Evaluation of the Written Competence of Pre-service Teachers of French as a Foreign Language in Belgium

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ABSTRACT: The main objective of this study was to describe French as a foreign language (FFL) proficiency in pre-service FFL teachers. This study was performed with all native Belgian Dutch postgraduate students (n=40) coursing an Academic Teacher Education Program (Ghent, Belgium) during the academic years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. Analyses revealed interesting findings on their FFL level and different error types in their written productions. In conclusion, the presence of writing errors in FFL in pre-service teachers suggests the need to design novel teaching strategies to improve their overall language proficiency and writing skills during their degree studies.
Keywords: French as a foreign language; writing errors; pre-service teachers; ©DIALANG; CorpuScript

Evaluación de la competencia escrita de profesores en formación de francés como lengua extranjera en Bélgica

RESUMEN: El objetivo principal de este estudio fue describir las competencias en francés como lengua extranjera (FLE) en futuros profesores de FLE. Este estudio se realizó con todos los estudiantes neerlandófonos (n=40) que cursaban el Máster universitario en profesorado de educación secundaria obligatoria y bachillerato (Gante, Bélgica) durante 2013-2014 y 2014-2015. Los análisis revelaron resultados interesantes sobre su nivel en FLE y diferentes tipos de errores en sus producciones escritas. En conclusión, la presencia de errores escritos en FLE en profesores en formación sugiere la necesidad de diseñar nuevas estrategias didácticas para mejorar sus competencias escritas durante sus estudios de grado.
Palabras clave: Francés como lengua extranjera; errores escritos; profesores en formación; ©DIALANG; CorpuScript

1. Introduction

In the acquisition of French as a foreign language (FFL), it is a challenge to achieve a near-native level. This is certainly important in the case of future FFL teachers, responsible to transfer their knowledge to enable secondary, undergraduate and/or postgraduate students to master it (Myhill, Jones & Watson, 2013). In order to teach any subject effectively, it is generally accepted that an adequate degree of subject knowledge is required (Madrid, 2004). In addition, within the European Union it is teachers' linguistic proficiency that often appears

to be the focus of most attention (Trujillo & Madrid, 2001; Pizarro, 2013). Furthermore, research suggested that high proficiency is essential to teach students to become linguistically competent themselves (Woodgate-Jones, 2008). In this context, students enrolled in a Master in French philology or French translation and interpretation studies should reach to a C1 level of FFL based on Common European Framework of Reference's (CEFR) scales at the end of their university studies. However, at present it is still unknown if FFL pre-service teachers enrolled in the Academic Teacher Education Program (ATEP) at Ghent University (Belgium) have successfully acquired this required level. In this sense, this study intends to shed some light on this question.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Language proficiency assessment

In general, the CEFR describes foreign language proficiency at six levels, A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), and C1 and C2 (proficient user). In this regard, foreign language (FL) level can be evaluated by official tests at authorized centers (e.g. *Alliance Française*) or through online tools and tests. In this sense, ©DIALANG, an online test, allows to assess language proficiency in 14 different European languages. It has been developed by more than 20 European institutions and is based on the Council of Europe's CEFR, which has become established throughout Europe as the most widely recognized frame of reference in the field of language learning (Zhang & Thompson, 2004; Alderson & Huhta, 2005). In addition, it was successfully used for FL level assessment in research (Cortina Pérez, 2011; Lundell & Lindqvist, 2014b).

2.2. Writing skills and errors

In general, writing has been a useful tool to assess learners' FL proficiency, particularly in academic contexts (Benevento & Storch, 2011; Martínez, 2015). In writing assignments, students are expected to demonstrate their skills and learners perceived that an extensive vocabulary is crucial to their academic writing (Leki & Carson, 1994). Additionally, FL writing is a complex activity and is considered one of the most difficult skills, due to the combination of grammar, vocabulary and discourse organization (Llach, 2007; Yu, 2010). Currently, university programs dedicate more importance to academic writing, integrating it more intensively and explicitly in the curriculum (Hadermann & Demeulenaere, 2013). Curiously, despite the clear importance of writing skills in academic contexts, most of the studies in FFL are mainly focused on different aspects of grammar (Dewaele & Véronique, 2000; Benevento & Storch, 2011). In addition, differences in proficiency between native speakers and very advanced FL learners are demonstrated. In fact, only a minority was capable to acquire a lexical level of native speakers (Forsberg & Bartning, 2010). Similarly, a longitudinal study, focused on the improvement of writing skills of secondary school learners of FFL, showed improvements at the discourse level and in linguistic complexity. However, there were no significant improvements in accuracy and certain frequent errors persisted (Benevento & Storch, 2011). In addition, it was observed that students still seem to struggle with faultless academic writing (O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006).

Concerning writing errors, there are no unified guidelines for their description or assessment. Therefore, linguists have devised their own taxonomies for error description. Some researchers used a taxonomy based on linguistic categories (Ellis, 1994). A more recent and actualized classification of errors was described which was not limited to grammatical elements but also included lexical and stylistic issues (James, 2013). James' classification served as guide for the elaboration of the online correction tool called CorpuScript, developed by and currently used at Ghent University (Belgium) (Hadermann & Demeulenaere, 2013). This online correction tool distinguishes three main categories of errors (lexical, grammatical and discursive) and two other categories (spelling mistakes and content errors).

3. AIMS OF THE STUDY

The studies mentioned above demonstrated that writing skills in FL represent a great challenge for advanced learners and even for future FL teachers, and it plays a key role in their professional performance. In this regard, the present study was designed based on the importance of the acquisition of a high FL level in an academic context and the persistence of writing errors at different academic levels. In this context, the FFL level and the frequency and types of written errors made by native Belgian Dutch pre-service teachers of FFL are still unknown. In Belgium, all graduated future FL teachers must complete their formation by following a specific postgraduate ATEP. In this sense, this program offers a unique opportunity to evaluate the FL level and writing skills of the future FFL teachers. It is hypothesized that these postgraduate students reach a high or close to a native level of FFL. However, probably they could still commit errors in their written compositions which could affect their professional career. For this reason, the aim of this study was to determine the level of FFL and to describe qualitatively and quantitatively the types and frequency of written errors committed by these postgraduate students.

4. MATERIAL AND METHODS

4.1. Participants

This study was performed with all the pre-service teachers (n=40) enrolled in the obligatory ATEP with a specialization in FFL at Ghent University (Belgium) during the academic years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. In this population of students, 40 were native Belgian Dutch speakers, which represented the experimental population (EP). EP was composed by 9 male and 31 female students. In addition, the majority of the students had acquired a Master in French philology (n=32, PHILGroup and the others in French translation and interpretation studies (n=8, TIGroup). Note that gender information was only supplementary and it was not used as variable or for further analyses in this study.

4.2. FFL level assessment

During the first stage of this study, students were asked to self-assess their FFL level. In order to obtain an objective and complete assessment of the FFL skills, they performed

the computer-based and delivered via the Internet ©DIALANG test (Zhang & Thompson, 2004) for French in an informatics classroom at Ghent University. Before starting the actual language skills test, they performed a vocabulary size placement test, in which a collection of words –real and invented verbs– are presented, and a self-assessment questionnaire in order to rate their own language abilities (Ockey, 2009). It was scored between 0-1000 points (Zhang & Thompson, 2004). Next, listening, writing, reading, grammar and vocabulary skills were objectively evaluated and scored on the CEFR scales. These values were then analyzed to know the overall language proficiency in FFL in each student. In addition, ©DIALANG does not give a global score, but scores range from A1-C2 (total of six levels) in each skill. In this sense, to obtain a numeric value corresponding the global FFL level of each participant, a number from 1-6 was assigned to each level (1=A1, 2=A2 till 6=C2 respectively).

4.3. Writing assignment

During the second stage of the study, in order to assess the writing skills, students were asked to perform a writing assignment in French which was conducted in their own classroom under their teacher's and the researcher's supervision. It consisted of a short essay which should include a brief introduction and a clear conclusion (375-400 words) relating to an aspect of FFL and its teaching. The title of the essay given to the students was: "*L'importance de l'enseignement du français langue étrangère dans une Europe multilingue.*" This general topic was selected thanks to its direct relation to the student's background. Thus, specific knowledge on the subject has played no role. Students were given an introduction of 10 minutes outlining what they had to do; they were allowed up to 60 minutes to complete this task, to revise their handwritten text and make any changes they wished. Additionally, students could not make use of any help source (dictionary or grammar, nor were they allowed to ask the teacher or researcher for help).

4.4. Writing error analysis

In the third stage of this study, all essays were treated in different phases.

In the first phase, in order to facilitate the writing error analysis, the 40 handwritten essays were collected and transcribed literally into word files using Microsoft Office Word 2007.

In the second phase, in order to perform an efficient, uniform and objective writing error analysis, all essays were uploaded to the online correction tool CorpuScript. This tool has been developed by Ghent University because there was a growing need for a more efficient, uniform and, hence, objective correction method of written assignments (Hadermann & Demeulenaere, 2013). Three main categories of errors are distinguished: lexical, grammatical and discursive errors. Two other categories, spelling mistakes and content errors, were also included. In addition, the following subtypes of errors were considered in the three main categories: omission, misselection, overinclusion and order (James, 2013). Omission is considered as the absence of an item that should appear in a well-formed sentence (e.g. grammatical omission: *Dans un premier temps nous nous intéressons *à les* suites positives pour finir par (…).); misselection is the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure (e.g. lexical misselection: *Après une journée *occupée*, (…), ça nous fait du bien (...) pour se relaxer.); overinclusion is defined as the presence of an item that should not appear in a

well-formed sentence (e.g. grammatical overinclusion: *Le contact physique avec un livre, (…), est un prem*ière* aspect positif.); and finally order is regarded as the incorrect placement of a morpheme in an utterance (e.g. grammatical order: *D'ailleurs, *ne pas* tout le monde jouit d'un ordinateur.). Thus, in this study, a total of 14 types of written errors were evaluated.

In the third phase of the analysis, in order to evaluate the frequency and types of errors, all the transcribed written compositions were read and scrutinized one by one. First, the total number of words written in each essay has been calculated. Furthermore, errors were identified, selected and classified into the main categories and subtypes as described above, and then counted up. Next, the number of total errors and the number of errors for each category and subtype was written down in Excel for each student. Finally, the mean frequency of each error type was calculated. At this stage, no correction or feedback was provided. Instead, the students were informed that they would receive a personal feedback on their essay and that they would have the opportunity to improve their assignment.

4.5. Quantitative and statistical analyses

In this study, all data from the FFL level analysis (©DIALANG) and the writing error analysis were collected and subjected to the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality by using the software SPSS 15.0. Scores of the vocabulary placement test were normally distributed and therefore, student's t-test was used to determine statistical differences. FFL skills from ©DIALANG and data from writing errors analyses were non-normally distributed, and Mann-Whitney non-parametric test was used to determine statistical significance. In addition, the results of each variable were expressed as mean and standard deviation (SD) values and p values $p<0.05$ were considered statistically significant in two-tailed tests. In writing errors analyses, the percentage of students who committed each particular error, the distribution of each category of writing errors and their respective subtypes were presented as percentage in their respective tables.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Level of FFL

Self-assessment of the FFL level performed by each student ranged from B1 to C2 for EP. Furthermore, 82.5% of EP placed themselves at the C level on the CEFR scales (27.5% at C1 and 55% at C2) and 17.5% supposed having a B level (2.5% at B1 and 15% at B2). These results suggested that, as far as self-assessment is concerned, EP supposed a high FFL level, comparable to native speakers.

After self-assessment, students performed the ©DIALANG in order to have a more objective overview on their FL level. First, on the vocabulary placement test, EP scored a mean of 759/1000. Interestingly, results by group revealed that PHILGroup obtained a higher mean score (766/1000) than TIGroup (731/1000) but no statistical differences were found (p=0.526).

Concerning the acquired CEFR levels, results by EP showed that 62.5% was placed at B2 and 37.5% at C1. Observing results by group, 37.5% of both groups were placed at C1.

In addition, more than half of the participants (62.5% for PHILGroup and TIGroup) were placed at a B2 level. None of them was placed at C2.

Table 1 ©DIALANG analysis of FFL level by skills

©DIALANG FFL SKILLS

Groups	Listening	Writing	Reading	Grammar	Vocabulary
EP	4.5 ± 0.6	3.9 ± 0.5	5.0 ± 0.8	4.2 ± 0.7	4.1 ± 0.7
	C1	B2	C1	B2	B2
PHIL	4.5 ± 0.7	3.9 ± 0.6	4.9 ± 0.8	4.1 ± 0.6	4.0 ± 0.7
	C1	B2	C1	B2	B2
TI	4.4 ± 0.5	4.0 ± 0.5	5.4 ± 0.9	4.5 ± 0.9	4.1 ± 0.6
	B2	B2	C1	C1	B2

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

PHIL vs. TI	p=0.629	p=0.557	p=0.179	p=0.146	p=0.663

FFL results are presented as mean ± standard deviation values for each group and skills. FFL level is expressed according to the CEFR scale. Statistical *p* values for Mann-Whitney non-parametric test are shown and all *p* values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant for the two-tailed test.

In relation to ©DIALANG analysis of the CEFR levels for each skill (Table 1), EP showed a B2 level for writing, grammar and vocabulary, and a C1 level for listening and reading. Similarly, PHILGroup obtained a B2 level for each skill. However, for receptive skills such as listening and reading skills, students obtained a higher level (C1). Whilst, observing the scores obtained by group, means for every skill were very similar for each group. However, for reading skills and grammar, TIGroup outperformed PHILGroup. Finally, when PHIL and TIGroups were compared, no statistical significant differences were observed (p>0.05).

5.2. Analysis of written compositions and general classification of the writing errors

A system of classification of errors was based on the taxonomy established by James (James, 2013). A summary of the number and percentage of errors made in each main category of error is summarised in Table 2.

The total analyzed corpus contained a total of 11069 words written by 40 students. Text length of the essays of the EP ranged from 197 to 432 words with a mean of 276.73 words, which was under the established maximum length (400 words). Mean length of the essays of PHILGroup (271.28 words) was slightly lower than that of the TIGroup (298.50 words) but both were still under the maximum established length. In addition, the shortest and the longest text were both written by students of PHILGroup (Table 2).

The general analysis of errors revealed a total of 163 errors (100%) in the analyzed corpus. 80% of these errors were committed by PHILGroup (131 errors) and 20% by TIGroup (32 errors). Regarding to the total number of errors, there were no significant differences (p=0.919) between both groups (Table 2).

Table 2 General analysis of writing errors.

MAIN CATEGORIES OF ERRORS	% CATEGORY ERROR OF TOTAL ERRORS	EP (n=40)	PHILGroup (n=32)	TIGroup (n=8)
LEXICAL	41.1% (67)	75% students 1.68 ± 1.33	75% students 1.69 ± 1.38	75% students 1.63 ± 1.19
GRAMMATICAL	32.5% (53)	70% students 1.33 ± 1.21	68.8% students 1.28 ± 1.11	75% students 1.50 ± 1.60
SPELLING	24.5% (40)	62.5% students 1.00 ± 0.99	62.5% students 1.06 ± 1.05	62.5% students 0.75 ± 0.71
DISCURSIVE	1.2% (2)	5% students 0.05 ± 0.22	3.1% students 0.03 ± 0.18	12.5% students 0.13 ± 0.35
CONTENT	0.61% (1)	2.5% students 0.03 ± 0.16	3.1% students 0.03 ± 0.18	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00
TOTAL ERRORS	100% (163)	100% students (163) 4.08 ± 2.28	100% students (131) 4.09 ± 2.20	100% students (32) 4.00 ± 2.73
TOTAL WORDS CORPUS	11069	11069 276.73 ± 60.52	8681 271.28 ± 59.61	2388 298.50 ± 63.19

The general distribution of each error category is presented as percentage and number of errors between () for each one. In the analysis by group, participants who committed each type of error are shown in percentage (% students). Writing errors are shown as mean ± standard deviation for each error category and group.

Overall analysis of each category of error revealed that vocabulary errors were the most frequent with 41.1%, followed by grammatical (32.5%) and spelling (24.5%) errors. Discursive and content errors represented 1.2% and 0.61% respectively of all errors (Table 2). First, the analysis of vocabulary errors showed that a large percentage of students (75%) committed this type of error in each group. The mean of vocabulary errors was higher in PHILGroup but differences between groups were not statistically significant (p>0.05). Second, the analysis of grammatical errors showed similar results where 75% of TIGroup committed this type of error, followed by PHILGroup (68.75%). In addition, TIGroup showed higher mean of grammatical errors but this difference was not statistically significant (p>0.05). Third, the analysis of spelling errors revealed that more than half of the students (62.5%) committed

this type of error in each group, but spelling errors were less frequent than vocabulary and grammatical errors. Finally, discursive and content errors were less frequent than all the other errors described above and no statistical differences were observed (Table 2).

5.3. Analysis of subtypes of writing errors

The analysis of sybtypes of writing errors revealed that main part of the subtypes of errors was present in the three main categories of errors, especially in grammatical and lexical errors, but clear differences were observed in their distribution along groups (Table 3). First, when grammatical errors were deeply analyzed, it was observed that a high percentage of students committed grammatical omission and overinclusion errors, followed by misselection and order. This order was as well observed in the mean values of errors for each subtype (Table 3). Indeed, mean values in overinclusion errors were the highest in TIGroup, but without statistically significant differences comparing to PHILGroup. Omission grammatical errors showed the second highest mean values in TIGroup and did not present statistical differences (Table 3). In the case of grammatical misselection and order errors, mean values were lower and no statistical differences were identified between groups.

Table 3 Detailed analysis of the subtypes of writing errors.

GROUPS	SUBTYPES OF WRITING ERRORS				DISTRIBUTION OF SUBTYPES OF ERRORS	
	OMISSION	MISSELECTION	OVERINCLUSION	ORDER		
			LEXICAL			
EP	7.5% students 0.08 ± 0.27	75% students 1.58 ± 1.26	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00	2.5% students 0.03 ± 0.16	MISSELECTION: OMISSION: ORDER: OVERINCLUSION:	94% / 38.7% 4.5% / 1.8% 0% / 0% 1.5% / 0.6%
PHIL	6.3% students 0.06 ± 0.25	75% students 1.59 ± 1.32	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00	3.1% students 0.03 ± 0.18		
TI	12.5% students 0.13 ± 0.35	75% students 1.50 ± 1.07	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00		
			GRAMMATICAL			
EP	47.5% students 0.55 ± 0.64	27.5% students 0.30 ± 0.52	30% students 0.43 ± 0.78	5% students 0.05 ± 0.22	OMISSION: OVERINCLUSION: MISSELECTION: ORDER:	41.5% / 3.5% 32.1% / 10.5% 22.6% / 7.4% 3.8% / 1.2%
PHIL	50% students 0.56 ± 0.62	31,3% students 0.34 ± 0.55	25% students 0.34 ± 0.70	3.1% students 0.03 ± 0.18		
TI	37.5% students 0.50 ± 0.76	12,5% students 0.13 ± 0.35	50% students 0.75 ± 1.04	12.5% students 0.13 ± 0.35		
			DISCURSIVE			
EP	2.5% students 0.03 ± 0.16	2.5% students 0.03 ± 0.16	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00	2.5% students 0.00 ± 0.00	OMISSION: MISSELECTION: OVERINCLUSION: ORDER:	50% / 0.6% 50% / 0.6% 0% / 0% 0% / 0%
PHIL	0% students 0.0 ± 0.00 (α; p=0.046)	3.1% students 0.03 ± 0.18	% students 0.00 ± 0.00	3.1% students 0.00 ± 0.00		
TI	12.5% students 0.13 ± 0.35	% students 0.00 ± 0.00	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00	0% students 0.00 ± 0.00		

The distribution of each subtype of error in each main category is shown in decreasing order as the percentage of each subtype of the total number of errors in its category and the percentage of each subtype of the total errors present in the corpus. In the analysis by group, participants who committed each type of error are shown in percentage (% students). Writing errors in each group are shown as mean ± standard deviation. (α) shows significant differences in comparison to TIGroup and their respective p value for Mann-Whitney non-parametric test. All p values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant for the two-tailed test.

Second, analysis of lexical errors showed that a high percentage of students committed lexical misselection errors as compared to the other subtypes of lexical errors. Furthermore, higher but not significant (p>0.05) mean values were observed in PHILGroup in comparison to TIGroup. Mean values of the other lexical subtypes writing errors were considerably lower (all below 0.13 errors) than misselection (Table 3).

Third, in-depth analysis of discursive errors confirmed the lower presence of these errors in EP. The only subtypes of discursive errors present were omission followed by misselection and no statistical differences were observed, except for omission (p=0.046). Remarkably, TIGroup only committed omission errors (Table 3).

Finally, when the distribution of subtypes of errors was analyzed in relation with the total number of errors in its category and with the total number of errors in the corpus, a major variation was observed. In the case of grammatical errors, the distribution of subtypes of errors was heterogeneous where the most frequent subtype of error was omission (41.5%), followed by overinclusion, misselection and order. Interestingly, grammatical omission error represented 13.5% of all the errors present in the corpus. Unlike grammatical errors, in the case of lexical errors, the subtypes of errors were less distributed where 94% was lexical misselection. In contrast with grammatical omission errors, lexical misselection errors represented 38.7% of all errors. At last, the most frequent subtypes of discursive errors were misselection and order with 50% each. However, discursive misselection and omission errors represented less than 1% of all errors. Examples of all the types of errors can be found in table 4.

Table 4 Examples of writing errors

EXAMPLES OF WRITING ERRORS			
OMISSION	MISSELECTION	OVERINCLUSION	ORDER
GRAMMATICAL			
*Bref, l'apprentissage du français s'avère très utile de pouvoir communiquer, et (…) la communication avec les pays plus **lointain**.*	*Bref, si tout Européen doit étudier deux langues, nous désirerons qu'il **devrait** être l'anglais et le français.*	*Posséder des compétences françaises, à quoi **ça** sert-**il**?*	*Ils **le** veulent surtout apprendre pour pouvoir travailler, voyager, etc., parce que c'est une langue pratique dans le monde.*
LEXICAL			
*En ce qui concerne le français, connaître cette langue signifie **en même** reconnaître la grande partie des Européens qui la parlent.*	*Enfin, la France est le pays le plus adoré comme pays de **vacance**.*	/	*Si vous **sur un de vos voyages** faites un effort envers les gens, ces derniers feront sans doute la même chose pour vous.*
DISCURSIVE			
/	***A cause de** la présence étendue de cette langue, dans beaucoup de pays, il est nécessaire ou au moins très utile pour les non-francophones d'en avoir une bonne connaissance (…).*	/	/
SPELLING			
*La communication en Europe pourrait **s'amméliorer** si le français recevrait plus d'importance à l'école.*			
CONTENT			
***Dans l'Europe**, les pays les plus importants du point de vue économique sont l'Allemagne, **les Etats-Unis**, mais aussi la France fait partie de ce groupe.*			

Examples of writing errors observed in the corpus. Errors are indicated in bold.

6. DISCUSSION

In the present study, due to the great importance of a high FL level in pre-service teachers one of the aims was to determine the FFL level and to assess the writing skills of native Belgian Dutch postgraduate students enrolled in an ATEP. In this regard, in order to determine the FFL level, a combination of self-assessment (subjective) and ©DIALANG (objective) were performed and compared. In the case of ©DIALANG, it was chosen thanks to its demonstrated high efficacy, the reliability of results, and because it allows to perform a complete evaluation of five FL skills (Zhang & Thompson, 2004; Ockey, 2009; Klimova & Hubackova, 2013). It was a useful tool but it was not possible to assess the oral production of the students, and therefore the overall FFL level is still unknown.

The first research question was "Do future FFL teachers have acquired a native-like language level?". We hypothesized that both groups would have reached a high FFL level according to the final aim of their university studies. Results demonstrate that some students overestimated their skills. This indicates that they did not perform any test of their FFL level before. The fact that not all pre-service teachers reach a high level in a FL is not something new. Comparable results were also observed in previous studies focused on the evaluation of FL level (Cortina Pérez, 2011; Lundell & Lindqvist, 2014a).

Interestingly, EP obtained higher means for receptive skills than for productive skills. In addition, it was plausible that both groups would still commit errors in their writing assignments. All these findings would indicate that more FFL instruction is required to successfully meet the language requirements at the end of university studies.

The second research question was "Do future FFL teachers commit a lot of writing errors? If yes, which type of errors and what is their frequency?". We hypothesized that as the students have obtained a Master's degree, they would not commit many errors. In this sense, this second hypothesis has to be rejected, because analysis of writing compositions revealed that they still commit different kind of errors. It has been proved that, although all learners make errors, the more advanced learner makes fewer errors (Verspoor, Schmid, & Xu, 2012). However, some other studies (Villanueva & i Cherta, 2001; Mayo & Lecumberri, 2003) show that there is a qualitative change rather than a quantitative one. The evaluation of the interlanguage in very advanced language learners has suggested that even they commit many errors, especially of the lexical type (Lennon, 1991, 1996; de Miguel, Lagunilla, & Cartoni, 2000), which is confirmed in this study.

Results revealed that of all types of errors, lexical followed by grammatical errors were the most frequent in both groups and were committed by 75% of the students. This is not all surprising, as it is a recurrent result in research (Catalán, 1992; Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Llach, 2007). Spelling, discursive and content errors follow these two categories in decreasing order of frequency. These results are not in accordance with the findings described in other previous studies where spelling errors generally far outweigh grammatical ones in second language performance (Meara, 1984; Catalán, 1992; Lennon, 1996; Cenoz & Jessner, 2000). Discursive and content errors were very infrequent. These results allowed us to confirm that these students dominate discourse organization. However, students still commit lexical and grammatical errors and sometimes experience problems with spelling. Practice of discourse organization plays an essential role in the development of writing skills. Nevertheless, vocabulary training and writing is also necessary to develop and enlarge vocabulary (Muncie, 2002; Lee, 2003; Llach, 2007). In light of the results of the present study it seems extremely relevant to attach importance to vocabulary in FFL and to encourage the systematic contrastive study between their mother tongue and the target language in order to eliminate many of their errors (Llach, 2007).

In conclusion, the presence of these written errors could have an impact in the professional performance of these pre-service FFL teachers. Indeed, there is a connection between teachers' grammatical content knowledge and their ability to address learners' language needs in the classroom. (Chambless, 2012; Myhill et al., 2013) Therefore, during their degree studies it would be useful to incorporate more writing activities and personalised feedback in order to improve their linguistic competences. Finally, these results suggest that it is necessary to design novel didactic strategies at the undergraduate programs focusing on the improvement

of overall language proficiency and particularly writing skills. In addition, teacher training must mainly focus on the development of pedagogical content knowledge to enhance learning which leads to more effective instruction (Chambless, 2012; Myhill et al., 2013).

7. Conclusions

First of all, this study has been conducted with all the students enrolled in the ATEP during 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 at Ghent University, and therefore these results are representative for this specific population.

Concerning FFL level, this study objectively demonstrated with ©DIALANG that only 37.5% of these Belgian Dutch pre-service teachers of FFL acquired a C1. In addition, ©DIALANG confirmed that some participants were still placed at B2 for certain productive skills. These results suggest that it is necessary to combine novel didactic strategies with the aim to improve the FFL level of the future FFL teachers during their degree studies and objective language level tests are recommended.

Concerning the analysis of written assignments, writing errors were deeply described and classified with high accuracy. In this sense, this study revealed different kind of errors, where lexical errors (41.1%) were the most frequent followed by grammatical (32.5%) and spelling errors (24.5%). This study demonstrates that some participants acquired a near-native writing level. However, the persistence of errors could have implications in the professional performance of these future FFL teachers. Therefore, future studies should be focused on the understanding of the presence of certain errors. Future research could also be focused on finding out whether the hierarchy of errors found in the present study remains the same for students with another mother tongue.

In conclusion, this study clearly demonstrated that some native Belgian Dutch future FFL teachers still encounter problems with the acquisition of a near-native level. Therefore, it could be necessary to incorporate different kind of level tests during their degree studies in order to improve their skills and to obtain a near-native FFL level.

8. References

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