

Grammatical and metalinguistic knowledge among post-A students of French

1 Aim and origins of the test

At the beginning of the teaching year 1998/9, every student at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) taking French at post-A Level was given a written language test. The aim of this test was to demonstrate perceived weaknesses in the knowledge of grammatical structures and metalanguage of students with French A Level embarking on a post-A French course at MMU. After marking, the test results were broken down both according to individual performance and according to the performance of all students on the particular points being tested. As such the test served as a diagnostic both of individual and general proficiency in written language. Although nearly 90 students took the test, the results shown in this article relate to the 69 students who took the test and who have A Level French.

The test itself was carried out principally for internal purposes: were our perceptions regarding student weaknesses in the area of grammatical structures and metalanguage valid? In answering this question in our conclusion we will also offer a description of the remedial steps and future developments which the test was intended to justify. However, it is hoped that the test is also of some external interest. First, and primarily, in the way in which the raw data of the test might correspond with the experience of other HE teachers of French. Second, in the small measure of data analysis we have been able to undertake. And third, in the way in which some of the data presented in this article might be said to complement or reinforce data derived from another similar project, that carried out by David Steel and J. Charles Alderson at Lancaster University.¹

2 Methodology

The test comprises 12 sentences for translation from English into French (part one) and 22 questions asking the students to give examples of grammatical terms contained in the 12 English sentences (part two). The 12 sentences for translation are marked for 47 specific grammatical points covering the range of grammatical knowledge that the students could be expected to have acquired through having

¹ Steel, D. and Charles Alderson, J. "Metalinguistic Knowledge, Language Aptitude and Language Proficiency", from *Language in a Changing Europe*, Clevedon: BAAL and Multilingual Matters, 1995.

attained a French A Level at grade E or above.² Part two tests for understanding of the grammatical terms considered important in the acquisition of this knowledge.³

The students were asked to write on the paper, and give their A Level grade. The time allowed was fifty minutes, the standard duration time for classes at MMU, although in effect most students finished well before this time. The tests were carried out in class time for the most part towards the end of the first week of the Christmas Term. As such most of the students had already begun their French teaching and had managed to shake off some of the rust that naturally occurs over the summer holidays. However, given that attrition rates in language competence during gaps in learning tend to be more pronounced in oral skills than in written skills, it is arguable that had the test taken place later in the term, the difference would not have been very great.

A substantial amount of vocabulary was provided for the student, along with information regarding genders, tense, and verb and question constructions. This was done in order to try to achieve the most accurate possible assessment of a student's knowledge of each grammatical point. For example, in q1, the feminine gender of *décision* is given so as to ensure that any lack of agreement could be put down solely to the student's inability to understand or implement grammatical agreements.

For the test on grammatical terms, students were asked to give examples of terms from the English sentences for translation. This was to avoid the need for students to have to familiarise themselves with a new text in order to answer the questions. In order to avoid confusion over the semantic category of words, students were asked to indicate the sentence from which the example was taken. Some gave answers from the French sentences they had translated, and these were marked in the normal way. Others invented examples, and these were marked correct if it was clear that the student knew the term in question.

3 Results (for list of questions, see Appendix)

3.1 Verb tenses, moods and voice

3.1.1 Just over 40% of students used the present tense in q6 requiring a *depuis*-type construction.

² Exam boards are not always specific in defining the level of grammatical competence expected for students attaining French A-level at grade E or above. In predicating this, the author has drawn from a list of grammatical elements / structures included in Appendix A of Pickering, R. *Planning and resourcing 'A' level French: a handbook for teachers*, London: CILT, 1992.

³ Most of these terms feature in Robert Pickering's list.

3.1.2 76.8% of students were able to form the *passé composé* of *prendre* in q1, using the correct auxiliary and participle (but not including agreement). Of the 16 students who gave a wrong answer, most gave answers that were homonymic, although some made more serious errors (*il a prenné, il a rendu, il rendu, il a prend*). 75.4% used *être* as the auxiliary for the verb *arriver* in q8.

3.1.3 50.7% of students used an imperfect in the subordinate verb in q2, whilst most of the other half gave a properly formed *passé composé* using the verb *habiter*. 23.2% used the imperfect in the main clause to express habitual action where English uses would do (serious errors included *je serais rendu visite à, je rendre visitrais à, j'ai fait rendre visite à, je renderai visiter à*). And 29% used the imperfect in a subordinate clause introduced by *si* where the main clause verb is in the conditional.

3.1.4 65.2% of students gave the future of *être* in q5. 11.6% gave the conditional of *obtenir*. Incorrect answers included *obteniriez, obtenez, obtiennez, obtenez, serait obtenir, auriez obtenir*.

3.1.5 24.6% of students managed to form a subjunctive in *Je veux qu'elle vienne* and 30.4% in *pour que je puisse*. This might be considered surprising when one considers that these constructions constitute the most common uses of the subjunctive, and as such are often learned in schools as vocabulary rather than as grammatical structures. Although in the former example a majority managed to produce a structure using *que*, this nevertheless left a significant minority unaware of the construction *vouloir que*, and producing answers such as *je veux elle de viendra, je veux elle à venir, je veux elle venir, je la veux venir, je la veux vendre, je la voudrais à venir, je veux lui à venir, je la veux arriver*.

3.1.6 85.5% of students produced a correctly formed imperative, although most preferred to negate the imperative of the verb *critiquer*. (No circumflex was required for *arrêter*).

3.1.7 65.2% of students gave a correctly formed passive in q1 (*était* and *publier* were accepted).

3.2 Agreements

3.2.1 53.6% of students gave a feminine agreement for the adjective *intelligent* in q4, although some students might have been distracted by the superlative structure. 8.7% gave a feminine plural agreement for *parfait* in q10, although problems might have been caused by the fact that the adjective is both predicative

and in a different sentence from the original noun (the gender of which was given).

3.2.2 13% of students gave a feminine agreement for *publié* in q1, although some students might have been distracted by the fact that the participle is separated by a relative clause and an adverb. 60.9% of students gave a feminine agreement for the participle *arrivé* in q8. 5.8% gave a preceding direct object agreement for *pris* in q1, and 20.3% for *donnés* in q8.

3.3 Articles

Not one student gave the article *de* in q3 (adjective preceding noun). 66.6% gave the repeated article *le* in q4. 4.3% of students gave the article *le* before *docteur* in q5. 23.2% gave *au* before *Canada* in q5. 43.5% gave no article or preposition before *lundi* in q5 (many wrote *à lundi*). 71% gave *le* before *français* in q6 (there were a few instances of *la français*). And 39.1% gave the article *de* in q11 (after negative).

3.4 Pronouns

3.4.1 37.7% of students gave the indirect object pronoun *lui* in q7, 45% in q8 and 34.8% in q9. 75.4% gave the direct object pronoun *les* in q8 and 79.7% in q9. In q8 and q9, 23.2% gave the correct order *les lui*. In q7, 17.4% gave the pronoun complement *en* in the first sentence and 13% gave *y* in the second sentence.

3.4.2 40.6% gave the demonstrative pronoun *ceux* in q12 (*celles* was accepted: other answers included *ceux-ci*, *ceaux*, *les choses*, *lesquels*, *les*, *ils*, *eux*, *cela*, *ces*, *cels*, *là*, or a repetition of *document*) and 10.1% gave the possessive pronoun *les tiennes* or *les vôtres* (*les tiens* and *les votres* were accepted: many wrote *vos*, others *vos idées*, *votre*, *votre idées*, *votres*).

3.4.3 15.9% of students gave the relative pronoun *dont* in the first relative clause of q12 (the most common response being *que j'ai besoin*, but others including *qui j'ai besoin*, *ce que j'ai besoin*, *que j'en ai besoin*, *que j'ai besoin de* or else avoiding the relative clause altogether). Of those who gave *dont*, some used *en* as well, as in *dont j'en ai besoin*). 13% gave *dont* in the second relative clause of q12 (similarly, the most common response was *que vous avez parlé*, but others included *que vous aviez parler de*, *que vous en avez parlés*, *qui tu en parlais*, *qui vous parlait*, *qui vous avez parler*, *que vous êtes parlé*, *que tu parlé de*, *que vous étaient parler*, *que vous était parler de*).

3.5 Word order

27.5% of students gave the negative particle *ne* after the adverb *personne* in q11 (many wrote *Personne me*, many others *Ne personne ...*, others *Rien de personne*, *Pas de personne*, *Il n'a personne qui*, *Quelqu'un n'a pas*, *Zero person a me dit*). 40.6% gave the word order *docteur Smith est-il* in q4 where a question by inversion was specified (incorrect answers included *Est Dr Smith*, *Dr Smith il est*, *Dr Smith est lui*, *Dr Smith il est là*, *Est-il Dr Smith* or else an affirmative structure with a question mark). 42% put *meilleur* before the noun in q5. 66.6% put *intelligent(e)* after the noun in q4.

3.6 Other points

49.3% of students gave the comparative adjective *meilleur* in q3. 65.2% used *lundi* in the lower case in q5. 53.6% used a *ça fait / il y a / depuis* construction in q6. 56.5% used *français* in the lower case in q6. (Translations for “German” included *l'Allemagne*, *l'Allemande*, *l'Allemane*, *l'almange*, *l'Allemange*, *l'Allegmange*, *l'Allemont*, *le langue allemande*). 68.1% gave the 3rd person plural possessive pronoun *leurs* in q10.

3.7 Grammatical terms

A noun that is the subject of a sentence / clause: 41 = 59.4%. A noun that is the direct object of a sentence / clause: 16 = 23.2%. An adjective: 59 = 85.6%. An adverb: 38 = 55.1%. A definite article: 16 = 23.2%. An indefinite article: 7 = 10.1%. A personal pronoun that is the subject of a sentence / clause: 22 = 31.9%. A personal pronoun that is the direct object of a sentence / clause: 8 = 11.6%. A personal pronoun that is the indirect object of a sentence / clause: 19 = 27.5%. A possessive adjective or pronoun: 23 = 33.3%. A demonstrative adjective or pronoun: 2 = 2.9%. A relative pronoun: 2 = 2.9%. A superlative adjective or adverb: 25 = 36.2%. A comparative adjective or adverb: 23 = 33.3%. A preposition: 19 = 27.5%. A conjunction: 31 = 44.9%. A verb in the imperative: 34 = 49.2%. A verb in the passive: 9 = 13.0%. A verb in the conditional: 54 = 78.3%. A present participle: 19 = 27.5%. A past participle: 12 = 17.4%. A subordinate clause: 5 = 7.2%

4 Data analysis

For internal purposes the totals for parts one and two were calculated for each student, and an overall total awarded. Although this total mark was somewhat arbitrary, both in terms of its hybridness and its lack of correspondence to the

conventional HE marking scheme involving upper seconds, lower seconds and so on, it nevertheless enabled the teachers to get an idea of how students performed relative to other students, and thereby ascertain which students were most in need of remedial support in the area of language structure.

The individual marks were also sorted according to A-level result in order to see if there was any correlation between performance in this test and A-Level grade. The result was as follows:

A-level	Number	Average overall mark	Average mark on part one (/47 – %)
A	4	38 / 55%	31.0 / 66%
B	14	28 / 41%	20.6 / 44%
C	26	25 / 35%	18.6 / 40%
D	17	22 / 32%	14.8 / 31%
E	8	25 / 37%	17.1 / 36%

The first observation that may be derived from these comparisons is that there is a clear correlation between the overall mark in the test and A-Level grade. This correlation is even stronger when comparing grammatical accuracy (part one mark) and A-Level grade. There is admittedly a blip in that the students with an grade E obtained a higher overall percentage than those with a C or D grade, but this might be put down to the fact that the E-grade sample is much smaller than the C- or D-grade samples and therefore more prone to error.

Another observation may be derived from a comparison of A-level grade and the mark for part two, testing metalinguistic knowledge. Here the result was as follows:

A-level	Average mark (/22)	Average percentage on part two
A	7	32%
B	7.6	35%
C	6.2	28%
D	7.2	33%
E	8.3	38%

These figures would suggest that there is no correlation between metalinguistic knowledge and A-level grade. Is there a correlation between performance in part one and performance in part two? As the above tables suggest, it is perfect possible to achieve a high mark in part one (translation test) and yet achieve a relatively poor mark in part two. However, the inverse is not so. The 16 students

who scored 10 or above in part 2 between them achieved an average of 22.9 (48.7%), a higher average than that for the B, C, D and E-grade samples, and well above the overall average. This would suggest that metalinguistic knowledge is significant in the ability to write grammatically correct sentences, although grammatical correctness can also be acquired by non-metalinguistic means. (This point is borne out strongly by the fact that the student who achieved the highest mark both overall and for part one, achieved only 4/22 (18%) for part two. Needless to say, the student was a native speaker.)

It is stressed, however, that given the smallness and restricted nature of the sample, along with other factors (e.g. no account has been taken of individual language-learning backgrounds or whether students are following an Arts or Business language route, etc.), these observations are intended as nothing more than an illustration of the situation with a particular cohort of students at MMU. To establish whether they indicate broader trends in HE language teaching it would be necessary to carry out a much broader-based and detailed survey with more profound statistical analysis.

5 Some conclusions

As was mentioned at the beginning of this article, the test itself was carried out primarily for internal purposes: were our perceptions regarding student weaknesses in the area of grammatical structures and metalanguage valid? The results of this test would suggest strongly that our perceptions were indeed valid, and that, by extension, so too were the remedial steps we have taken. What are these remedial steps?⁴ In our latest quinquennial course review carried out in 1996/7, structures were put in place to allow for a one-hour grammar class / lecture to take place each week. This came about as a result both of student requests by means of our annual questionnaire and feedback meeting with personal tutors, and of teachers' perceptions already mentioned regarding student weaknesses. This has proved popular among students, and continued efforts are being made to keep class numbers as low as possible so as to permit effective interaction.

⁴ It is not the intention in this article to justify the idea that a certain amount of metalinguistic and explicit grammatical awareness is necessary for second language acquisition. For a justification of such a position in terms of Second Language Theory, the reader is referred to Hawkins, R and Towell, R, "Why Teach Grammar?" from *Teaching Grammar: Perspectives in Higher Education*, London: AFLS / CILT, 1996:195–211.

In addition, and potentially more importantly for the long-term future, the Department has begun to develop its own web-based grammar-teaching project, comprising a book of detailed grammar notes (available also on-line) with on-line self-marking exercises for use as self-access materials. The advantages of such a development are as follows:

- The marks for each exercise are stored by the program and are available to teachers at all times. This enables teachers to assess weaknesses in individual students, and therefore to set remedial work according to these weaknesses ; it furthermore enables teachers to see whether students are actually carrying out the work in the first place.
- The self-marking nature of the exercises frees up teacher time for concentration on weaker students.
- As the exercises tie in closely with the grammar notes, there can be a greater expectation that students will actually read these grammar notes.
- As the exercises are web-based, they could be set during holidays or during the year abroad, with a realistic expectation that they will be completed.

Throughout the country, university language departments complain of low standards of grammatical accuracy and awareness among first-year post A-Level students, and each has its own ways of dealing with the problem according to its circumstances. But all languages departments would agree that it would surely be better if students arrived in Higher Education with a better knowledge of grammatical structures. For this to happen, there needs to be not only a more explicit statement in A-Level syllabuses of what grammatical structures need to be learned, but also a greater emphasis within methods of assessment and marking schemes on ascertaining whether or not these structures have been learned.

6 Comparison with Steel / Alderson data

The MMU test was much less far-reaching and detailed in its aims than the Steel / Alderson test. It is interesting to note, however, with a similar caveat to that included at the end of section 4, that there is a considerable measure of concordance between the various observations made in the two tests.

- Both tests served to corroborate the notion that first-year university students have serious deficiencies in the areas of grammatical accuracy and metalinguistic knowledge.
- The MMU test would concur with the Lancaster test's conclusions that "any instruction that assumed that first-year undergraduates knew much more than 'verb', 'noun' and, possibly 'adjective' would cause students difficulties." [Steel / Alderson p. 96]
- The MMU test would concur with the Lancaster test's result that relative clauses cause great problems for students.

- The MMU test would suggest that in certain areas of metalinguistic knowledge, the problems are even more serious than suggested in the Lancaster test. Compare for example:

Direct object	Lancaster 67%	MMU 23.2%
Indefinite article	Lancaster 34%	MMU 10.1%
Past participle	Lancaster 91%	MMU 17.4%
Preposition	Lancaster 62%	MMU 27.5%
Passive	Lancaster 48%	MMU 13.0%
Relative clause	Lancaster 17%	N/A
Relative pronoun	N/A	MMU 2.9%

- The MMU test would concur with the Lancaster test's conclusions that there is a clear correlation between the overall mark in the test and A Level grade.
 - The MMU test would concur with the Lancaster test's conclusions that there is no correlation between metalinguistic knowledge and A Level grade.
 - The MMU test would concur in part with the Lancaster test's conclusions that there is a limited correlation between metalinguistic knowledge and grammatical accuracy. However, the Lancaster test does not express the idea that metalinguistic knowledge is significant in the ability to write grammatically correct sentences, but that grammatical correctness can also be acquired by non-metalinguistic means.

Appendix

Year 1 post-A diagnostic grammar test and results

Q1 The decisions that he took were finally published in the report.

(*prendre* [use the *passé composé*] *une décision, publier, un rapport*)

topic: preceding direct object and general agreement, past participles, passives

- a – *a pris(e)(s)*: auxiliary + past participle 53 = 76.8%
- b – *prises*: p.d.o. agreement 04 = 05.8%
- c – *étaient / ont été + participe*: passive 45 = 65.2%
- d – *publiées*: agreement 09 = 13.0%

Q2 When I lived in France I would often visit my cousins.

(*rendre visite à*)

topic: use of imperfect

- a – *j'habitais* or equivalent: imperfect 35 = 50.7%
- b – *rendais visite à*: imperfect 16 = 23.2%

Q3 If you worked harder you would achieve better results.

(*obtenir, un résultat*)

topic: *si* clauses / articles / agreements / comparative

- a – *travillais*: imperfect + spelling 20 = 29.0%
- b – *obtiendrais*: conditional + spelling 08 = 11.6%
- c – *de meilleurs résultats: de* 00 = 00.0%

- d – *meilleurs*: irregular comparative 34 = 49.3%
 e – *meilleurs* –before noun 29 = 42.0%
- Q4 She's probably the cleverest girl in the class.
 (*intelligent*)
 topic: superlatives, adjective agreements
- a – *la fille la plus intelligente*: adjective after noun 46 = 66.6%
 b – *la plus intelligente*: article 27 = 39.1%
 c – *intelligente*: agreement 37 = 53.6%
- Q5 Is Dr Smith in the office? - He is in Canada now but he will be back on Monday.
 ([Form the question using inversion and not *est-ce que*], *être de retour*)
 topic: articles, formal questions, future
- a – *Le docteur Smith*: article 03 = 04.3%
 b – ... *docteur Smith est-il*: word order 28 = 40.6%
 c – *au Canada*: preposition 16 = 23.2%
 d – *sera* 45 = 65.2%
 e – *lundi*: no article/ preposition 30 = 43.5%
 f – *lundi*: lower case 45 = 65.2%
- Q6 Have you been learning French and German for long?
 topic: *depuis*-type constructions
- a – *vous apprenez / tu apprends*: present 28 = 40.6%
 b – *ça fait / il y a / depuis* construction 37 = 53.6%
 c – *le français*: article 49 = 71.0%
 d – *le français*: lower case 39 = 56.5%
- Q7 — Are you going to talk to him about it? — I'm still thinking about it.
 (*parler à qn de qch, penser à qch*)
 topic: personal pronouns
- a – *lui*: indirect object pronoun 26 = 37.7%
 b – *en*: personal pronoun 12 = 17.4%
 c – *y*: personal pronoun 9 = 13.0%
- Q8 The documents? I gave them to her yesterday when she arrived.
 (*un document*)
 topics: object personal pronouns / agreements
- a – *les*: direct object pronoun 52 = 75.4%
 b – *lui*: indirect object pronoun 31 = 45.0%
 c – *donnés*: p.d.o. agreement 14 = 20.3%
 d – *elle est arrivée*: *être* auxiliary 52 = 75.4%
 e – *elle est arrivée*: agreement 42 = 60.9%
 f – *les lui*: pronouns + order 16 = 23.2%
- Q9 I want her to come this time so that I can give them to her myself.
 (*pour que*)
 topics: subjunctive / personal pronouns
- a – *qu'elle vienne*: subjunctive 17 = 24.6%
 b – *je puisse*: subjunctive 21 = 30.4%
 c – *les*: direct object pronoun 55 = 79.7%
 d – *lui*: indirect object pronoun 24 = 34.8%
 e – *les lui*: pronouns + order 16 = 23.2%
- Q10 Stop criticising their ideas! Yours are far from being perfect!
 (*critiquer, une idée, loin de, parfait*)
 topics: imperatives / possessives / agreements

- a – *Arrêtez / arrête* (circumflex not required) 59 = 85.5%
- b – *leurs*: possessive adjective plus plural agreement 47 = 68.1%
- c – *Les vôtres / les tiennes*: possessive pronoun 7 = 10.1%
- d – *parfaites*: agreement 6 = 08.7%
- Q11 No-one told me that she hadn't any money.
topic: negatives / omission of article
- a – *Personne ne* 19 = 27.5%
- b – *d'argent*: no article 27 = 39.1%
- Q12 The documents (that) I need are those (that) you were talking about
yesterday.
(*avoir besoin de qch, parler de qch*)
topics: *dont* / demonstratives
- a – *dont j'ai besoin* 11 = 15.9%
- b – *ceux*: demonstrative (*celles* accepted) 28 = 40.6%
- c – *dont*: relative pronoun 9 = 13.0%

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