The International Journal of

Assessment and Evaluation

A Comparison of the Frequency and the Types of French Spelling Errors Produced by Students Located in Different Demolinguistic Settings

MAXINE BÉLANGER, MICHÈLE MINOR-CORRIVEAU, AND ROXANNE BÉLANGER

The International Journal of Learning in Assessment and Evaluation is
peer-reviewed, supported by rigorous processes of criterion-
referenced article ranking and qualitative commentary,
ensuring that only intellectual work of the greatest substance
and highest significance is published.

A Comparison of the Frequency and the Types of French Spelling Errors Produced by Students Located in Different Demolinguistic Settings

Maxine Bélanger, Laurentian University, Canada
Michèle Minor-Corriveau, Laurentian University, Canada
Roxanne Bélanger, Laurentian University, Canada

Abstract: In this study, the frequency and the types of French spelling errors produced by fifth grade students from Northern Ontario were assessed using "Chronosdictées", a spelling test standardized in France. This study aims to highlight and compare the types of spelling errors exhibited by francophone populations in majority and minority language settings, while providing normative data that will be available for use in francophone minority language settings. A dictation composed of 6 sentences was given to 82 students from the City of Greater Sudbury (CGS). Data was collected and analyzed according to error type: morphosyntactic, lexical, phonetic, as well as errors of segmentation and omission. The detailed analysis of these errors revealed that the general frequency of spelling errors more then doubled when the dictation was given to French fifth grade students living in a francophone minority setting (CGS, Canada), compared to those in a predominantly francophone location (Paris, France). In addition, this study revealed the types of spelling errors most frequently produced by fifth grade students from the CGS (morphosyntactic, lexical and phonetic). Furthermore, a more detailed analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the general means of spelling errors produced by the French fifth grade students from the CGS according to gender or school. The conclusion of this study brings the authors one step closer to standardizing and validating a French spelling assessment tool for French students living in minority settings.

Keywords: Spelling Errors, Linguistics, Morphology, Syntax, Grammar

Context

S pelling errors are common but problematic in all alphabetic languages because a one-to-one phoneme to grapheme correspondence does not exist in any alphabetic language (Rieben, Fayol and Perfetti 1997). The French language includes 36 phonemes (i.e. sounds) that are used to communicate orally and 26 graphemes (i.e. letters) that are used to communicate in writing. The alphabetic correspondences between the French phonemes (i.e. sounds) and graphemes (i.e. letters) are far from being transparent because one phoneme may correspond to several different combinations of graphemes (Jaffré 2003). For example, the phoneme /o/ can be represented by a single grapheme [o] or more complex graphemes like [au] or [eau]. There are upwards of 30 ways to represent the phoneme /o/ in French (Rey and Rey-Debove 2013). This lack of graphophonemic transparency makes the French alphabetic writing system difficult to master. Even though a perfectly transparent graphophonemic language system (matching one grapheme to each phoneme) does not exist, certain languages (i.e. Italian, Spanish or Croatian) reflect their phonological system more accurately (Aro, Erskine and Seymour 2003; Fraca de Barrera, Gombert and Goswami 1998; Alegria and Mousty 1999), making these languages more transparent and less fundamentally complex to acquire. The presence of such confusion increases the complexity of learning and also the probability of producing a higher number of spelling errors. This complexity also increases for individuals who have two phonological systems at their disposal, like most bilingual French-speaking children in Canada. These children are constantly surrounded by the predominant influence of the English language (Allard, Landry and Théberge 1991; Allard, Deveau and Landry 2007; Thériault 1999).

Literacy development progresses from the ability to understand and express oral language to the ability to comprehend and produce written language (Billard 2004; Callu et al. 2003; Catts and Kamhi 2005; Gillam 2008). For this reason, the key to becoming a coherent writer involves

COMMON GROUND