept of communicative competence. The concept, proposed in 1970 by Hymes, has since been further developed within applied linguistics, especially by Canale (1983) in an Anglo-Saxon context, Martinez (1996) in a French context and Lund (2019) in a Danish context. This concept can be considered an alternative to the traditional deductive approach to language teaching, whereby grammatical forms are taught in an isolated manner without taking into consideration the communicative context.

Communicative competence consists of a system of knowledge and skills related to four specific domains and the complex interplay between them: *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic/pragmatic*, *discursive/textual* and *strategic competence*.

Grammatical competence refers to the formal aspects of language learning and has traditionally been the core of language learning, i.e., phonetics, morphology, syntax, lexicon, etc.

Sociolinguistic or pragmatic competence is related to social rules and interactive norms as well as contextual factors such as the status of the speaker and the hearer, their mutual relationship and the objective of the interaction. Students have acquired sociolinguistic competence if they know how to communicate appropriately according to the context.

Discursive or textual competence refers to the combination of grammatical form and meaning to convey coherent and cohesive texts as well as to traits characterising different text genres such as literary texts, essays, emails, text messages, oral genres, etc.

Finally, strategic competence refers to the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies used to compensate for a lack of competence in one of the other communicative domains.

Martinez (1996: 77) does not integrate strategic competence in his typology of communicative competence, but proposes instead a competence labelled *referential competence*, which concerns the “scientific” experience of the world.

In this article, focus is made on grammatical and discursive competence because they constitute the core elements of writing competence and are intertwined. Thus, to produce a cohesive and coherent text, a certain grammatical level is required since cohesion is ensured through the use of pronouns and connectors and a precise and varied vocabulary. It goes without saying that the mastery of sociolinguistic and strategic competencies is also important to be a competent language user. However, the use of strategic competence is especially important in oral production due to time constraints and overload of the working memory. Furthermore, the study reveals that both sets of learners do not encounter important challenges within the sociolinguistic domain. For that reason, it has been decided not to treat this competence separately in this study.

2.2. Different approaches to writing

This study is based on an understanding of writing as both a central skill and as a means by which the content of the language subjects (learning about social conditions, history and literature) is acquired. In the didactic literature on L2 writing, a distinction is made between three dimensions of writing, the first one represents a perspective on writing as a skill to be acquired, while the other two consider writing as a tool for learning content or language: 1) learning to write, 2) writing to learn content and 3) writing to learn language (Ortega 2011). This contribution draws on all three dimensions with a special emphasis on the first and the third dimension.

Regarding the first dimension, learning to write, the writing literature distinguishes between experienced and inexperienced writers (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987). Inexperienced writers (or knowledge tellers) engage in the writing process without making any plan of the content they are going to present. Their text production is based on associative chains coming to their mind during the writing process, which could best be characterised as *ad hoc*, linear and unstructured. This type of

learner only integrates a small amount of encyclopaedic or textual knowledge during the text production phase, and very few corrections can be observed between different versions of the text. In other words, the writer only uses his or her existing knowledge during the writing process. For that reason, this approach is labelled *knowledge telling*.

Experienced writers (or knowledge transformers) engage in a completely different writing process. They plan and set goals for the text before starting to write. This type of writer is not only concerned about the content to present in the text, but also its rhetorical form. (S)he engages, in other words, in a recursive writing process by establishing a dialectic relation between the content space and the rhetorical space. If the writer identifies a problem in the content space, (s)he consults the rhetorical space to solve the problem and *vice versa*. Furthermore, a knowledge transformer is constantly concerned about the reader of the text and often attempts to counter his or her potential arguments. (S)he constantly revises the text and thereby obtains new insights during the writing process and thus transforms his or her existing knowledge.

This study is based on the assumption that many secondary school learners could be considered inexperienced writers, at least during their first year, since they are expected to apply the lowest levels of Bloom's (1974) taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application) in their written compositions; but, as they mature as writers, they gradually learn to develop strategies that move their writing toward knowledge transformation using some of the highest levels of Bloom's (1974) taxonomy (analysis, synthesis, evaluation). Learners at university are *per se* considered more mature writers, due to their experience with written academic assignments.

As far as the second dimension, writing to learn content, is concerned, it is crucial that the writer has acquired a certain level of writing skills to be able to apply the higher levels of Bloom's (1974) taxonomy. Writing to learn content often takes its starting point from the reading material that students must integrate in their written compositions. This process is labelled *reading to write* in the literature and requires not only an experienced writing process but also a well-developed reading process, allowing readers to relate the texts to their background knowledge (Hirvela 2016). The writing helps them to organise knowledge from the texts, and wording problems encountered during the writing process are often due to misunderstandings of the text or to non-identified connections. Reading to write has the additional function of introducing students to different text genres. Awareness of genres helps students structure their own texts in different contexts.

This leads to the third dimension, writing to learn language. Through the reading process, students build up their vocabulary, which allows them to produce coherent and cohesive texts by developing appropriate grammatical and lexical patterns.

In a bridge-building perspective, as the one adopted in this article, it is essential that students in upper secondary education begin a socialisation process into the genre and knowledge traditions of language subjects, which is expanded and re-contextualised at the university level.

3. Corpus

This study is qualitative with certain quantitative elements. Written assignments from the two educational levels (secondary school: 15; university: 17) have been analysed with respect to grammatical and discursive competence (see section 2.1). The written texts have also been classified according to the distinction between experienced and inexperienced writing (see section 2.2).

Students at the secondary school level have been divided into two groups: ten students belong to beginner level A (corresponding to the B1 level in CEFR) and five to advanced level A (corresponding to B1+). University students are all supposed to have a least a B1 level in French when entering university, and obtain, as a minimum, a B2 level at the end of their bachelor studies.

Data were collected during the spring term 2020 and represented different tasks. The written samples from the secondary school level were mid-term papers consisting of different types of creative writing (i.e. inventing the end of a short story or writing an e-mail to a friend) of a length of

approximately two pages. The written productions from the university level were term papers consisting of two essays related to French colonial history and literature from the nineteenth and twentieth century of a length of approximately ten pages. The variation of text length can be explained in terms of difference in requirements to the writing task of the two educational levels.

Students at both levels had dictionaries, grammars and notes at their disposal during the completion of the writing task, and university students also had access to digital resources, including the Internet.

4. Results

The analysis of the findings is divided into two major sections according to learners' educational level. The first section presents the results from students at the secondary school level (both beginner level A and advanced level A), whereas the second one discusses the results from the university level. All examples are reproduced in their original version as found in the students' written texts, and translations into English are provided for all examples.

4.1. Written texts at the secondary school level

4.1.1. Description of the written assignment

The written assignment of the secondary school level is divided into two parts. In the first one, of a duration between one hour (beginner level A) and one hour and a half (advanced level A), reading skills and grammatical knowledge are tested. In the second part – a duration of three hours (beginner level A) and three-and-a-half hours (advanced level A) – students' writing skills are tested. This study only focuses on the second part of the assignment. Learners at the beginner level are asked to write a blog of approximately 250 words about the environment and climate change, while students at the advanced level must write a text of 300 words about one of the following tasks: a diary, an email to a friend or inventing the end to a short story. All students in the advanced level ended up choosing the diary task. Students at both levels are furthermore asked to integrate several texts in their written production, including images and songs. Students at the beginner level should also include in their text at least five verbs from a predefined list and use them in different tenses. Even though both examination questions invite students to use an inexperienced approach to writing, it will be discussed to what extent they are able to engage in a more experienced writing process.

4.1.2. Grammatical competence

The grammatical level of the advanced learners was surprisingly not much higher than one of the students at the beginner level. Even though some students at the beginner level displayed high grammatical competence, the overall tendency was that the beginner group had a much more heterogeneous grammatical level than the advanced group.

The most frequent grammatical deviations observed at the beginner level (BL), as well as at the advanced level (AL), are the following: the form and place of clitic pronouns (1), which should normally be located before the finite verb (*m'ont* instead of *ont me*); the place of the second part of the double negation *ne...pas* (2), which should normally be placed around the finite verb (*ne se sont pas engagés*); verbs used in the infinitive form (*savoir*) in cases where they should be inflected (*je sais*) (3); use of two subsequent finite verbs, where the second one (*ramassent*) should be in a non-finite form (*ramassé*) (4); absence of contractions, for instance between prepositions and definite articles (*au* instead of *à le*) (5); confusion between the prepositions *à* and *en* before country names (6); confusion between the two auxiliaries *être* 'to be' and *avoir* 'to have' (7); and, finally, confusion between word classes, which might lead to a confusion of meaning. In (8) the possessive article *notre* 'our' is used instead of the subject pronoun *nous* 'we':

- (1) Un groupe des musiciens des rues ont **me** demandé (text 5, AL) ‘A group of street musicians have me asked’.
- (2) ... les politiques ne se sont engagés **pas** ... (text 8, BL) ‘the politicians are involved not’.
- (3) ... je **savoir** que j’aimerais rester ici (text 2, AL) ‘I know that I would like to stay here’.
- (4) ... ils **ont ramassent** les ordures (text 4, BL) ‘they have gather the garbage’.
- (5) ... nous nous sommes engagés **á le** combat de climat (text 10, BL) ‘we are involved in the fight for climate’.
- (6) ... le gaspillage **en** Danemark et **au** France (text 10, BL) ‘the waste in Denmark and in France’.
- (7) J’**ai** rentré à l’auberge ... (text 5, AL) ‘I have come back to the hostel’.
- (8) J’aime Elsa, mais **notre** somme en désaccord sur toutes choses (text 3, AL) ‘I love Elsa, but our disagree about everything’.

These linguistic deviations are – with some rare exceptions – not observed between university students and could thus be considered signs of a lower proficiency level in French. However, in the written compositions of secondary school students the same kind of linguistic deviations as those produced by university students are also observed. The following examples illustrate the most frequent ones of this type: absence of agreement, especially between the noun phrase and the verb phrase (9)¹; use of the indicative mood in cases where the subjunctive mood is obligatory (10); confusion of articles, for instance between the partitive article *des* and the reduced partitive article *de* (11, 13); confusion of prepositions as in (12), where the student uses *à* instead of *dans* ‘in’; and problems with the *consecutio temporum*. In (13), the sentence *elle a découvert qu’il n’y a* (present) *pas* should have been replaced by *elle a découvert qu’il n’y avait* (past) *pas*:

- (9) Notre la classe et une classe française **est** tout aujourd’hui (text 5, BL) ‘Our class and a French class is all today’.
- (10) C’est très important, que plus de gens **vont** participer à aider le climat (text 6, BL) ‘It is very important, that more people will participate in helping the climate’.
- (11) On a dormi dans **des** grands hôtels luxueux ... (text 4, AL) ‘We have slept in some big luxurious hotels’.
- (12) Dr. Jolene Cook explique **á** une article que nous perturbons le climat avec notre coutume (text 15, BL) ‘Dr. Jolene Cook explains in an article that we disturb the climate with our customs’.
- (13) ... parce qu’elle **a découvert** qu’il n’y **a pas des** toilettes privées (text 5, AL) ‘because she discovered that there are not any private toilets’.

Moreover, several cases of interference with Danish and English have been observed in the students’ written productions. Interference with Danish both relates to the syntactical (14, 15) and the lexical domain (16). In (14), the student inserts a modal verb (*pouvons*) before a verb of perception (*voir*), a very frequent structure in Danish, but rarely used in French. In (15), the Danish V2 order is reproduced in the French sentence structure (*fera ma classe*), even though French is clearly an SVO language (*ma classe fera*). In (16), the student has translated the Danish noun *politikere* directly into

¹ This sentence contains several linguistic deviations, which blurs the understanding. For instance, the student uses two articles (the possessive article *notre* ‘our’ and the definite article *la* ‘the’) before the noun *classe* ‘class’ and furthermore forgets to use the plural form of the indefinite pronoun *tout* -> *tous* and an adverb of location *là* ‘there’. Thus, an appropriate and understandable version of (9) could be *Notre classe et une classe française, nous sommes tous là aujourd’hui* ‘Our class and a French class, we are all here today’.

les politiques instead of using the noun phrase *les hommes politiques* or *les politiciens*:

- (14) Sur la photo 1, nous **pouvons voir** un dessin ... (text 2, BL) ‘In picture 1, we can see a drawing’.
- (15) Au cours du mois prochain **fera ma classe** quelques des activités climatiques (text 9, BL) ‘During next month, does my class some of the climate activities’.
- (16) ... c’est inadmissible que **les politiques** ne se sont engagés pas (text 8, BL) ‘it is unacceptable that politicians are not involved’.

On the contrary, interference with English only concerns the lexical domain (17, 18). In (17), the expression *second hand* is translated directly into *seconde main*, and in (18), the English term *areas* has been integrated into the French sentence as a loan:

- (17) On peut aider par recycle et acheté de **seconde main** choses (text 11, BL) ‘We can help by recycling and buying secondhand things’.
- (18) Au début nous avons ramassé déchets seulement sur les **areas** de notre lycée (text 12, BL) ‘In the beginning we have collected only waste in the areas of our secondary school’.

The students’ lexical level is generally precise and adequate despite some problematic cases. In (19), the student chooses the wrong word to express the sense of being disappointed. Instead of using the word *déçu*, the student selects the adjective *aigre* ‘sour’, which is normally used in relation to taste. In (20), the student struggles with the expression *c’est la raison pour laquelle* ‘that’s the reason why’ and only uses the first part:

- (19) Je ne sais pas si Elsa continue d’être **aigre** (text 2, AL) ‘I do not know if Elsa continues to be sour’.
- (20) **C’est la raison** j’ai réservé les lits à l’auberge (text 3, AL) ‘That’s the reason, I have reserved the beds in the hostel’.

As far as syntactic complexity is concerned, students succeed in using rather complex sentence structures with subordinate clauses (especially complement and relative clauses) and non-finite verb phrases, but to a lesser extent than students at the university level. However, the majority of secondary school students have a tendency to use paratactic structures coordinated by *et* ‘and’, *ou* ‘or’, *mais* ‘but’ or a punctuation mark.

4.1.3. Discursive competence

Generally, students respect the conventions of text genres in their written productions. The majority of students at the beginner level apply criteria used in blogging by introducing their texts with a title and a date and by asking a question or making a suggestion to the reader at the end. In a similar vein, students at the advanced level respond directly to the diary by introducing their text with the formula *cher journal intime* ‘dear diary’ and by seeking advice at the end using formulas such as *cher journal intime, qu’est-ce que je dois faire ?* ‘dear diary, what am I supposed to do?’

To ensure textual cohesion, the vast majority of students use anaphora and connectors. Even though the inventory is less varied and sophisticated than at the university level, students employ connectors from different semantic fields; for instance, time (*quand* ‘when’, *après* ‘after’, *pendant* ‘while’, *hier soir* ‘last evening’), cause (*parce que* ‘because’, *c’est la raison pour laquelle* ‘that’s the reason why’, *c’est pourquoi* ‘that’s why’), concession and adversativity (*même si* ‘even if’, *bien que*

‘even though’, *tout de même* ‘still’, *mais* ‘but’), addition (*en plus de cela* ‘moreover’, *de plus* ‘in addition’, *aussi* ‘also’), condition (*si* ‘if’), enumeration (*en premier* ‘first of all’, *au début* ‘in the beginning’, *finalement* ‘finally’), consecution (*ainsi* ‘thus’), conclusion (*en somme* ‘in sum’), exemplification (*par exemple* ‘for example’) and comparison (*comme* ‘like’).

Anaphora, especially pronouns, are, to a considerable extent, used correctly. However, cases in which the masculine plural pronoun *ils* ‘they’ are used either with clear reference to women (21), or to a collective group in the singular (22) or with a generic value corresponding to the neuter pronoun *on* ‘one’ (23):

- (21) ... on a parlé avec **les trois gentilles femmes** ... **Ils** aident pour créer ... (text 16, BL) ‘we have talked with three friendly women. They help with creating’.
- (22) ... on peut regarder **la classe française** après **ils** a ramassé des ordures (text 11, BL) ‘we can see the French class after they have gathered garbage’.
- (23) C’est une crise globale. Mais **ils** peuvent agir (text 4, BL) ‘It’s a global crisis. But they can act’.

As already stated, the written assignment does not invite students to adopt an experienced approach to writing (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1987) or to apply the most advanced levels of Bloom’s (1974) taxonomy. However, the analysis of the written products clearly shows that some students try to integrate some “academic” dimensions in their texts, for instance by integrating references and notes in their productions or arguments that support their statements.

4.2. Written texts at the university level

This section will study how first year students at university master grammatical and discursive competence.

4.2.1. Description of the written assignment

The written assignment that the university students are asked to respond to represents French and francophone literature, history and culture from 1800 to 1945. The students must write two small essays of a length between six and 10 pages, ten in total, on French colonial history and French literature. The assignments are presented as followed (translated from French):

- 1) For France, the construction of its colonial empire implies a certain image of the colonised people. Please discuss 1) how France represents, explicitly or implicitly, the colonised people and their culture; 2) how authors like Frantz Fanon and/or Aimé Césaire use this image of the colonised people in their argument against colonialism.
- 2) Please analyse the literary representation of women by using at least two extracts that have been studied during class. Compare these representations by including political, philosophical or social elements that you consider relevant.

These questions invite students to proceed to the highest levels of Bloom’s (1974) taxonomy, in their argumentation, due to the use of verbs such as *discuss*, *analyse* and *compare*. Furthermore, the students are asked to choose extracts that they consider relevant, which oblige them to explain their choices.

4.2.2. Grammatical competence

The vast majority of students write in a grammatically correct and lexically precise manner using a

level of French that respects the academic conventions of standard French. Their texts are to a large extent characterised by grammatical complexity due to the use of subordinate clauses of different types (nominal, relative and adverbial) and non-finite verb groups (infinitive, present and past participle and gerund). However, the gerund is by far the most frequent non-finite verb form observed in the students' productions, which was also a recurrent form at the secondary school level.

Despite a certain grammatical complexity in students' texts, some simple, paratactic structures introduced by a comma or conjunctions of coordination (*et* 'and', *ou* 'or', *mais* 'but') are also frequently observed (24):

- (24) Ils sont représentés sans secours et ignorants quand Tintin ... conduit sa voiture, **et** il est cloué sur les rails de chemin de fer. Le train est détruit, **et** les « Indigènes » ne savaient pas que faire. C'est Tintin qui trouve la solution, **et** c'est lui qui distribue les tâches (text 5). 'They are represented as helpless and ignorant when Tintin ... drives his car, **and** he is nailed on the railway tracks. The train is destroyed, **and** the "Natives" do not know what to do. It is Tintin who finds the solution, **and** it is he who distributes the tasks'.

This example is indicative of a poor mastery of syntactic complexity and could be considered a case of negative transfer with Danish, an endocentric language, which favours paratactic structures – contrary to Romance languages, which prefer noun phrases, non-finite verb phrases and hypotactic structures (Korzen & Lundquist 2010).

Despite a high grammatical proficiency level, deviations of various kinds are observed in the students' texts, many of which were also observed at the secondary school level (see section 4.1.2.). The most frequent ones are the following: agreement (25, 28)²; the use of two subsequent finite verbs (*peut utilise*), where the second one should be in a non-finite form (*utiliser*) (26); the indicative mood in contexts where the subjunctive is required, i.e. in adverbial clauses of purpose (*pour que*) (27); the use of prepositions (*dans* instead of *en*) and the gender of nouns (the feminine definite article *la* instead of the masculine *le*) (28); confusion of articles, especially between the partitive (*des*) and the generic article (*les*) (29); confusion between word classes, especially between nouns (*suite, mention*) and verbs (*suit, mentionne*) (30); missing contractions before vowels, in particular after the subordinating conjunction *que* 'that' as in (31); where the student writes *tandis que il* and *lorsque on* instead of *tandis qu'il* and *lorsqu'on*; homonyms, for instance between *où* 'where' (relative pronoun of place) and *ou* 'or' (conjunction) (32); word order (*présenta-t-il* instead of the correct order *il présenta*) (33) and the *consecutio temporum* as in (34), where the student forgets to locate the verb of the relative clause (*présentent*) in the past due to the past-tense reference of the verb in the matrix clause (*organisait*):

- (25) Dans ceci les colonisés sont représentés comme **être méchantes, primitives et sauvage** (text 6) 'In this the colonised people are represented as evil, primitive and wild human beings'.
- (26) **Peut** on l'**utilise** à comprendre des pensées typiques pour l'époque (text 11) 'Can we use it to understand the typical ideas of the period'.
- (27) ... pour que la France **a** sauvé Alger de la piraterie (text 4) 'so that France has saved Alger from piracy'.

² In (25), the student makes a confusion between the masculine, the feminine and the plural in the noun phrase. The correct version would be *des êtres méchants, primitifs et sauvages*, where the noun and the adjectives are all in the masculine, plural. In (28), the student uses a verb inflected in the second person plural (*avez*) with a subject in the third person singular (*Jules Ferry*). The correct version would be *Jules Ferry a...*

- (28) **Dans** 1869 **Jules Ferry** avez choisir de être **la** nouvel maire (text 12) ‘In 1869 Jules Ferry has chosen to be the new mayor’.
- (29) Que peut-être ce n’était jamais l’objectif d’améliorer la vie pour **des** indigènes ... (text 5) ‘That maybe it was not the objective to improve life for some natives’.
- (30) Dans ce qui **suite**, je vais analyser ... ; ainsi qu’il **mention** « Y’a bon Banania » (text 9) ‘In what follows, I will analyse ... ; and he mentions “There’s good Banania”’.
- (31) ... **tandis que** il peut s’exprimer à d’autres noirs ... **[]orsque on** est autorisé à entrer dans l’esprit d’autres personnes (text 10) ‘while he can express himself to other blacks ... when one is allowed to enter other people’s mind’.
- (32) Il est discutable qu’il fait ça pour justifier la colonisation **où** pour garder une position de pouvoir sur les sujets coloniaux pour les garder dans une position inférieure (text 5) ‘It can be discussed whether he did that in order to justify colonisation or to maintain a power position on the colonised people to keep them in an inferior position’.
- (33) Tout d’abord **présenta-t-il** l’axiome scientifique ... (text 11) ‘First and foremost presented he the scientific axiom’.
- (34) L’état français **organisait** plusieurs expositions coloniales qui **présentent** la grandeur des colonies (text 6) ‘The French state arranged several colonial exhibitions that present the magnitude of the colonies’.

In addition to these morpho(syntactic) challenges, lexical problems are identified which result either in the use of semantically imprecise verbs or in confusions with other words. In (35), the student has chosen the verb *être* ‘to be’ instead of a lexically more precise verb such as *représenter* ‘represent’.

- (35) L’Occident **est** les gens civilisées, et les colonisés **sont** les non-civilisés (text 6) ‘The West is the civilised people, and the colonised are the uncivilised’.

There are several deviations that could be due to negative transfer either between Danish or English. Transfer with English is mainly observed for the lexicon, as in (36), as was also the case at the secondary school level (see section 4.1.2.). The verb *réaliser* is a so-called false friend³ and should instead have been replaced by *se rendre compte* in French:

- (36) Cela est visible dans l’extrait Odette vs Zephora dans laquelle Swann tombe amoureux d’Odette dès qu’il **réalise** qu’elle ressemble à Zephora ... (text 14) ‘This is visible in the extract Odette vs Sephora in which Swann falls in love with Odette as soon as he realises that she resembles Sephora’.

On the other hand, transfer with Danish mostly concerns the syntactical level, as observed among secondary school students. Example (24) illustrates a tendency to use coordination, whereas French prefers subordination. To this example can be added several others which concern the use of prepositions (37, 38), which are direct translations of Danish structures like *formålet med* (37) and *på den ene side (...)* *på den anden side* (38):

³ A false friend is a word in a different language that looks or sounds similar to a word in a given language but differs in meaning.

- (37) Le but **avec** cet exercice sera d'examiner ce que représente le personnage principal, Emma Bovary (text 11) 'The goal with this exercise will be to examine what represents the main character, Emma Bovary'.
- (38) ... les colons **sur** un côté et les autochtones **sur** l'autre côté (text 6) 'the colonialists on one side and the natives on the other side'.

4.2.3. Discursive competence

As far as discursive competence is concerned, the university students provide, in general, coherent and structured analyses using headings and subheadings to guide the reader. Many of them provide their text with an introduction and a conclusion to meet the requirements of an academic text. They also use various sources (novels, critical literature, historical essays, comics) to support their analyses and arguments, often supplemented by quotations. With respect to the organisation of content, many students operate at the most advanced levels of Bloom's (1974) taxonomy by making an analysis, a synthesis and an evaluation of their statements, which clearly shows that they are to be considered experienced writers according to the terminology of Scardamalia & Bereiter (1987).

In order to ensure linguistic cohesion of their texts, the students usually apply a vast majority of connectors covering different semantic fields; for instance, cause (*car* 'because', *c'est la raison pour laquelle* 'that's the reason why'), addition (*aussi* 'also', *également* 'as well', *de plus* 'moreover', *ensuite* 'in addition', *en fin de compte* 'ultimately'), concession and adversativity (*en revanche* 'on the other hand', *cependant* 'however', *mais* 'but', *alors que* 'whereas', *tandis que* 'whereas', *néanmoins* 'nevertheless'), consecution (*ainsi* 'thus', *par la suite* 'subsequently', *du coup* 'as a result'), exemplification (*entre autres* 'among other things', *en particulier* 'especially'), enumeration (*tout d'abord* 'first of all', *finalement* 'finally'), reformulation (*autrement dit* 'in other words', *c'est-à-dire* 'namely', *soit* 'that is', *en d'autres mots* 'in other words') and conclusion (*en conclusion* 'in conclusion', *en somme* 'altogether'). These are signs of a more varied use of connectors than observed for secondary school students.

However, some connectors are not used appropriately. For instance, a student makes a confusion between *en effet* 'indeed' and *en fait* 'in fact', by using the latter to introduce an argument that confirms the previous statement, while this connector serves rather to introduce a counterargument (39). This confusion can most likely be explained as a case of negative transfer with Danish, which uses only one connector *faktisk* to translate both meanings:

- (39) Fanon ... mention « Y'a bon Banania », une célèbre caricature de l'homme noir et de son dialecte. **En fait**, une manière efficace et persistante de dépeindre l'homme noir tout en le rabaisant était par le langage (text 9) 'Fanon ... mentions "There's good Banania", a famous caricature of the black man and his dialect. In fact, an effective and persistent way to portray the black man while humiliating him was through language'.

Another way of ensuring textual cohesion is using anaphora, often expressed through pronouns and lexis. Students generally use anaphora appropriately in their productions, with a few rare exceptions. One case has been identified where the masculine, plural pronoun *ils* 'they' has been used to refer to a group of women, a use which has also been observed at the secondary school level (21).

5. Conclusion

This article has analysed the proficiency level of grammatical and discursive competence by L2 learners of French in the last year of secondary school (beginner and advanced level) and in the first year at university.

The analysis has revealed that, as far as grammatical competence is concerned, learners at both levels face the same linguistic difficulties, although those of secondary school students are often of a more basic type than those of university students, which occasionally leads to difficulties in understanding the message. Several cases of negative transfer with Danish have also been detected at both educational levels. Transfer from Danish influences both syntax and lexis, while transfer from English primarily concerns lexis – a result which is not surprising, since Danish is the mother tongue of most students and thus is likely to affect the French sentence structure.

Secondary school students already seem to have a mastery of discursive competence, since they use many cohesive markers such as anaphora and connectors covering several semantic fields. At the university level, the inventory and frequency of connectors increase, which contributes to a more nuanced and academic argumentation than in secondary school and thus to the use of experienced writing strategies. The fact that both sets of students have a relatively high proficiency of discourse competence could suggest that they transfer their discourse knowledge acquired in Danish and English to French, which shows that they are able to make links between different subjects, even though it sometimes implies a transfer of paratactic structures from endocentric languages, such as Danish and English, to an exocentric language such as French (Korzen & Lundquist 2010).

Although some secondary school students attempt to make an academic argumentation, the exam question clearly invites them to use a knowledge-telling strategy close to the lower levels of Bloom's (1974) taxonomy. Since we are dealing with the final exam at secondary school, modifying the question in such a way that it invites students to make an argument mentioning the advantages and disadvantages related to a given topic could be considered. This would probably facilitate the transition to the university level, not only in French but in many areas of higher education.

This study clearly reveals that both sets of students seem to struggle with grammatical competence. This suggests that, both at secondary school and university, a form-based focus must be maintained or even strengthened to reinforce students' communicative skills. A form-based focus can be obtained in different ways, and it is important that grammar is not taught independently of its communicative context, because students need to be aware of how grammar contributes to optimising written and oral communication. In order to develop students' grammatical competence throughout their university studies it is important that both linguistic and content courses are responsible for developing these skills. Grammar courses can provide students with thorough knowledge about specific forms and functions, while content courses can offer students insight into how language functions in different textual genres and how it contributes to the understanding of messages. If content courses furthermore offer students the opportunity to write texts in the foreign language, in relation to the topics treated, passing from summaries and textual comments to bigger academic dissertations, students will gradually develop their writing skills and thereby pass from knowledge tellers to knowledge transformers.

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