

FRENCH FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS' ASSESSMENT IN SPANISH PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract

The acquisition of foreign language (FL) skills by European citizens is essential, and the adequate training of FL teachers (FLT) emerges as a key factor for this objective. In this regard, having an excellent command of the target language is indeed one of the most important characteristics of outstanding FLT teachers, and teachers' language proficiency has a direct impact on what takes place in the classroom.

However, despite the recommendations described in the "European profile for language teacher education: a frame of reference", explicit attention to language improvement is still lacking in most teacher training programs. Recent studies have demonstrated the importance of assessing the language skills of FLT. Some studies reported their concerns about the writing proficiency, in the target language, of pre-service FLT (P-FLT) and concluded that the acquisition of a near-native level in the target language by non-native P-FLT is a real challenge and it plays a key role in their professional development.

This study aimed at assessing the language proficiency of French as a FL (FFL) of Spanish P-FLT enrolled in a Postgraduate Teacher Education Program. FFL level was assessed with a self-assessment test and ©DIALANG. Furthermore, their writing skills were quantitatively evaluated. Self-assessment of the FFL level (according to the CEFR) performed by each student ranged from B1 to C2. The analyses of ©DIALANG showed that 11.1% acquired a C1 level and 68.9% a B2 level. Moreover, writing skills analysis revealed a high occurrence of different kind of errors, mostly spelling errors (37%).

These results demonstrated that the participants still encounter problems with the acquisition of a proficient user level (C1-C2), and specifically with writing skills. These findings should be of concern since these FFL skills gaps can affect the quality of their professional performance. More importantly, these results suggest that quality controls, to assess the progressive acquisition of FL level during university studies, are needed to ensure that FL professionals were able to acquire the aimed FL competences at the end of their studies. Finally, more research is still needed to determine these important aspects in other FL university programs.

Keywords: Pre-service language teachers, French as a foreign language, language skills, writing errors, DIALANG.

1 INTRODUCTION

Within the European Union (EU), the language skills of citizens have become one of the challenges of language policies. In recent decades, the EU has launched a range of initiatives to promote the teaching and learning of foreign languages (FL). It stresses the importance for every citizen to have an independent or proficient user level in at least two FL in order to increase their opportunities for education, mobility and employment [1]. In this context, the acquisition of FL skills by the European citizens is crucial and the adequate training of FL teachers (FLT) emerged as a key factor to fulfill this aim [2].

In this regard, researchers suggested that a high command of the target language is essential for FLT to teach their students to become linguistically competent themselves [3-7] being especially important for non-native FLT [8-10]. Surprisingly, the proficiency level of FLT is often assumed or taken for granted [11], even though it is not clear whether the majority of these teachers have the necessary language skills to transfer them to enable secondary, undergraduate and/or postgraduate students to master the target language [12-13].

Also, despite the recommendations described in the "European profile for language teacher education: a frame of reference" [14], explicit attention to language improvement is still lacking in most teacher training programs [9, 11, 15].

In Spain, some authors reported that the level of mastery of oral competence of pre-service teachers of English as a FL (EFL) remains a real challenge [16, 17]. A study conducted with Spanish students of a primary education degree revealed that most of them did not feel prepared to effectively meet the real demands of an EFL course [9]. According to Pizarro, these results should be considered, if our aim is that future FLT will be able to meet the language needs of our society in agreement with European language policies [9]. Recently, the deficiencies of FLT language skills resulted in a major social, media and political impact, and as a consequence almost 90 public primary and secondary schools will abandon bilingualism programs during 2021-2022 in Spain (El País, 2021).

Oral competences are important and frequently evaluated, however, authors have demonstrated the importance of assessing other language skills. Indeed, studies reported their concerns about the writing proficiency, in the target language, of pre-service FLT (P-FLT) and concluded that the acquisition of a near-native level in English by non-native P-FLT is a real challenge [16-18] and it plays a key role in their professional development [10, 18].

In general, high proficiency levels in FL are often evaluated via written work, especially in academic contexts [10, 19-21]. In addition, writing is considered one of the most difficult skills to acquire in a FL, due to the complex combination of grammar, vocabulary and discourse organization [10, 22, 23]. As cognitive, content, and academic demands increase, the development of writing skills becomes a multi-dimensional challenge for students, teachers and institutions [18]. In a recent study with Belgian Dutch P-FLT of French as a foreign language (FFL), it was shown that 37.5% of the participants were placed at C1 and 62.5% at B2 using ©DIALANG test. Moreover, 100% of these professionals committed different kind of writing errors on their handwritten productions being lexical errors the most frequent [10]. Curiously, despite the clear importance of academic writing skills, these aspects remain poorly studied. All these studies highlight the importance of the assessment of FL competences in future FLT during their studies (undergraduate and/or postgraduate level) in European countries. Undeniably, this information could help to determine if these professionals acquired the aimed linguistic competences and meet the social and educational demands.

Most published information was obtained in the context of EFL learners and teachers. Despite the relevance of this issue, to date, there are no published studies about P-FLT's French foreign language (FFL) level in Spain, which is the second FL taught in the country and the 7th most spoken language worldwide. Therefore, the main purpose of the current study is to address this gap, assessing FFL level on the one hand, in compliance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) [1] where each level is clearly defined and on the other hand; evaluating the written skills of Spanish P-FLT of FFL.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

This study was performed with all the P-FLT (n=45) enrolled in the Master's degree in Teacher Training for Compulsory and Upper Secondary Education, Vocational Education and Training and Language Teaching, with a specialization in FFL (MAES) at the University of Granada (Spain). The 45 participants, which represent the experimental population (EP), were monolingual Spanish native speakers, thus there were no bilingual students nor students with another mother tongue. EP was composed of 12 male and 33 female with a mean age of 24.62 years old. In EP, 30 participants held a Bachelor's degree (240 ECTS) in French Studies (PHIL Group), whereas, the other 15 held a Bachelor's degree (240 ECTS) in French Translation and Interpreting (TI Group). Note that the information regarding gender and age is only supplementary and it was not used as variables in this study. All participants have followed French in secondary education. However, the exact number of hours cannot be determined, as it is not a compulsory subject in all secondary schools. Finally, none of the students was dyslexic or had any other language-related pathologies.

All the activities conducted in this study were part of approved research and teaching innovation projects, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.2 Instruments and procedures

2.2.1 French as a foreign language level assessment

During the first stage of this study, all the participants were asked to perform a self-assessment of their FFL level according to CEFR scales. To obtain an objective and complete assessment of the FFL skills, participants performed simultaneously the computer-based online test, ©DIALANG [10, 24-26] for French in an informatics classroom. Briefly, the ©DIALANG test consists of different parts: a vocabulary size placement test, a self-assessment questionnaire and, the language skills test. Before starting the language skills test, the participants performed a vocabulary size placement test, in which a collection of words – real and invented verbs – were presented, and a self-assessment questionnaire to rate their language abilities. This test was scored between 0-1000 points [25, 26]. Next, the listening, writing, reading skills and knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of FFL from all students were evaluated and scored on the CEFR scales. These values were then analysed to know the overall language proficiency in FFL of each student. The ©DIALANG test does not give a global score of proficiency, but scores in a range from A1 to C2 for each skill. In this sense, to obtain a numeric value corresponding to 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) to calculate the mean for the ©DIALANG test. As mentioned previously, speaking is not evaluated through ©DIALANG. Thus, further studies should be developed focusing on oral skills.

2.2.2 Writing assessment

During the second stage of the study, to assess the writing skills of this study group, all students were asked to perform a writing assignment in French as described previously in a similar study with Belgian pre-service FFL teachers [10]. The assignment was conducted in the module “*Aprendizaje y Enseñanza de la Lengua Extranjera*” in their own classroom under the supervision of their teacher and the researcher. It consisted of a short essay in French which should include a brief introduction and a clear conclusion (between 375 and 400 words) relating to an aspect of the French language 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 and to revise their handwritten text. Additionally, during this activity, students could not make use of any help source (dictionary, grammar or textbook, nor were they allowed to ask the teacher, researcher or other students for help). It is important to mention that this activity was designed as any other writing exercise and therefore it had no impact or consequences on the qualifications of the students.

2.2.3 Writing error analysis

To determine the types and frequency of writing errors, essays were treated in different phases. In the first phase, to facilitate the writing error analysis, the 45 handwritten essays were collected and transcribed literally into word files using Microsoft Office Word 2007 (deactivating correction tools).

In the second phase, to perform an efficient, uniform and objective writing error analysis, all essays were uploaded to an online correction platform called *CorpuScript* [10]. The taxonomy of errors, available in this correction platform, was inspired by the recommendations of James [27]. In this sense, three main categories of errors were distinguished: lexical, grammatical and discursive errors. Two other categories, spelling and content errors, were also included. Besides, the following subtypes of errors were considered in the three main categories: omission, misselection, overinclusion and order [27]. Thus, in this study, a total of 14 different types of written errors were evaluated. An error of omission is considered to be the absence of a lexical, grammatical or discursive item that should appear in a well-formed sentence. A misselection error is the wrong choice of an item. The overinclusion error is defined as a redundant item, for example an item that should not appear in a well-formed sentence. And finally, the error of order is defined as the wrong order of an item in a sentence.

In the third phase of the analysis, the frequency and types of errors were assessed. Briefly, all transcribed 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 with the use of the online tool *CorpuScript* [10]. 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. Finally, each student received personal feedback on their essay and had the opportunity to correct their essay with the aim to improve their writing skills in FFL.

2.2.4 Quantitative and statistical analyses

In this study, all data from the analysis of FFL level (©DIALANG) and the writing error analysis were collected and subjected to the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality by using the software SPSS 16.0. In this sense, scores of the vocabulary placement test were normally distributed and therefore, student's t-test was used to determine statistically significant differences. In the case of FFL skills from ©DIALANG test and data from writing errors analyses were non-normally distributed, and Mann-Whitney non-parametric test was used for statistical comparisons. Also, the results of each variable were expressed as the mean and standard deviation values and p values $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant in two-tailed tests.

For writing errors analyses, the percentage of students who made each particular writing error, the distribution of each category of writing errors and their respective subtypes are described in the following section.

3 RESULTS

3.1 CEFR level of French as a foreign language

Self-assessment of the FFL level (according to the CEFR) performed by each student ranged from B1 to C2 for the EP. Furthermore, a total of 73.4% of the EP placed themselves at the C level on the CEFR scales (46.7% at C1 and 26.7% at C2) and 26.6% assumed having a B level (11.1% at B1 and 15.5% at B2). These results suggested that, as far as the self-assessment is concerned, the EP assumed to have acquired a high FFL level (C level).

After the self-assessment, each student performed the ©DIALANG test in order to obtain an objective overview of the FFL level of each participant. First, on the vocabulary placement test of ©DIALANG, the EP scored a mean of 543.5/1000. Interestingly, results by each group revealed that PHIL Group obtained a significantly higher ($p = 0.028$) mean score (597/1000) than TI Group (436.5/1000).

Concerning the acquired CEFR levels, the results by the EP showed that 68.9% was placed at B2, followed by 20% at B1 and 11.1% at C1. Observing the ©DIALANG results by group, TI Group (with 20% at C1) showed more comparable results to a proficient user level than the PHIL Group (with only 6.7% at C1). In addition, more than half of the participants (73.3% PHIL Group and 60% TI Group respectively) were placed at a B2 level and 20% (in each group) at B1 level.

In the ©DIALANG analysis of the CEFR levels for each skill, the EP showed an overall B2 level, while PHIL and TI Groups obtained a B2 level for each skill, except for writing skills (PHIL Group) and for vocabulary (TI Group) where both groups obtained a B1 level. Furthermore, the EP obtained a higher mean CEFR level for receptive skills such as listening and reading skills than for writing, a productive skill. Whilst, observing the results by each experimental group (PHIL and TI Groups), the mean scores for every skill were very similar for each group. When PHIL and TI Groups were compared, no statistically significant differences were observed ($p > 0.05$).

3.2 Analysis of written compositions and general classification of the writing errors

The total analysed corpus contained a total of 16214 words. The text length of the analysed essays ranged from 177 to 692 words with a mean of 360.31 words. The mean length of the essays of PHIL Group (372.7 words) was slightly higher than that of the TI Group (335.53 words) but both were still under the maximum established length. In addition, the shortest text was written by a student of TI Group (177 words) and the longest text (692 words) by a student of PHIL Group.

The general analysis of errors revealed a total of 889 errors (100%) in the analysed corpus. In addition, 62% of these errors were made by PHIL Group (total of 549 errors) and 38% by TI Group (total of 340 errors). However, there were no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) between PHIL and TI Groups.

An overall analysis of each category of error revealed that grammatical and spelling errors were the most frequent with each 37%, followed by lexical errors (23%). Discursive and content errors only represented 1% each of the total errors in the analysed corpus. Firstly, the analysis of spelling errors showed that a large percentage of students made this type of error in each group. This percentage was relatively high in EP, but it was even higher in TI Group, where 100% of students made spelling errors.

The mean of spelling errors was higher in the TI Group, followed by PHIL Group, but differences between PHIL vs. TI were not statistically significant ($p>0.05$). Secondly, the analysis of grammatical errors showed similar results, where again 100% of students from TI Group made this type of error, followed by PHIL Group. In addition, TI Group showed a higher mean of grammatical errors than PHIL Group, but this difference was not statistically significant ($p>0.05$). Thirdly, the analysis of lexical errors revealed a high percentage of students making this type of error in each group, but lexical errors were less frequent than spelling and grammatical errors. Finally, the analysis of discursive and content errors was less frequent than all the other errors described above. PHIL Group showed a higher percentage of students that made these types of errors than TI Group. However, the mean of errors was less than 0.5 errors in all groups; therefore no statistical differences were observed.

3.3 Analysis of subtypes of writing errors

As mentioned in the methodology and based on James' taxonomy (James, 2013), the errors belonging to the three main categories of errors (grammatical, lexical and discursive errors) were each subdivided into 4 subtypes (omission, misselection, overinclusion, and order).

The analysis of subtypes of writing errors revealed that the majority of these 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 between the groups. Firstly, when grammatical errors were deeply analysed, it was observed that a high percentage of students made grammatical omission and overinclusion errors, followed by misselection and finally order. The same order was also observed in the mean values of errors for each subtype. Indeed, mean values in omission errors were the highest along both groups, but without statistically significant differences. Interestingly, overinclusion grammatical errors showed the second-highest mean values along both groups. In the case of grammatical misselection and order errors, mean values were much lower and no statistical differences were identified between groups.

Secondly, analysis of lexical errors showed that a higher percentage of students made lexical misselection errors as compared to the other subtypes of lexical writing errors. In addition, higher but not significant ($p>0.05$) mean values were observed in TI Group in comparison to PHIL Group. Mean values of the other lexical subtypes writing errors were considerably lower than misselection. The mean values were all below 0.30 errors.

Thirdly, an in-depth analysis of discursive errors confirmed the lower presence of these errors in the studied population (as described in the general analysis). The only subtypes of discursive errors present were misselection (ranging from 0 to 0.27 mean of errors) followed by overinclusion (ranging from 0 to 0.03 mean of errors) and no statistical differences were observed. In both cases, the percentage of students that had made these errors ranged from 0% to 20%. Remarkably, TI Group only made misselection errors.

Finally, when the distribution of subtypes of errors was analysed in relation to 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 and the most frequent subtype of error was omission with 55%, followed by overinclusion, misselection, and order. Interestingly, grammatical omission error represented 20% of all the errors present in the whole analysed corpus. Unlike grammatical errors, in the case of lexical errors, the subtypes of errors were less distributed where the 87% was lexical misselection. As well as grammatical omission errors, lexical misselection errors represented 20% of all the errors present in the whole corpus. Lastly, the most frequent subtype of discursive errors was also misselection with 91%. However, discursive misselection error only represented 1% of all the errors present in the whole corpus.

4 CONCLUSIONS

There are several broad implications that can be taken from this study regarding FFL level of Spanish pre-service teachers. Firstly, this study has been conducted with all pre-service teachers enrolled in the MAES at the University of Granada. Therefore, these results could be considered representative of this specific population. More representative results could be obtained in future multicenter and time-course comparative studies.

Concerning FFL level, this study demonstrated with the ©DIALANG test that these Spanish FFL pre-service teachers acquired a mean CEFR level of B2 differing from the end goals of their university studies (the recommended linguistic qualification is a C level) and from self-assessment. These results

suggest that it is evident that improving non-native future FFL teachers' skills seems to be a serious and particular urgent matter. It is necessary to combine novel didactic strategies to improve the FFL level of the future FFL teachers during their 4-year Bachelor's degree studies and objective language level tests are recommended [28]. In light of these results, it is believed that teacher education programs should assess the language skills of their enrolled students to increase the language awareness and importance of language improvement of FFL, even during 1-year teacher training.

Concerning the analysis of FFL skills, all of them are crucial for future FL teachers. In this particular case, writing skills were thoroughly evaluated, described and classified with high accuracy. Consequently, this study revealed a high frequency of different kind of writing errors. Spelling errors (37%) were the most frequent followed by grammatical omission (20%) and lexical misselection (20%) errors. Unfortunately, this study demonstrates that Spanish participants did not acquire a near-native FFL level concerning writing skills. Besides, the persistence of these errors could have severe implications in the professional performance of these future FFL teachers. Therefore, future studies should be focused on a better understanding of the presence of certain errors and their subtypes to improve writing skills. In this regard, it could be interesting to perform a detailed analysis of the lexical richness in these written compositions. A further subclassification of the spelling errors could be revealing since they constitute a large proportion of errors.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that Spanish FFL pre-service teachers still encounter problems with the acquisition of a proficient user level (C1-C2) and specifically with writing. The existence of these errors should be of concern since this can affect the quality of the professional performance of these pre-service teachers of FFL. Indeed, there is a connection between teachers' grammatical content knowledge and their ability to address learners' language needs in the classroom [13]. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate diagnostic language tests (such as ©DIALANG) and writing activities with personalized feedback during their Bachelor's degree studies to improve their overall language proficiency skills and particularly writing skills to obtain a closer native language level [28].

Based on these results, the Department of French Philology decided to implement a FFL level test at the beginning of each FFL course in the Bachelor's degree in French Studies and a FFL-based tutoring teaching strategy [28-29]. In addition, FFL students are now assessed in the four traditional language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and have to succeed in each skill to pass the language subjects. This has led to a change in the assessment system and the performance of the students. This data is being evaluated over time and future studies will demonstrate the impact on FFL level acquisition, academic performance and student awareness [28].

Finally, although this study has been based exclusively on students of one Spanish university, it is believed that these results should be considered to understand their current needs. These results suggest that non-native FFL pre-service teachers in Spain urgently need to improve their overall French proficiency to be able to teach French effectively. It is crucial to set explicit linguistic goals that enable future teachers to meet a certain minimum standard of FFL skills. Nevertheless, further research must be conducted to assess the speaking, reading and listening competences in FFL. The outcomes of this study may have significant implications for other pre-service teacher training programs in other contexts, aiming to assess and to enhance foreign language proficiency as part of the teacher training.

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