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French Spelling Abilities of Franco-Ontarian University Students

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Abstract: Studies have shown that the mastery of French grammatical spelling skills is far from complete at the end of elementary school and that this process takes many years to reach mastery, from kindergarten to Grade 12 and beyond. This study aims to compare the literacy skills of Franco-Ontarian students with respect to gender, language spoken at home, and geographical region, using sentences from a standardized dictation. These dictations consist of 150 phrases (ten dictations, comprised of fifteen sentences each) used to measure the mastery of fifteen grammatical spelling skills deemed essential for reaching master of French spelling. The dictations were adapted for Franco-Ontarians and administered to 158 participants. This adaptation included the use of words more commonly used and understood by Franco-Ontarians (i.e. CN Tower was substituted for Eiffel Tower). The results of this study will help propose a hierarchy of grammatical spelling skills designed for use in primary and secondary schools. Historically, females have demonstrated a better mastery of grammatical spelling skills than males, and students who are educated in settings where French is the majority language (and the language of instruction) have a better mastery of spelling than those who are educated in settings where French is the language used by the minority of the population. Those who speak more French at home are also more successful than those who speak mainly English. The hierarchy demonstrates that certain grammatical skills that are deemed to be simple that should be mastered in elementary school are not yet mastered at the post-secondary level. This confirms the need to teach grammatical competencies explicitly and in sequence to ensure the mastery of these skills.

Keywords: Spelling, Syntax, Learning, Teaching, Writing

Introduction

Spelling consists of stringing together letters (i.e. alphabet system) in a specific order to form words that a collective group can identify as carrying meaning. Grammar refers to the functions of words and their relations within the sentence (Paret 2010). Similar to English, writing in French is alphabetic in nature and has about 130 graphemes used to transcribe the thirty-six phonemes in the language (Catach, Gruaz, and Duprez 1995).

In French, there are very few words written exactly as they are pronounced. The reader/writer must therefore rely on their knowledge of phonographic correspondence (Brissaud, Jaffré, and Pellat 2008), morphological and lexical knowledge (e.g., which graphemes composed of each word) in order to correctly write the words (Brissaud and Cogis 2011). Grammatical spelling mistakes are typically inherent to learning and usually represent underlying learning patterns that are important to identify and understand (Bousquet et al. 1999). Two major distinctive categories, lexical spelling and grammatical spelling, generally define spelling. St-Pierre et al. (2011) explain the concept of lexical spelling and define it as the activity of writing words in the lexicon, without taking into account their role within the sentence. Grammatical spelling refers to the application of grammar rules (e.g., subject-verb agreement, agreement in gender and number) when writing words in a sentence (St-Pierre et al. 2011).

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