

# FOSTERING AUTONOMY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE ACQUISITION OF FRENCH LANGUAGE SKILLS THROUGH ASSESSMENT AND PERSONALISED TUTORING

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## Abstract

This study is part of a teaching innovation project carried out in the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies at the University of Granada (Spain). The main objectives of the project were to carry out an objective assessment of the level of French as a foreign language (FFL) and a personalised tutoring in order to improve the FFL skills of all students of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies.

In this specific context, achieving the homogenization of the level of FFL remains a major challenge due to many factors, such as the different language level with which students enter this degree or the change in teaching and learning methodology they experience at university level compared to previous stages. Correctly managing this heterogeneity of the students' language level is one of the great challenges the teaching staff faces, especially in the first year, when the heterogeneity that exists among them is even more evident.

Therefore, the tasks of language teachers as "mediators and facilitators" of the learning process of their students are: to detect the FFL level of the learners through diagnostic tests at the beginning of each course, to adapt to their needs and expectations, and to guide them throughout the teaching-learning process so that they achieve autonomy, and to provide them with the appropriate materials and resources to work both inside and outside the university classroom, in order to homogenize the language level at group level and to reinforce those who do not have the required level or who show some deficiencies in some of the levels.

With regard to methodology, this project has implemented several actions, aiming the development of autonomy through self-assessment and fostering the internal motivation of students in their learning process. Indeed, it is through autonomy in learning that motivation necessarily develops since it is the learner who takes control of his or her learning process, focusing on what is most interesting or useful to him or her, using the strategies that work best for his or her own learner profile.

Thus, this study aims to present best practice examples designed, implemented and carried out in the Degree of French Studies during the past year.

Keywords: French as a foreign language, innovation, autonomy, student engagement, language assessment, tutoring.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The current project (2021-2022) is an extension of another teaching innovation project carried out in the academic year 2020-2021 [1-3]. The main objective of these teaching innovation projects is to achieve the homogenisation of the French language level of students enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies at the University of Granada (UGR) in Spain [1-4].

Achieving this aim is highly complex due to multiple factors, such as the different language level with which students enter this Degree and the change in the teaching-learning methodology they experience in the university environment with respect to previous academic stages [4]. Correctly managing this heterogeneity of the students' language level is one of the great challenges facing the teaching staff of this Degree, especially in the first year, when the inequality that exists between them is even more evident, due both to their geographical origin and to the irregularity of the linguistic itinerary they have followed in learning French [1-3].

In terms of origin, this Degree is characterised by its intercultural nature. Although there is a high percentage of Spanish students from different provinces of Spain, there are also students from the five continents, especially from French-speaking European or African countries who come to complete the entire degree in Spain, whose mother tongue is French and, therefore, have an excellent level of oral skills, although on many occasions different spelling and/or grammatical deficiencies can be detected.

It is also necessary to include exchange students, mainly Erasmus students, who are often representative in these subjects and come from different countries. These students are characterised by a fairly high level of French and Spanish, as well as obviously having a good command of their mother tongue, and can therefore generally be considered as multilingual. In the case of Spanish students, who are the most numerous in the Degree, there are several cases:

- Students who have studied French both in secondary school (*E.S.O.* and in *Bachillerato*), so they have a level A2/A2+ that allows them to adapt perfectly to the subjects of the Degree.
- Students who have only studied the French language in one of the 2 previous stages, which means that their language level is very low (A1) or even that they have practically forgotten the language, if they have not studied it since *E.S.O.*

The level of access required for this Degree (although it appears in the official documents as "recommended") is A2, in order to be able to follow normally the subjects taught entirely in French, and to progressively reach level B1 in the first semester and level B2 in the second semester [1-4]. Therefore, a rapid acquisition of linguistic skills is required, progressively, throughout the year. Given the heterogeneity in the level of access, ensuring that practically all students can reach the required level entails a change in the learning methodology, which since the implementation of the European Higher Education Area and the ECTS credit, is oriented towards the student's personal work (both face-to-face and distance), so that the student must be aware from the outset of the need to be autonomous, thanks to the adoption and implementation of two fundamental concepts: self-learning and self-assessment [1-3].

The teacher's tasks are: to detect the language level of the students through diagnostic tests, to adapt to their needs and expectations, as well as to guide them throughout the teaching-learning process so that they achieve autonomy, and to provide them with the appropriate materials and resources to work both inside and outside the classroom, in order to homogenise the language level at group level and reinforce those who do not have the required level or who show some deficiencies in some of the levels: phonetic, grammatical, orthographic, lexical or with respect to language skills: oral comprehension, written comprehension, oral expression, written expression, with special emphasis on oral interaction [1-3].

To this end, the current project has developed a series of strategies, the main objectives of which are the detection of the language level of the pupils at the beginning of each year (from 1st to 4th), the tutoring of pupils throughout the semester (individually and collectively) and the promotion of autonomy, empowerment and motivation so that pupils become actively responsible for their own learning.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Participants**

With regard to the participants, all the proposed activities were carried out during the academic year 2021-2022 in the following compulsory French Language subjects of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies at the UGR [4], together with the teaching staff and other members of the project team:

- 1<sup>st</sup> year: Lengua Francesa I B1 and Lengua Francesa II B1;
- 2<sup>nd</sup> year: Lengua Francesa V B2+ and Lengua Francesa III C1 (minor avanzado 1);
- 3<sup>rd</sup> year: Lengua Francesa VII C1 and Idioma superior I francés; and finally,
- 4<sup>th</sup> year: Lengua Francesa IX C1+.

### **2.2 Instruments and methodology**

Following an important planning process, the instruments and methodology followed throughout the academic year were as follows:

Stage 1. Organisation of a session aimed at training 1st year French language teachers to carry out the different objectives of the project: to learn how to handle or improve the use of "questionnaire" and "question bank" in PRADO for the elaboration of the initial level test.

In this phase, the teachers involved in the project met to train and update in the use of computer tools that allowed to carry out the design, creation, development and evaluation of the placement test.

Stage 2. Design and development of the initial assessment test in PRADO for 2021-2022.

During the months of September and October 2021, the teachers involved met on several occasions to coordinate the design and development of the placement test: choice of materials, design of sections, activities and questions, establishment of the assessment percentages, etc.

### Stage 3. Realization of the level test.

The necessary requirements for the successful completion of the language level tests in PRADO are the following: a computer with an internet connection; speakers or headphones for listening comprehension; a (web) camera, a microphone or smartphone for video recording.

First, the structure of the test for the 1<sup>st</sup> year students is as follows (a single attempt):

- Grammar: 20 "short answer" questions.
- Conjugation: 10 "short answer type" questions.
- Listening comprehension: viewing of a 5-minute video + 10 multiple-choice questions.
- Reading comprehension: reading of a short text + 10 multiple-choice questions.
- Written expression: writing a short text.
- Oral expression: video.

Second, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies took the diagnostic test ©DIALANG [5-10] to find out their level of FFL. This test has been previously described as follows: it consisted of three parts and lasted approximately 2h30-3h: 1) a vocabulary extension test, with a score between 0 and 1000 points; 2) a self-assessment of the different skills; and 3) a test for each skill, followed by immediate feedback [5-10]. In the latter test, the following skills were assessed: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, written expression, vocabulary, and grammar knowledge. In addition, a video was requested in order to be able to assess oral expression.

### Stage 4. Correction and analysis of the results of the placement test.

Once the placement test had been completed by the 1st year students, the corrections were distributed among the different teachers so that the results were available to the students in a short period of time. These results included the final mark, the breakdown of marks and access to all the corrections so that they could check where they had made mistakes and be aware of where they needed to improve. After the teachers analysed the marks in detail, deficiencies were detected in lexical, grammatical and spelling skills, as well as in the four skills of oral and written comprehension and expression.

With regard to 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students, after completing each test of ©DIALANG, students received immediate feedback on their performance as well as their European FLE level (between A1-C2) [5-10]. In terms of immediate feedback, ©DIALANG aims to encourage self-diagnosis and self-directed learning. The feedback in ©DIALANG aims to inform learners, support learning and awareness, both about their own performance and skills and about how to improve their language level [6-10]. After obtaining and analyzing the results of the diagnostic test, the teaching staff drew up a tutoring and action plan to help the pupils to improve their deficiencies in the French language, as well as to make further progress in the level corresponding to the subjects [1-3]. Students were provided with a series of materials and resources through the electronic platform so that they could go deeper and practice autonomously in the parts in which they made the most mistakes or found the most complicated, as well as carry out the activities that were part of the subject. Subsequently, personalized and collaborative tutoring has been organized individually and collectively for the students of the four courses [1-3]. Students have also been involved through the implementation of formulas for collaboration and mutual help among students (e.g. through a Forum in PRADO). In addition, three workshops have been organized: a conversation workshop I (intermediate), a conversation workshop II (advanced) and a theater workshop.

Stage 5. Coordination of French language teachers by year (from 1st to 4th) to establish a work plan and collaborative and personalised tutoring. Special attention to students with below-average levels. Involvement of the students through the implementation of formulas for collaboration and mutual help between students.

Once the results of the placement test had been obtained and analysed, the teaching staff coordinated to draw up a joint action plan to help students improve their deficiencies in the French language, as well as to make further progress in the level corresponding to the subjects. Pupils were provided with a range of materials and resources to enable them to go deeper and practise on their own in the parts where they made the most mistakes or found the most difficult, as well as to carry out the activities that were part of the subject.

The teachers of the French language subjects per course coordinated horizontally through various meetings during the semester to carry out different measures and actions together, such as the following:

- To teach exactly the same syllabus, using the same contents and carrying out the same activities in the two groups A and B.
- To improve the language level of the pupils by establishing the following work: the pupils had to fill in and hand in the *Portfolio européen des langues* which shows all the trajectory related to the French language (courses, readings, films, stays abroad, activities, etc.). As a complement to this portfolio, the students were also required to complete and hand in the language improvement activities, a complete list of exercises and activities on the points that they considered most complicated in French and on which they had made the most mistakes in the level test, thus creating a dossier of all the work done during the semester to remedy the linguistic deficiencies detected.
- Holding group tutorials several times during the semester, in addition to the individual tutorials requested by the students, in order to resolve doubts about the subject and help them with the points where they had the most difficulties.
- Propose to those students who most needed to improve their oral skills in French to take part in the conversation workshops organised by the Department of French Philology, at intermediate level for 1st year students and at advanced level for students in higher years. Due to the pandemic situation, these workshops have been virtual this academic year and have been held via Google Meet. The students were selected by the teaching team, with motivation being one of the main criteria as well as the need for improvement after the level test.
- Students filled in a satisfaction questionnaire about the conversation workshops to find out their assessment of the organisation, content, methodology and teaching skills, with special emphasis on whether the workshops met their expectations and were useful for their training.
- Finally, a theatre workshop in French was held with first and second year students, a workshop that allowed them to perfect their diction, intonation and oral expression in French. The workshop took place every Monday afternoon and Friday morning during the second term. The participating students have shown a great improvement in their pronunciation.

### 3 RESULTS

At the end of the project, and after analysing the data on the evolution of the pupils obtained through the different tasks, activities and assessment tests and comparing them with the results of the level test, we can affirm that the objectives of the project have been adequately achieved, thanks to the diagnostic level test carried out at the beginning of the course, the pupils' deficiencies and difficulties with respect to the French language have been detected in time, and reinforcement and improvement actions have been put in place so that these pupils have evolved positively in their learning throughout the semester. The continuous tutoring process, both individual and collective, as well as the implementation of conversation workshops to improve oral skills, have allowed constant supervision by the teaching staff and a positive adaptation to French language immersion. The final results have been conclusive, since most of them have experienced a progressive improvement which has been observed over the months and which is evident in the results of the final exams.

### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, we can conclude that both the planning and execution of the project and the methodology, activities and resources provided to the pupils have been adequate to achieve the objectives set, which were to homogenise the language level of the pupils (according to the CEFR 11-12[]) so that they could acquire the linguistic competences established in the different French language subjects. Thanks to the methodology, the extra resources provided and the conversation workshops, the autonomy, self-learning and personal self-assessment of the students have been encouraged in a non-classroom-based way, as a complement to classroom-based learning. Likewise, attention to diversity and equality has been given at all times in a personalised way, through individual and group tutorials, attending to the needs of the students and resolving their doubts throughout the educational process. Special attention has also been paid to the monitoring of students with Specific Educational Support Needs enrolled in French language subjects.

As for the continuity of the project in the future, it would be advisable to continue along the same lines each year, carrying out a diagnostic test of the students' language level each academic year [13-16] in order to be able to monitor their learning in a more personalised way and to provide them with the resources to improve their training autonomously on a half-yearly and annual basis.

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