

Comparing Written Competency in Core French and French Immersion Graduates

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Abstract

Few studies have compared the written competency of French immersion students and their core French peers, and research on these learners at a postsecondary level is even scarcer. My corpus consists of writing samples from 255 students from both backgrounds beginning a university course in French language. The writing proficiency of core French and French immersion graduates was compared based on total output and several measures of grammatical and syntactical accuracy. Few statistically significant differences emerge. However, a subgroup of core French learners who had benefitted from an authentic immersion experience appears to outperform both regular core French and French immersion groups. The purpose of this quantitative study is primarily diagnostic; the results should help universities better serve the needs of first-year students.

Résumé

Les études comparant la compétence écrite des étudiants de programmes d'immersion française et de français cadre sont peu nombreuses—particulièrement au niveau postsecondaire. Mon corpus consiste en des échantillons du français écrit de 255 étudiants issus de ces deux formations qui commencent un cours de français à l'université. J'ai comparé leur production globale et leur précision sur le plan morphosyntaxique. Peu de différences statistiquement significatives en émergent. Toutefois, un sous-groupe d'étudiants cadre ayant bénéficié d'une expérience d'immersion authentique se révèle comme le plus compétent selon plusieurs des mesures utilisées. Les résultats de cette étude quantitative devraient aider les universités à mieux répondre aux besoins des étudiants de première année.

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Introduction

Copious research has been carried out over the past four decades on English-speaking school children learning French as a second language (FSL), particularly in the increasingly popular French immersion (FI) program (e.g., Bournot-Trites, 2007; Genesee, 1987; Germain, Netten, & Séguin, 2004; Harley, 1989; Harley, Cummins, Swain, & Allen, 1990; Knaus & Nadasdi, 2001; Lapkin, 1998; Lapkin, Harley, & Taylor, 1993; Lyster, 1992, 1998, 2007; Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner, 2010; Rebuffot, 1993). In his overview of its first 25 years, Calvé (1991) recognised “le succès historique” (p. 15) of a Canadian FSL program where graduates were finally able to reach a level of *functional bilingualism*; at the same time, he acknowledged the *fossilised errors* that characterise these learners and the ceiling of proficiency (*le plafonnement*) that they often meet. Since then, many have continued to study the linguistic (and sociolinguistic) competencies of FI students in relation to native Francophone speakers, and have reported that FI graduates approach native-like abilities in receptive skills, but remain weaker in productive skills (see Lazaruk, 2007). Where comparisons have been made with those in the regular stream, the consensus has long been that FI students outperform core French (CF) learners (Lapkin et al., 1993)—however, studies comparing the written production of these two groups of learners have been scarce. Lyster (1992) observed *communicative competence* to be more developed in his FI students than in his CF students—although his immersion students were not communicating accurately and demonstrated a fossilised interlanguage (“immersion French”). Indeed, both the written and spoken French of FI students is known to be “fluent but not flawless” (Lapkin & Swain, 2000, p. 8). Nevertheless, according to Netten and Germain (2004): “Although French immersion possesses some limitations, it is the most successful means of developing communicative abilities in French in a school situation” (p. 278). These learners have not only studied FSL, they have used this language to study and discuss other academic subjects—indeed with relative ease and confidence. By contrast, students in the CF program (the vast majority of FSL learners in Canada) receive considerably less exposure to French: a total of 600 hours at the elementary level (Grades 4 to 8), typically dispensed in increments of 30 to 40 minutes per day (the “drip-feed” approach), and a total of 1000 hours of French language instruction for those who continue until the end of Grade 12. Moreover, widespread dissatisfaction with this program has been reported among students, parents and teachers (Lapkin, Mady, & Arnott, 2009).

It is therefore reasonable that first-year students enrolling in French courses at the University of Waterloo are placed according to whether or not they completed Grade 12 French in the core stream, or in immersion; they are directed to the intermediate level language courses FR192A and FR192B, respectively (also referred to in what follows as levels I and II). However, the present study tests the assumption that an important difference exists between these two groups of learners, at a postsecondary level, in terms of their written skills, and specifically, their ability to write accurately. In her longitudinal study of FI students in British Columbia (Grades 5 to 7), where she tested the hypothesis of a *plateau effect*, Bournot-Trites (2007) insisted that increased instruction time cannot in itself improve writing skills. She reported that a more systematic approach to language learning is needed, and that when teachers used traditional methods (such as the

memorisation of verb conjugations), students' grammar did improve. Yet, as she pointed out, knowledge of basic verb morphology is not required for entry to immersion high schools: "*En fait, aucun objectif grammatical n'est mentionné...*" (p. 19). Lyster (2007), Mueller (2010) and others continue to highlight the need for improved grammatical accuracy in immersion students. This begs the question: Should universities be fast-tracking FI graduates when it comes to (French) grammar review?

Research Context of this Study

As extensive as FSL research in Canada has been, it has focused primarily on FI. Lapkin et al. (2009) found "regrettable" (p. 23) that there have been no large-scale studies on CF since the 1970s. Moreover, in recent decades few studies have compared the written competency of CF and FI learners, and fewer still have described these students' abilities once they leave their respective programs and enter university-level French courses. Morrison (2004) compared undergraduates with FI ($n = 25$) and CF ($n = 27$) backgrounds in terms of their outcomes on reading comprehension tests as well as a monitoring task that involved detecting errors inserted into the texts. She expected to find evidence of superior abilities in FI graduates, who had been reading in French on a variety of subjects since an early age. In fact, she found no significant differences between the two groups on the second language (L2) reading test used (TESTCan); the mean scores were indeed almost identical. Moreover, there was no significant difference for error detection at a macro level; the only difference was found for micro-level (graphemic) error detection, where the FI group was more successful. I find her interpretation of these results of considerable pertinence:

These results might seem surprising, given previous findings that FI students have better receptive skills than CF students (Lapkin & Swain, 1984). I do not believe that this necessarily applies to reading comprehension in the context of university-level courses; CF students who pursue their studies in French at the undergraduate level are usually very motivated language learners. (Morrison, 2004, p. 95)

As Lapkin et al. (2009; citing CPF Ontario, 2008) pointed out, only 3% of Grade 9 CF students complete Grade 12 French. Of those who do, according to the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), only 30% choose to pursue their study of French at the postsecondary level (compared to 51% of FI students). Presumably, these would be not only the most motivated students but also the strongest, those who had benefitted most from the predominantly form-focused instruction the CF program offers. The pool of participants is quite different, then, from that of early studies done on school children or high school students.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the conclusions reached following research on much younger students continue to hold true; that is, that the principal weakness of FI French appears to be one of accuracy, while CF students experience substantial difficulties communicating fluently and confidently in French (Netten & Germain, 2004). The present study seeks to gain some insight into the specific strengths and weaknesses of first-year French students, by comparing the written French of 255 FI and CF graduates who enrolled in intermediate language courses in 2011 and 2012.

Criteria for Assessing Written Competency

According to Skehan's (1996) framework, three important language learner goals are *fluency*, *complexity* and *accuracy*. Skehan defined fluency as: "the learner's capacity to mobilize an inter-language system to communicate meanings in real time" (p. 46). However, the term is sometimes found to be ambiguous and therefore problematic.¹ Often associated specifically with oral abilities and evaluated by measuring duration of speech utterances, number of syllables and pauses, and by calculating mean length of runs (e.g., Préfontaine, 2013), fluency can also refer to an assessment of written production based on total word counts (e.g., Stillwell et al., 2010), and sometimes totals per minute. Yet some researchers point out that "good writers" may actually write less per minute than their unskilled peers; they suggest that written fluency may have more to do with the writing process itself—including the willingness to engage in a series of revisions (see Bruton & Kirby, 1987). In short, more is not necessarily better. In my experience, a full assessment of written competency must be based on several components, including: ease of expression (often referred to as fluency); discourse skills (organisation, clarity, coherency); variety and richness of both syntax and vocabulary (often termed complexity); and, perhaps the simplest to evaluate objectively, grammatical and syntactical accuracy.

In Germain et al.'s (2004) study comparing the French compositions of Grade 6 students of intensive French to those of young native speakers in Quebec, fluency (*aisance à communiquer*) was measured in terms of total number of words, sentences, subordinate clauses, adjectives and adverbs, as well as paragraph development; measures of accuracy (*précision linguistique*) were based on criteria such as sentence structure, verb agreements, agreements in gender and number, spelling, and so on.² After five months of intensive French, the students' proficiency was comparable to that of Grade 5 Francophones in terms of fluency and to that of Grade 4 Francophones in terms of accuracy. A clear correlation was established between number of hours of instruction in French and ease of written expression, and the authors suggested a possible link between students' oral and written fluency. In other words, if students are able to express themselves with facility in writing, it may be because they are able to transfer abilities they have acquired in oral French. However, as Germain et al. concluded, achieving a balance between ease and accuracy of expression seems to have more to do with effective classroom teaching than total hours of exposure to the target language.

In a recent study of 15 FSL students in their final year of high school in Australia, Benevento and Storch (2011) analysed three in-class compositions (written over a period of six months) according to their grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity. Writing samples were coded for *T-units*, defined as "an independent clause and all its dependent clauses" (p. 100), and complexity was measured by number of clauses per T-unit. A second measure of complexity was the number of linking words used, other than the high frequency *mais* and *parce que*. Grammatical accuracy was demonstrated in error-free clauses, with error categories consisting of: syntax, nominal and verbal morphology, prepositions, articles, and mechanics. In Bournot-Trites' (2007) study, the emphasis was placed on verbs: variety and richness of vocabulary was measured by the proportion of different verbs used, and specifically, infrequent verbs. Grammar was evaluated primarily in terms of ratios of correctly conjugated verbs, both overall and with separate analyses of composed tenses, the conditional and the subjunctive. (Discourse skills were also assessed, according to students' abilities to use paragraphs and organise them coherently.)

Accuracy with verb morphology has been established as one of the principal difficulties of FSL learners. Even among more advanced learners it constitutes what Bartning (1997, as cited in Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009) has called “fragile zones”; for example, confusion may persist as to the appropriate use of the *passé composé* and *imparfait* tenses. A generalisation of the auxiliary verb *avoir* in the *passé composé* (e.g., *j’ai allé/revénu/resté/retourné*, etc.) has been well documented among FI learners (e.g., Knaus & Nadasdi, 2001; Lyster, 1992, 1998). In their analysis of the written French of 250 FI graduates enrolled in three eastern Ontario universities, Vignola and Wesche (1991) observed significantly more errors in verb conjugation, agreement, and tense than in the compositions of Francophone peers. Similarly, reporting on the analysis of 400 written samples collected in 2001 from FI students (Grades 9-12) and native speakers, Rivard, Dilk and Barnabé (2007) found significantly more errors in verb morphology (as well as in syntax and spelling) in his FI group. I am aware of no such comparisons between CF and FI students, at least in recent decades, and feel some quantitative data would be useful in planning our first-year courses.

Lyster (1992, 1998), Harley (1989) and others have also described a tendency among FI students to substitute *être* for *avoir* in the expressions *avoir _ans/peur/froid/faim*, and so on. It is logical to assume this to be a case of negative transfer from the English *to be _years old/afraid/cold/hungry*, and so on. In fact, Mougeon, Nadasdi, and Rehner (2005) reported evidence of this “contact-induced innovation” among Franco-Ontarians in a marked linguistic minority situation: in Pembroke (a predominantly English-speaking community), a 24% rate of the variant *être peur* was observed, and this variant occurred 52% of the time in recordings of restricted speakers in the Mougeon-Beniak (1978, as cited in Mougeon et al., 2005) corpus. For the variant *être _ans*, Mougeon and Nadasdi (2010) reported a rate as high as 70% among Franco-Ontarian speakers in Pembroke in 2005; among FI students surveyed the same year, the variant *être peur* occurred almost 50% and *être _ans* 30% of the time. In a study of Grade 10 CF students in Ottawa, Morrison and Pawley (1987, as cited in Lapkin et al., 1993) reported that fewer than half (40-48%) produced this structure correctly. I am interested in seeing whether these percentages hold true in the present study.

Negation is another focus of my corpus analysis. Linguistic accuracy is measured, that is, correct placement of pre- and postnegators (*ne...pas, ne...jamais, ne...rien*). I am alert to the possibility of postnegator deletion, as described in Rehner and Mougeon’s (1999) study, and explained as a possible first language (L1) transfer: “*je n’allais _ à l’école*” (p. 144); according to Mougeon et al. (2010), there was in fact a 3% rate of *pas* deletion in their corpus of speech samples from 41 FI students (Grades 9 to 12). However, less than 30% *ne* deletion is reported in Mougeon et al.’s (2010) corpus of FI students, reflecting little evidence of vernacular use, and revealing only limited contact with Francophone speakers outside of the classroom.³ Indeed, in FI teaching materials, even those imitating spoken discourse, a rate of only 1% for *ne* deletion was found, and students were clearly modeling their speech on their FI teachers (Mougeon et al., 2010, cited a 71% use of *ne* among teachers, based on in-class speech data gathered by Allen, Cummins, Harley, & Swain, 1987). I expected to find little evidence of vernacular use (*la chute du ne*) in my own FI corpus, and even less in the CF group, as these learners typically have had no contact with native speakers.⁴

For the purpose of the present study, written competency is evaluated according to several measures of grammatical and syntactical accuracy; overall *output* is reported as an indicator of ease of written expression. I use these analyses to test the following two assumptions, which justify fast-tracking FI high school graduates enrolling in university French language courses:

1. FI graduates outperform CF graduates in terms of their overall output, producing longer responses and more complex sentences.
2. FI graduates demonstrate some difficulty writing with accuracy; however, they still outperform CF students in this respect, having benefitted from considerably more exposure to the target language.

Method

Instrument of Evaluation

Having been approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo, the following Diagnostic Questionnaire, together with a Letter of Information and Consent, were distributed to 10 sections of FR192A and seven sections of FR192B during the first class of the fall semester, 2011 and 2012, and to three sections of FR192B at the beginning of winter 2012. The individual course instructors did this after the syllabi had been distributed and discussed. Students were given an opportunity to review the Letter of Information and Consent and were reminded that their participation in this project was voluntary. With no other preparation, they were then allowed exactly 10 minutes to respond to the Diagnostic Questionnaire (see below) before placing it, unsigned, in the designated envelope:

Diagnostic Questionnaire—FR192A/B

Please respond *en français*, in paragraph form, using complete sentences.

1. How old are you?
2. Describe your background in French (Core or Immersion? Periods of study and/or travel to Quebec, France or other Francophone destinations?).
3. What would you like to learn most in this course?
4. What do you **not** like about studying French?
5. What question(s) would you like to ask your professor about this course?

The five questions asked were designed to elicit specific grammatical structures. By requesting students respond in paragraph form, and by providing several lines for them to do so, I hoped to encourage the participants to answer the questions fully and freely, demonstrating their ease of written expression in French. The questions were asked in English to avoid providing clues as to how to best formulate the answers (i.e., what tenses and structures to use in French).

Participants

The completed questionnaires were sorted into two main groups: Core French (CF) and French Immersion (FI), based on answers to Question 2 (“Describe your background in

French.”). Those indicating the student had taken a previous university French course were discarded, as were a small number of questionnaires indicating a Francophone family background (an antirequisite for both of these intermediate level courses). Also eliminated were a small number of questionnaires indicating students had not first learned FSL in the Canadian school system. Gender of participants was not controlled in this study.

Following this sorting of questionnaires, a collaborator and I converted 155 CF samples and 100 FI samples into electronic form, each of us verifying the work of the other. During the sorting and preparation of the electronic corpus, it became clear that the CF group was far from homogeneous. While the majority of these students had clearly had no contact with French beyond the 90 hours per year of classroom time provided for in the CF high school curriculum, approximately a quarter of them had participated in the Explore program (5 weeks in Quebec, either following Grade 11 or Grade 12), or had spent a semester of study in France, in their penultimate year of high school. These enriched students were grouped at the end of the larger CF group and identified as Core French Plus (CF+; participants identified as numbers CF+ 111 to CF+ 155) for the purpose of comparative analyses. Thus, we had three groups of CF students in total: the main, larger group, comprised of all Core French students (CF); a first subgroup of CF students having not had any authentic immersion experience, which we refer to as the Regular Core French (CFR) group; and a second subgroup, which was the CF+ group.

The FI group was relatively homogenous: all had completed level 4U (Grade 12) FI, with the exception of 17 respondents with a background in extended French. The decision to include these students should in no way compromise the results of the FI group; in fact, extended French students have typically received more language-centred instruction than their FI peers. Almost all respondents had travelled to Quebec with their classmates at least once, and many indicated additional trips, with school or family. Thirty-two percent of them had vacationed in France (for periods of 1 to 4 weeks), and another 10% of the group had benefitted from a period of study there (3 to 12 months). It is worth noting that I have not identified the FI participants as early, middle, or late immersion, as they were not required to indicate at what elementary school grade they had entered the program. According to Lazaruk (2007), research by Turnbull et al. (1998, as cited in Lazaruk, 2007) demonstrated that:

Differences between EFI [early French immersion] and LFI [late French immersion] students' L2 skills are rarely as great as the difference between their total hours in French instruction might lead one to expect [and] that the benefits of early entrance into a total immersion program manifest most strongly in graduates' improved speaking skills. (p. 610)

In their longitudinal study of FI graduates, Vignola and Wesche (1991) found no differences between early FI and late FI students in their French composition skills. As the present study examines aspects of the written competency of our university's first-year French students, a distinction between early and late FI therefore seems unnecessary. Indeed, no such distinction is made as a prerequisite for entry to French courses at the University of Waterloo.

Although no official statistics exist as to the number of students who go on to major (or minor) in French after completing either of these courses, my own records indicate that approximately 10% of the students I have taught in both level I and level II over the past 10

years completed a 4-year Honours program in French. While some students enrol merely to fulfill a language requirement in their program, I believe that the vast majority of students (including both CF and FI graduates) choose to pursue their study of French at university because they wish to improve their linguistic abilities in this language.

Procedure

I used totals (e.g., total words, simple sentences, subordinate clauses) as a means of comparing output, therefore adopting the first three criteria used to assess *aisance à communiquer* in Germain et al.'s (2004) study.⁵ My focus is on accuracy; this was measured in terms of the proportion of correctly-formed structures. I was particularly interested in examining structures and verb morphology reviewed in level I but not in level II, in order to ascertain if our FI graduates have indeed achieved a higher level of competency in these areas.

A research assistant/colleague and I (referred to in what follows as *we*) coded and verified all data, with a 100% inter-rater agreement; data were recorded in an Excel file organized in a binary fashion: *Yes-No* (Y-N) for each of the measures of competency. These were as follows:

Word count.

The length of each response was measured using the word count tool provided by Microsoft Word. We excluded from each total any substitutions from English, such as *agreements, become, bilinguale, excited, fluent, grade, high school, improve(r), practice, trip, vacation(né)*; we did, however, include the term *core* (it seemed unreasonable to expect students would know French equivalents such as *français de base* or *français cadre*, and they were required to identify their program of study). Errors in orthography were disregarded for the purpose of this word count.

Simple sentences.

We then agreed on the total number of simple sentences—that is, independent clauses standing alone or joined by a coordinating conjunction—and recorded the number of “successful” and “unsuccessful” attempts each respondent had made. A successful sentence was syntactically sound, containing a subject, an appropriate finite verb, and, where required, a direct object preceded by a determinant (SVO). The vast majority of errors in syntax were at the level of the verb, and account for most of the simple sentences entered in the *No* column of the Excel table; for example: *je jamais aller à Québec; je suis 18; je suis prendre un cours...; je besoin étudier...; j'ai été apprendre le français depuis...; j'espère vais au Québec; J'ai prenne “Core” française*. A successful simple sentence had to conform to French syntax; however, small errors in morphology (e.g., agreements, gender) as well as incorrect choice of verb tense or mode were disregarded at this stage of the analysis.

Thus, for the respondent FI 1, six simple sentences were recorded, all successful (6Y). These appear below in bold:

J'ai dix-huit ans/et j'avait pris le français depuis la maternelle./Je suis un étudiant d'immersion français,/et mon dernier cours était FIF4U./Ce que je voudrai apprendre le plus dans ce cours est de parler le français avec plus de confiance. Ce que je n'aime pas est que j'apprends, depuis maternelle, la vocabulaire des certaines sujets comme la géographie et l'histoire complètement en français, et je ne sais pas certains mots en anglais, ma langue maternelle./Je n'ai aucune question de poser à mon prof./
(= 86 w.)

Subordinate and relative clauses.

We then examined the complex sentences occurring in each response and calculated the total number of subordinate and/or relative clauses, recording the number that were successful and unsuccessful. In addition to containing SVO, each successful clause required the appropriate subordinate conjunction or relative pronoun. The response below contains four simple sentences (in bold), of which three are syntactically sound (**3Y**). There are four complex sentences, containing a total of nine subordinate/relative clauses; these are indicated below in square brackets. Seven of these dependent clauses are successful and two unsuccessful, due to an error in verb morphology and an inappropriate relative pronoun, respectively. Unsuccessful utterances have been underlined:

FI 35: Simple = **3Y**, 1N; Sub-rel = **7Y**, 2N

*Bonjour. **Je suis dix-huit ans,/et j'ai participé dans le programme d'immersion à l'école secondaire./Donc, j'ai étudié l'histoire, la géographie, l'anthropologie, et les 4 années de française en français./Je voudrais [qu'on étude plus des façons pour nous aider dans les situations oral]. J'aussi voudrais [qu'on pratique le grammaire], [parce que je sais] [que le grammaire est un partie] [que je ne suis pas bon]. Je n'aime pas des écoutes. Un question [que je voulais poser] est [que je ne suis pas sûre] [que le programme 192B est pour moi]. Je ne sais pas [quel programme est plus 'difficile' - 192A où B].***
(= 104 w.)

Note that this analysis of subordinate and relative clauses does not take into account any errors that may occur in the main clause of a complex sentence. These clauses are not included in either of the simple or subordinate tabulations. For the purpose of clarity, consider the following three responses (simple in bold, subordinate in square brackets, errors underlined):

CFR 89: Simple = **4Y**, 0N; Sub-rel = **3Y**, 1N

J'ai 17 ans./J'ai pris la français pendant l'école secondaire,/mais j'espère [que mes professeurs à mon école seront été meilleure] J'ai visité la France pour un vacation l'année dernière./Je veux apprendre beaucoup de la culture en France./Je n'aime pas le grammaire [parce-que c'est difficile]. Je veux demander ma professeur [si je suis prêt pour cet classe] [parce-que je suis nerveuse].
(= 63 w.)

CF+ 140: Simple = **5Y**, 1N; Sub-rel = **6Y**, 0N

*Salut. J'ai dix-huit ans./J'ai pris les courses français jusqu'à mon onzième année a l'école secondaire./puis j'ai fait une échange étudiante à Montréal pour deux mois [où je travaillais comme une animatrice à un camp de jour.] Dans cette course, j'aimerais améliorer mon prononciation;/c'est à dire, **je compris la plupart des mots**/mais je n'a pas beaucoup de confiance [quand je parle]. En école secondaire nous avons lus beaucoup des romans [qui sont pour les enfants] comme 'Le Petit Nicolas'. **Je n'aimes pas faire ça dans cette course.**/[Si c'est possible], je préfères les romans [qui sont peut-être plus courtes] mais [qui sont pour les adultes.] **Je n'ai pas des questions à ce moment.***
(= 116 w.)

FI 58: Simple = **3Y**, 1N; Subordinate = **2Y**, 3N

***Je suis 19 ans**/et la dernière fois [que j'ai étudié la français] était un ans passé. J'apprenais l'immersion français /et j'ai un chalet à Québec./Je veut étudié plus la grammaire [parce que j'ai beaucoup de problème en français] et [quand j'écrive]. Je n'aime pas [quand ont doivent lire les livres] [parce que ca prend moi beaucoup de temp.] **Je vais demander beaucoup de questions** pour plus comprendre mon grammaire et pour être capable d'écrire./*
(= 76 w.)

Avoir/être + âge.

When answering the first question (“How old are you?”), students used either the standard *J'ai _ ans*, or the variant often observed in L2 learners of French: *Je suis _ ans*. (Omitted here are the responses from FI 25: “*Mon âge est 18 ans*”; FI 63: “*Je viens d'avoir ma 19e anniversaire*”; and FI 65: “*Je suis une fille de l'age 18*”.)

Le passé composé: Formation and use.

The second question (“Describe your background in French...”) requires students to respond using the past tenses. Because the formation and uses of the *passé composé*, *imparfait* and *plus-que-parfait* constitute approximately one quarter of the grammar review in FR192A—a review from which FI students are exempt—I was interested in comparing the level of competency here, specifically with regards to the *passé composé*. We therefore tabulated the total occurrences of this tense in each writing sample, and the proportion of these that were formed accurately. Past participle agreement (*être* verbs) was not considered, as it was impossible to know if the respondents were male or female. We also accepted a small number of verbs with auxiliary *avoir* where an unnecessary past participle agreement had been made.

For example, in the case of CFR 70, three verbs were conjugated in the *passé composé*, all correctly (successful structures appear in bold): “*J'ai pris des courses de Français core en école secondaire pendant les quatres années. J'ai voyagé à Montréal, mais je n'ai pas tellement **utilisé** mon français pendant ces voyages.*”

For CF+ 127, there were three successful attempts (**3Y**) and three unsuccessful (3N, underlined):

J'ai étudié la français depuis (pendant) huit ans. Le dernier cours que j'ai suivi, je l'ai fini en juin 2011. J'ai suis des cours toujours en "Core French". En 2009, j'ai fait en échange avec une étudiante française, donc je suis vie en France pour trois mois.

For FI 33, there were two successful attempts (**2Y**) and one unsuccessful (1N): “Le dernier cours de français que j'ai pris était ma completion du programme d'immersion en douzième année. J'ai n'avais pas etudis dans la France ou Quebec mais j'ai visitée les deux.”

Expecting a possible correlation between the rate of error in the formation of the *passé composé* and the proportion of irregular verbs used in this tense, we recorded the results for such verbs. Errors typically occurred forming the past participles of irregular verbs, notably (*ap*)prendre, and suivre. Verbs using auxiliary être were also examined (*aller* was by far the most frequent); however, these occurred in only 67 responses (27 from the FI group and 40 from CF).

When measuring accuracy in terms of the formation of the *passé composé*, we examined only those verbs which students had conjugated (or attempted to conjugate) in this tense. Thus, in the case of CFR 8, one unsuccessful attempt was recorded, as shown underlined here (1N): “Le 12 classe et le cours que je etudie en l'école seondire. J'étudie le cours de Français core. Je suis alle au Quebec pour mon vacations.”

Next we examined the rate of accuracy for use—that is, correctly choosing the *passé composé* (PC) when it was required. Thus, for the above-mentioned respondent CFR 8, we recorded 1Y and 2N for use of this past tense. In the case of FI 4, we recorded 0 cases for PC formation, and 0Y, 3N for PC use (underlined): “Je prend les cours d'immersion.... Non, je n'étude pas en Quebec ou de France mais voyager en Quebec...”

Accuracy forming the present indicative.

As the present tense is reviewed at the beginning of our level I, but not our level II, course, we hoped to confirm whether FI graduates were indeed more competent than CF graduates in this respect. For each respondent, all occurrences of the present tense were recorded as successful or unsuccessful (that is, presenting either an error in conjugation or subject-verb agreement). Small spelling errors were not penalised (e.g., *j'espere* was judged unsuccessful, but *j'espère* was accepted). Verbs that were correctly conjugated in the present tense, but otherwise incorrect (e.g., *Je suis _ ans*) were omitted from this tabulation. We then examined the treatment of irregular verbs in the present, of which the most common were *aller*, *faire*, *vouloir*, *pouvoir*, *savoir*, *devoir*, and *venir*.

Verb + infinitive complement.

A number of the unsuccessful simple sentences contained a subject and appropriately conjugated verb, but were syntactically flawed because of the complement. A relatively common, superficial error found among both L1 and L2 French students is the use of the past participle (-é form) where an infinitive (-er) complement is required: “*je ne*

devais jamais parlé” (FI 5), “*je veux amélioré*” (FI 7), “*je voudrais voyagé*” (CFR 58), and so on. Sometimes the student had recognised the need for an infinitive complement, but chosen the wrong infinitive ending: “*je déteste sentir*” and “*j’aimerais demander*” (FI 29). Sometimes the problem was deeper: “*je veux étudie*” (FI 23), “*j’aimerais améliorer... et apprend*” (FI 31), “*je veux connais*” (CFR 1), “*je veux aide*” (CFR 64), and “*je veux parler... et comprenne*” (CF+ 111). All occurrences of the structure *verb (aimer, vouloir, devoir, pouvoir, devoir, aller, etc.) + infinitive* were examined, and the number of correct and incorrect realisations was recorded for each participant.

Conditional tense.

In Question 3 (“What would you like to learn most in this course?”) we hoped to elicit use of the conditional. Many students—in both the CF and FI groups—avoided this tense by responding in the present, however there were over 160 attempts at the conditional (e.g., *voudrais, aimerais*).

Negation.

Accuracy rates using basic negative structures such as *ne...pas/jamais/rien* were examined; these were specifically elicited by Question 4 of the questionnaire. For each student, we recorded the success respecting standard French in terms of the placement of both particles of negation. Separately, we noted a small number of negations where the particle *ne* was omitted, but the structure was otherwise correct. For example:

CFR 23: 0Y, 1N:

Je n’ai voyage jamais à Québec...

CFR 32: 4Y, 0N:

La seule chose que je n’aime pas des études français sont les étudiants qui n’essayent pas de parler en français ou qui n’essayent pas de développer une accent propre. À ce moment, il n’y a rien que je veux demander de ma prof.

FI 31: 3Y, 1N (*error is due to *ne* deletion)

**J’ai jamais étudié ou visité en France... Je ne pense pas qu’il y a quelque choses que je n’aime pas au l’étude de Français. ... je n’ai pas de questions...*

Other.

There were insufficient data to examine interrogative structures, elicited with Question 5. It would seem many students had either no time to answer, or no questions to ask. Because gender errors have been identified as one of the major sources of difficulty for L2 learners of French, in a separate study, I examined accuracy assigning gender to the 10 most frequently used nouns in our corpus, both overall and according to the type of determiner used (Lappin-Fortin, 2014).

Table 1 summarises the raw data submitted for statistical analyses (Y = successful, N = unsuccessful). Percentages correct are indicated and word count is expressed as means.

Table 1
Totals and Percentages Correct

Group	Word count			Simple			Subordinates			<i>Avoir + âge</i>		
	Y	N	%	Y	N	%	Y	N	%	Y	N	%
CFR	<i>M</i> = 72.8			579	153	79.1	172	57	75.1	99	11	90.0
CF+	<i>M</i> = 92.0			275	43	86.5	108	27	80.0	39	6	86.7
FI	<i>M</i> = 83.9			518	105	83.1	202	58	77.7	70	27	72.2

Group	Negation			Conditional			Present			Irregular Pres.		
	Y	N	%	Y	N	%	Y	N	%	Y	N	%
CFR	194	22	89.8	44	15	74.6	664	53	92.6	149	28	84.2
CF+	67	15	81.7	26	5	83.9	305	22	93.3	69	10	87.3
FI	154	22	87.5	55	16	77.5	563	59	90.5	135	28	82.8

Group	<i>Verb + infinitive</i>			PC			PC Irregular			PC Use		
	Y	N	%	Y	N	%	Y	N	%	Y	N	%
CFR	211	34	86.1	179	50	78.2	77	24	76.2	231	52	81.6
CF+	106	9	92.2	111	16	87.4	60	10	85.7	126	10	92.6
FI	205	43	82.7	214	15	93.4	87	5	94.6	224	23	90.7

Note: CFR ($n = 110$), CF+ ($n = 45$), FI ($n = 100$).

Statistical Analyses and Results

Comparisons of Output

We performed *t* tests on the total counts between the two main groups (CF vs. FI) and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were done for the three groups (CFR, CF+, FI) with a Least Significant Difference (LSD) post-hoc test to find out which groups differed. Output was compared based on the total word count, total number of simple sentences, and total number of subordinate/relative clauses. Totals were also compared for the finite verbs (all three tenses).

There was a significant difference in terms of the length of the responses ($F = 12.37, p < .001$). A LSD post-hoc test showed that with a mean of 91.98 words, the CF+

group, and, to a lesser degree the FI group ($M = 83.85$), outperformed the CFR group ($M = 72.78$; see Figure 1).

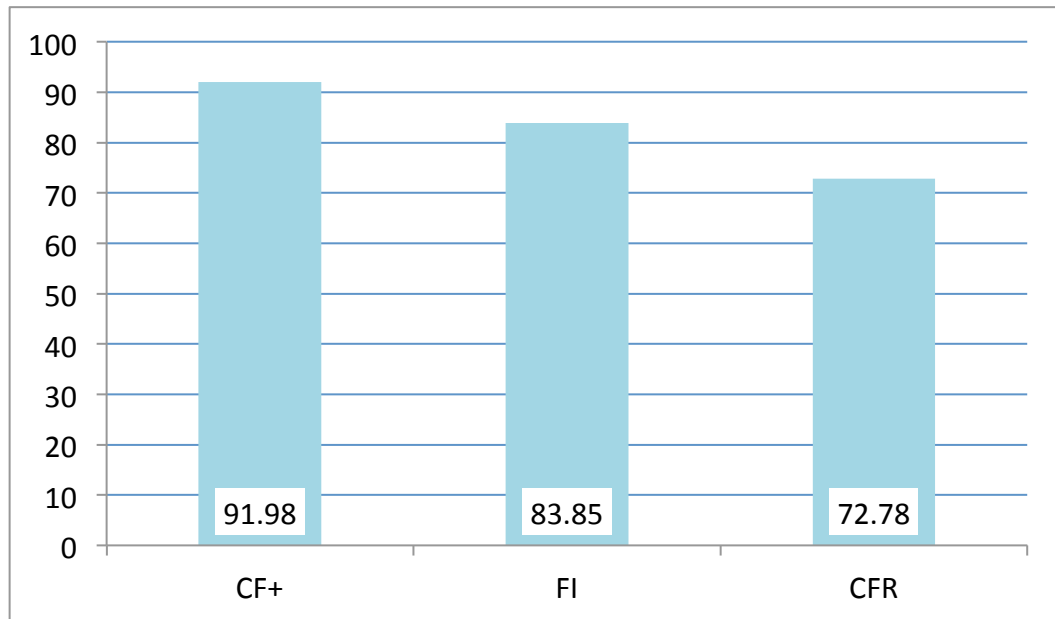


Figure 1. Mean word length.
 $p < .001$.

Similarly, there was a difference in terms of the total number of subordinate and/or relative clauses ($F = 4.44$, $p = .013$). Post-hoc analysis shows that both the CF+ ($M = 2.98$) and FI ($M = 2.59$) groups outperformed the CFR group ($M = 2.09$). There was no significant difference between the CF+ and FI groups (see Figure 2).

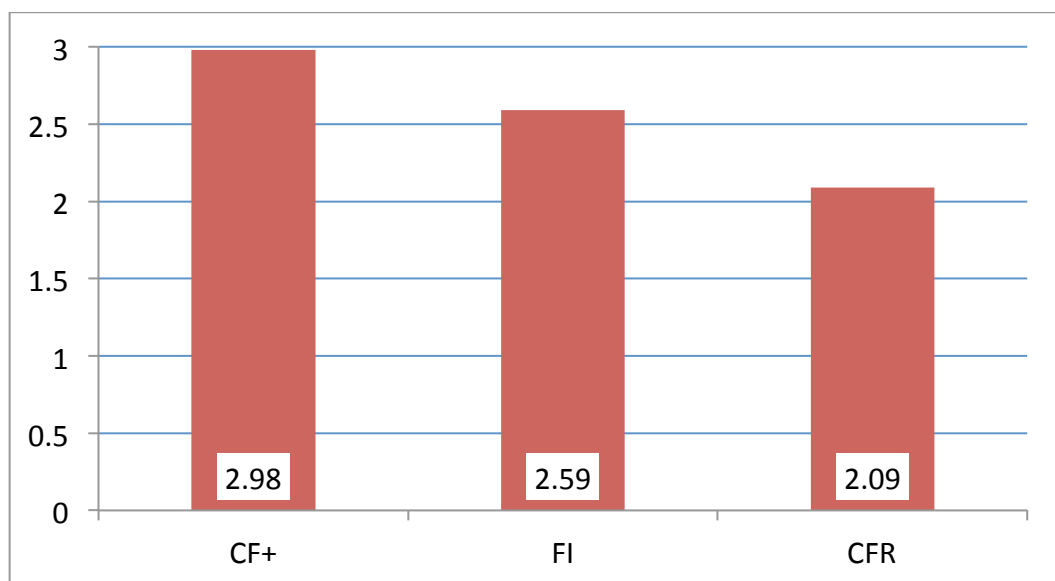


Figure 2. Subordinate/Relative means.
 $p = .013$.

There was no statistically significant difference between the three groups in the total number of simple sentences; all three means were in the range of 6.2 (FI) to 7.1 (CF+).

A one-way ANOVA test was also performed to see if differences emerged between the three groups in terms of the other totals. There were significant results for verbs in the past tense (PC). The CF+ group produced more verbs than the other two groups in the PC ($F = 5.09, p = .007$), and, notably, more irregular verbs in this tense ($F = 7.15, p < .001$). There was little difference between CFR and FI for these measures (see Figure 3).

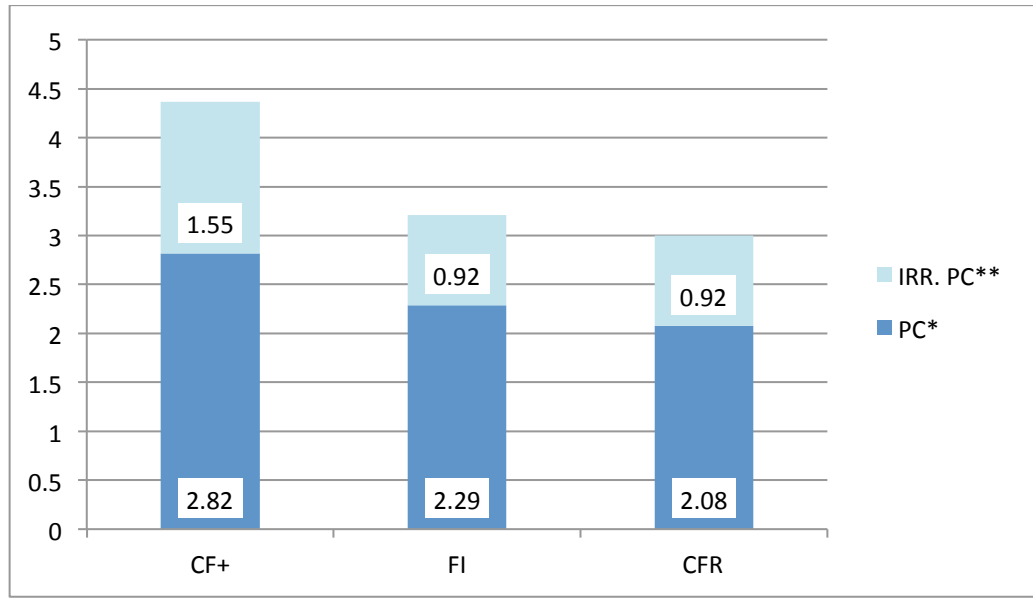


Figure 3. *Passé composé* (PC) means: total counts and irregular verbs.
* $p = .007$. ** $p < .001$.

Measures of Accuracy

Next we examined the proportion of successful simple sentences, subordinate/relative clauses, and the targeted grammatical structures as a proportion of the respective totals using a Logistic Regression Test, where *Yes* was considered success. When comparing the FI group to the entire CF group, significant results occurred. For the variable *avoir + âge*, the CF group was three times more likely to produce the correct form (odds = 3.131). The rate of success among the FI respondents ($n = 97$) was 0.72. The mean was significantly higher for the CF group ($n = 155$): 0.89. (There was little difference between the two CF subgroups, CFR and CF+, on this measure.) The FI group outperformed CF when choosing and conjugating the PC (use of PC: odds = 0.591; formation—all verbs: odds = 0.308; irregular verbs: odds = 0.232).

However, when the FI group was compared to each of the Core subgroups (CFR and CF+), it became apparent that the latter results were largely due to FI outperforming the CFR group: FI students were more successful with regard to both PC use (odds = 0.456) and conjugation (odds = 1.296). Their rate of success was also higher for irregular verbs in the PC (odds = 0.184). No significant differences appeared between CF+ and FI for the PC.

Other significant results appeared when FI was compared to each of the CF subgroups. In accuracy forming simple sentences, CF+ outperformed FI (odds = 1.296),

who in turn outperformed CFR (odds = 0.767). In accurately using the *verb + infinitive* structure, CF+ was 2.47 times more likely than FI to succeed.

Table 2 summarises these results. Note that no significant results emerged for accuracy in the other variables studied here (negation, subordinate-relative clauses, present and conditional tenses). Note also that, overall, rates of accuracy assigning grammatical gender revealed no significant differences between the abilities of these different groups of learners; findings from a separate study highlighted the difficulties all of these students have when attributing gender to even the most commonly used words (Lappin-Fortin, 2014).

Table 2
Logistics Results

Variable (% correct)	CF vs. FI	CFR vs. FI	CF+ vs. FI
Simple sentences		$p = .003$ (0.767)	$p = .028$ (1.296)
<i>Avoir + âge</i>	$p < .001$ (3.131)		
PC	$p < .001$ (0.308)	$p < .001$ (0.251)	
PC—use	$p = .042$ (0.591)	$p < .001$ (0.456)	
PC—irreg. verbs	$p = .003$ (0.232)	$p = .002$ (0.184)	
<i>Verb + infinitive</i>			$p = .036$ (2.470)

Note. Odds are indicated in parentheses.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, I compared the responses of 155 CF and 100 FI high school graduates to a questionnaire distributed at the beginning of their first university-level French course. My purpose was primarily diagnostic. With regard to assumption #1, where FI was expected to outperform CF in terms of total output, there were in fact no significant results. It was only when the CF+ group was isolated that some results began to appear, for mean length of each response and the total number of subordinate/relative clauses. Unsurprisingly, the results confirm that the FI respondents express themselves with greater ease than the 110 CF graduates whose exposure to French had been limited to the classroom (the CFR group). It was also unsurprising to see that a subgroup of 45 CF students who had benefitted from an authentic immersion experience in Quebec or France (the CF+ group) produced significantly longer responses and more complex sentence structures than their CFR peers. However, this CF+ group also performed at least as well as the FI group—and sometimes better. In fact, it proved to be the most productive in terms of word count, use of the PC, and use of irregular verbs in this tense.

With regard to assumption #2, the present study also failed to confirm that FI graduates outperform CF graduates in terms of accuracy. The FI group was not

significantly more successful when conjugating verbs in the present and conditional tenses; accuracy rates were in fact relatively high for both the FI and CF groups when using the present tense, with means of over 0.829 for irregular verbs. However, only errors in conjugation and subject-verb agreement were considered; it is important to remember that numerous spelling errors were disregarded. As for accuracy constructing negations, both the CF and FI groups performed well, with means of 0.886 and 0.865, respectively. There was no evidence of postnegator deletion; errors were more commonly a problem of word order with the PC.

Ne deletion was, unsurprisingly, all but inexistent among CFR participants (two occurrences in a total of 216 negations); the frequency was slightly higher in the FI group (14 of 176 negations), and for CF+ (13 of 82 negations, accounting for all but two of the errors recorded).

With an accuracy rate of almost 90%, the CF group outperformed the FI group with regard to the *avoir* + *âge* variable (and were considerably more successful than the Grade 10 CF students cited in Lapkin et al., 1993). This result may seem surprising, given the FI group's increased exposure to the target language. Yet, several studies over past decades have identified the *être* + *âge* variant among young FI students; if uncorrected, it clearly becomes fossilised. My results mirror those reported by Mougeon and Nadasdi (2010), that is, they indicate a slightly less than 30% rate of frequency for the *être* variant in the FI group ($M = 0.72$ for rate of accuracy). I believe review and reinforcement of expressions using *avoir* would be particularly beneficial to former immersion students enrolling in university-level courses.

The FI group appeared strongest conjugating and using the PC and were significantly more proficient in this respect than were the CFR respondents. However, it is important to remember that the results for this tense are largely based on *avoir* verbs, that the problem of past participle agreement has not been analysed, and that there are no data for pronominal verbs. Further study is needed before researchers could establish with any certainty that FI graduates would not benefit from a review of the PC in first-year university French.

In short, the subgroup of CF+ students in this study has emerged as the most successful overall, both in terms of total output and accuracy of their written French. If indeed a correlation exists between written and oral fluency, as Netten and Germain (2004) have suggested, the volume of output produced by the CF+ students may reflect the level of oral fluency they have achieved thanks to a recent (or fairly recent) period of immersion in France or Quebec. However, this is purely speculation; the present study is based on data obtained through written samples only. What appears to be relatively certain is that these learners possess greater knowledge of grammatical rules (particularly verb morphology) and the ability to apply these rules accurately. While not yet fully proficient, they did not make significantly more errors with the PC than did the FI group, even though they used significantly more irregular verbs (and also the highest percentage of *être* verbs). Moreover, CF+ outperformed both the FI and CFR groups on two other measures of accuracy: the construction of simple sentences and the variable *verb* + *infinitive*.

While these results suggest a much smaller gap between the written competency of CF and FI graduates than previous research has led us to expect, it is worth underlining the role that motivational factors may have played here, as previously suggested by Morrisson (2004). One aspect I have been unable to explore, but which may be quite relevant to my findings, is the importance of students' goals in learning French, whether these include

career plans, a need to complete academic requirements, or a strong desire to interact with Francophones—in short, what Gardner and Smythe (1976) referred to as the “motivational indices”. It is also clear that a strong correlation exists between students’ attitudes towards French and their learning outcomes (Lapkin, 2003), and in research studies on CF and FI in Grades 5 through 10, immersion students have clearly held the advantage in this respect. However, there is little doubt that the attitudes of the CF graduates in this study—students who chose to enrol in a French language course during their first year at university, some of whom would later go on to major or minor in this language—were considerably more positive than the average high school student who drops French well before Grade 12. This would be particularly true of the CF+ respondents, who had also chosen to participate in an optional student exchange in France or the Explore program in Quebec. Although I have not quantified data on language attitudes in this study, highly positive appreciations of French frequently occur in the CF corpus.

At the same time, a content analysis of the responses also revealed the linguistic insecurity that has long characterised this group of learners. Recall that the consensus among researchers and educators has been that CF students typically lack both fluency and confidence when expressing themselves in French (whereas FI students lack accuracy). The following comment perhaps best summarises the attitudes of the CF group: “*J’adore français mais mon français n’est pas bon*” (CFR 65). Moreover, in the CFR corpus, the words *timide*, *nerveux/nerveuse*, and *peur* occur quite frequently. In fact almost 20% of these respondents expressed anxiety, even fear about communicating in French. Another 20% of them expressed lack of confidence in their abilities and/or a belief that their French is *terrible*, *mauvais*, *pas bon*, and so on.

For those in the CF+ group, confidence levels appeared to be somewhat higher, but over 30% of these participants still expressed some insecurity, usually with regard to their accent in French, and their grammar. Indeed, the word *grammaire* was one of the most frequently occurring in the entire corpus. When the FI responses were examined, there was little evidence of linguistic anxiety (only 3% expressed fear about communicating in French); however, approximately 30% of these students expressed some degree of linguistic insecurity (e.g., *pas de confiance*, *beaucoup d’erreurs*, *mauvais*, *problèmes*, *difficile*). When responding to Question 3 (“What would you like to learn most in this course?”), the vast majority of FI students mentioned a desire to improve their oral skills; however, many also indicated a desire (or at least a need) to work towards greater written competency. This is well illustrated in what follows:

J’aussi voudrais qu’on pratique le grammaire, parce que je sais que le grammaire est un partie que je ne suis pas bon. (FI 35)

Je veux améliorer mon français écrit. L’écriture es mon moins préféré forme de français, mais je pense que j’aurai aimer plus çï je peux améliorer mes abilités. (FI 73)

Je voudrais devenu plus confidant dans l’aspect oral et le grammaire. J’amerais étudier le grammair parce que j’avais toujours un problème avec cela. (FI 83)

The results of FSL studies in Canada have convinced researchers and teachers that some balance must be reached between the traditionally form-focused instruction of CF

classes, and the more communicative, content-based approach of FI. Many have underlined the need for what Allen, Swain, Harley, and Cummins (1990) called “a commitment to accuracy”. As Wesche (2010) noted: “This is particularly important with respect to learner errors that do not impede communication and thus attract little natural feedback” (p. 288). Errors found in my corpus of CF and FI writing samples are most often of that type: errors in gender, verb agreement or even conjugation, of which few are serious enough to pose an obstacle to communication. Countless errors also appear using articles and prepositions; I have not had an opportunity to examine these here, but they would certainly warrant further research. Orthography is yet another minefield; accents, for example, are used indiscriminately, and there is little indication students of either background fully understand their function. Yet, many of our intermediate-level French students will go on to pursue careers as French teachers or civil servants. Clearly it is important to offer them effective and adequate grammar review, with the aim of improving their written competency. The present study has provided no conclusive evidence that FI graduates require this support any less than CF graduates do. On campuses where no placement tests are administered for entry in first-year French language courses, I believe it would be wise to avoid assumptions that FI students necessarily possess superior skills in terms of grammatical accuracy. Indeed, if fast-tracking is appropriate for any of our first-year students, I suggest it may be for those who—like the CF+ learners—have benefitted from both solid form-focused instruction and a period of authentic immersion in a Francophone milieu.

Notes

¹ For purposes of clarity, I am therefore adopting *ease of written expression*, as demonstrated by volume of output.

² In an end note to Germain et al.’s (2004) article, the authors explain that, at the outset, they had adopted the term *précision* to describe knowledge of linguistic structures and rules, while *aisance à communiquer* referred to the ability to use this knowledge in order to express oneself with ease in real-life situations (see also Netten & Germain, 2004). However, at the end, they prefer to define *accuracy* as both the knowledge, and the ability to use this knowledge correctly: “*la précision est donc vue à la fois comme un savoir et un savoir-faire*” (p. 352).

³ A rate of 27% is reported in Nadasdi, Mougeon, and Rehner (2005), while a rate of 28% is reported in Rehner and Mougeon (1999), as well as in Mougeon et al. (2010).

⁴ Inversely, rates of *ne* deletion are extremely high among Francophones in Quebec and Ontario—studies on Montreal and Ottawa area speakers describe it as close to 100%—and have been on the rise in France, even reaching 80% in some studies (Regan et al., 2009).

⁵ Because of the nature of the instrument of evaluation—a diagnostic questionnaire—few adjectives and adverbs occurred in the corpus and the ordering of ideas was determined by the sequence of the five questions asked.

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