The effect of a French intervention on children’s spelling of morphosyntactic agreement

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Context:

Multilingual education: Luxembourg is officially trilingual: Luxembourgish, German and French. Children learn to read and write in German from 1st grade on. Written French is added to the curriculum in grade 3. Luxembourgish remains the language of communication throughout primary school.

Due to a high percentage of immigration (50.3% in 2013) many other languages are spoken by the pupils: Portuguese, French, Italian, Slavic…

Aim:

Orthography encodes not only phonological but also morphosyntactic information. French nominal plural is marked by <-s> and verbal plural by <-nt>. As both markers are silent (only marked in writing), children have difficulties to acquire and spell them correctly even by the end of primary school.

Spelling performance depends on the semantic motivation of every word category, syntactic position as well as their frequency.

Aims:

1. to verify if the difficulty patterns of morphosyntactic information found for French monolinguals are confirmed for pupils acquiring French as second written language;
2. to improve their spelling competence by carrying out an intervention which fosters morphosyntactic processing.

Method:

During the intervention session, pupils:

- analysed French agreement with the method of “balles d’accord”;
- wrote small dictations and examined their spellings within the syntagmatic and paradigmatic paradigms (“phrase dictée du jour”);
- wrote pseudowords, trying to realize plural spelling based on pure syntactic criteria.

The intervention was performed by trained student assistants.

Design of pre- and posttest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word category</th>
<th>noun</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>adjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>frequent</td>
<td>les trai</td>
<td>les parents rencont</td>
<td>les avions blindés</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudoword</td>
<td>les prosc</td>
<td>les insectes amo</td>
<td>les d após flours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>les jouets tournés</td>
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</tbody>
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Children were asked to fill in words within preprinted sentences containing gaps. The words contained target spellings and filler items.

The dictations were presented via audio CD recorded by two different female native speakers.

Hypotheses:

1. Concerning the pretest, the difficulty patterns established for pupils with French as first school language will be confirmed for children who acquire French as second written language.

2. An intervention, training morphosyntactic structures:
   (a) will lead to improvement of spelling of the intervention group.
   (b) improve children’s spelling related to syntactic regularities.

Results:

- Effect of frequency: $F_{(p=m)}=266.33, p = .0001$
  - words > pseudowords

- Children’s spelling performance decreases when no semantic information is available, especially for verbs.

- Effect of word category: $F_{(p=m)}=133.82, p = .0001$
  - noun > prenominal adjective > verb > postnominal adjective

- Interaction category * frequency: $F_{(p=m)}=102.96, p = .0001$
  - words: noun > verb > prenominal adj. > postnominal adj.
  - pseudowords: noun > prenominal adj. > verb > postnominal adj.

- Children seem to heavily rely on semantics to inflect verbs as their performance is better for frequent verb than for pseudoverb.

References:


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