

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUDITORY PROFICIENCY IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH AS FOREIGN
LANGUAGES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN FLANDERS

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Abstract

A group of 125 Dutch-speaking students from five different secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium, were tested for oral production and listening comprehension proficiency in both English and French as part of a pilot study intended to examine outcomes and causal factors in the simultaneous learning of two foreign languages in an educational context. While overall the results indicate higher levels of proficiency in English than in French, pointing to the dominance of extra-curricular factors (socio-cultural context) over curricular factors (amount of formal instruction and classroom contact), a breakdown of the scores on the various test components suggests a more intricate interplay between both types of factors as determinants of oral language proficiency in a foreign language environment.

Introduction

This paper reports on an ongoing research of how adolescents simultaneously learn two foreign languages in an educational setting. The specific setting under investigation is the general system of education in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region in the north of Belgium. Multilingual competency is a valued quality in Belgium and for part of the population a fact of daily life. Not surprisingly, foreign language learning is a fundamental and compulsory component of general Belgian education. It involves at least two foreign languages -typically English plus French or Dutch- which are taught more or less in parallel, and is started in primary school and continued throughout secondary education to fairly advanced levels.

The findings reported in this article are part of a larger, ongoing research project investigating language education in Belgium. This research is motivated by several concerns.

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A first, 'applied' concern is to collect information on the system of foreign language education in Belgium and to evaluate *input* factors (curricular and extra-curricular) and *output* factors (linguistic and socio-psychological outcomes). There is a dearth of empirical research on foreign language education in Belgium. As a result, educational policy making and language teaching practice are inspired by impressionistic views, fragmented observations, and a set of widely accepted yet empirically unfounded assumptions. According to these folk assumptions, for instance, children across Belgium would find it much easier to learn English than the other national language (i.e. Dutch in French-speaking Wallonia, French in Dutch-speaking Flanders); English would be intrinsically easier to learn than French or Dutch; the teaching of English would be more 'communicative' than the teaching of French and Dutch; and at the end of general education, proficiency in the other national language (French, Dutch) would be inferior to proficiency in English. The objective of our ongoing research project, then, is to conduct a series of objective and external evaluations of foreign language education in Belgium which can serve as a reliable source of inspiration for educational policy and foreign language teaching practice. In this sense, the project is exploratory and descriptive in nature.

It is also believed that studies of foreign language education such as the one reported here can be of value for second language acquisition research and theory. VanPatten (1990) distinguished three areas of investigation in second language acquisition (SLA): foreign language, instructed second language, and untutored second language. Foreign language learning (FLL) takes place in a nonnative language-classroom environment; tutored second language acquisition takes place in a native classroom environment of which English as a L2 in the US is probably the best known case; and untutored acquisition occurs in the host environment. VanPatten represents the three areas as intersecting circles.² In the intersection of all three areas he places SLA, defining the intersection as what a "learner does in common to all contexts ... which forms the core of SLA theory" (p. 25). SLA research has tended to concentrate on the last two domains (e.g. Harley 1986, Swain 2000; Meisel et al., 1981; Perdue 1993). However, ever more people in the developed world learn foreign languages as part of general schooling. As such, studies of foreign language education have high ecological validity and can have great descriptive value.

There are good methodological reasons for analyzing foreign language education as an instance of the more general phenomenon of SLA. The language classroom in principle affords more control over at least some of the myriad factors in SLA than do naturalistic acquisition contexts. This control can give added weight to classroom findings. The case of the Belgian system of foreign language education, where children learn two or more languages, illustrates this.

In contrast to first language acquisition research, where there is a longstanding tradition and fascination with children learning two first languages simultaneously, in the field of second language acquisition, the emphasis so far has mainly been on L2 learners' development of one single target language. In their quest for explanations and the identification of universal vs. language-specific factors in SLA, researchers have had to turn to cross-linguistic investigations, comparing different L2 learners acquiring different target languages in different settings (see, e.g. Perdue 1993). However, ensuring the comparability of learners across populations, languages and environments is a persistent problem. After all, in such comparisons many psycho-social variables cannot be controlled, and thus one can never be certain what the precise reasons are for any differences or similarities found in the patterns of learners acquiring different languages: these may be due to purely linguistic factors, but also to other factors having to do with, amongst others, differences in previous knowledge, language learning aptitude, cognitive development, cognitive style, socialization patterns and so forth (see Skehan 1989). The same learners acquiring two (or more) second languages more or less simultaneously, on the other hand, provide better opportunities for investigating theoretical issues in SLA, particularly if the two languages are acquired in similar contexts. The foreign language classroom can provide such similarity of context. In such cases the number of intervening variables is reduced considerably (though by no means

² Alternatively, these three domains could also be represented as points on a continuum, allowing for more SLA types to be identified. One such type would be immersion SLA, which occurs in a native non-language classroom in a non-native larger environment (e.g. French immersion in Canada).

completely eliminated). After all, the simultaneous L2 learner always has the same previous knowledge, aptitude and is always at the same level of socio-cognitive development. The two main independent variables then, are the two input languages, with their respective linguistic and sociolinguistic properties, and the learner's socio-psychological predisposition towards each of these languages.

We are not yet in a position to offer an exhaustive account of the simultaneous learning of two languages in Belgian classrooms, however. The aims of the present paper are of necessity more modest. The results reported here come from a pilot study of the teaching and learning of French-foreign language (FFL) and English-foreign language (EFL) by Dutch-speaking pupils in the system of general education in Flanders, Belgium. For each target language (TL), we examined and compared two sets of factors by means of two parallel batteries of evaluation instruments (i.e. tests, questionnaires, evaluation schemes): (a) curricular and extracurricular input factors (amount of classroom contact with the target language, amount of extra-curricular contact, curriculum content and teaching methodology, actual teaching methods, techniques, textbooks and materials used, classroom dynamics, socio-cultural status of the target languages), and (b) linguistic and socio-psychological output factors (levels of speaking, listening, reading and writing proficiency, language attitudes and language learning motivations). While the study as a whole covers all these factors, this paper will only discuss levels of foreign language proficiency attained in the two target languages, more specifically the speaking and listening skills.

Background: The system of foreign language education in Flanders (Belgium)

With a few notable exceptions, foreign language instruction in Belgium is started in the 5th grade of primary school (age 10). In Wallonia, this can be either English, Dutch or German; in Flanders, the specific context under investigation here, there is no such choice and pupils obligatorily have French, the other national language, as their first foreign school language. The second foreign language, which is always English in Flanders, is introduced in the first year of secondary school (age 12). The first foreign language is taught for a minimum of two and a maximum of five hours a week, depending on the year of study and the specialization chosen. The second foreign language is taught for minimally one hour and maximally four hours a week. By the end of secondary school (age 18), Flemish pupils will thus have had an accumulated number of roughly 930 classroom contact hours with French as opposed to some 540 hours with English (these are average numbers; real numbers may differ considerably with specialization and elective courses chosen though the proportional difference between French and English remains).

There is no space for a detailed description of the EFL and FFL programs in Flanders. Suffice it here to say that the curricula for both languages are remarkably similar in terms of content, structure and teaching methodologies, which are grafted on the communicative and functional-notional principles of foreign language teaching with some features of the audio-lingual and direct method, and that stated objectives and final achievement levels at the end of secondary education are identical for both languages.

The latter seems surprising given the clear discrepancy in the amount of instruction in French and English provided, which would lead one to predict more advanced levels of proficiency for French than for English. No official explanation for this apparent paradox is given but it is probably motivated by the assumption that the difference in curricular contact will be compensated by the considerable amounts of additional extra-curricular contact and the more favourable disposition which Flemish children have with English, as the all pervasive language of youth and pop culture, mass entertainment and the media. Such additional extra-curricular exposure and favourable dispositions are not assumed to hold for French, despite its status as a national language and the native language of nearly 40% of the Belgian population.

One of the questions which this study sought to answer, then, was whether there was any empirical justification for these assumptions by assessing the weight of curricular versus extra-curricular contact in the process of foreign language learning.

Method

Subjects and schools

Five (state secondary) schools participated in this pilot study, selected from various parts of Flanders. Care was taken that none of the schools was located within the immediate catchment area of the officially bilingual yet predominantly Francophone capital district of Brussels, or near the French-Dutch linguistic border separating the monolingual Dutch-speaking region of Flanders from the monolingual French-speaking region of Wallonia.

A total of 150 6th year secondary students (age 18) from the Modern Language section participated in the study, though only 125 completed all the components of the test battery (cf. section below). All students had had the same amount of curricular contact with English and French at the time of testing. The same handbook for English was used in all five schools (*Headway*). For French, four different handbooks were used, all designed in Flanders for Dutch-speaking learners of French (*Arc-En-Ciel*, *Eventail*, *Horizons* and *Formule F*).

Test instruments

The foreign language assessment instruments for the present study had to meet a number of requirements. First, what was needed were general foreign language proficiency tests, not curriculum-specific achievement tests. At the same time, for the sake of validity, the evaluation measures must be directly linked to, or at least be compatible with the common learning outcomes identified in the FFL and EFL programmes of study. In addition, we felt that the evaluation had to be diversified to be effective: since language proficiency involves various combinations of skills (receptive, productive, oral, literacy), knowledge (grammatical, metalinguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, implicit, explicit) and dimensions (e.g. fluency, accuracy, complexity), a single instrument or the performance on a single task is not enough to provide a clear profile of students' language proficiency. The use of several methods of evaluation and several different kinds of instruments leads to a more reliable assessment of a student's ability (Huerta-Macias 1995).

Hence, two parallel proficiency tests (i.e. one for English and one for French) were developed. Each test consisted of five components, measuring the following five macro-skills: auditory comprehension, (semi-spontaneous) oral production, listening comprehension, written production, and metalinguistic knowledge.

The most important requirement for our purposes, and by far the most problematic one to meet, was cross-linguistic equivalence of measurements to ensure comparability of the evaluation of proficiency in English and French. Referring to the growing interest in comparative studies on language competence across several languages in Europe, Sigott (1996) underlines that language test translatability is an area of research which is still very much in the exploratory stages. In our attempt to make the two tests as equivalent as possible, we aimed at parallelism at the levels of *form* and *content*. Both tests were developed congruent with the *Common European Framework of Reference* for the teaching and assessment of foreign languages developed by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 1998). This language- and curriculum-neutral framework provides a general set of universally applicable descriptors and scales for six functionally determined levels of foreign language proficiency. We pitched our assessment measures at the 3rd and 4th proficiency levels (i.e. the *Threshold* and *Vantage* levels), which, in more generic terms, correspond to higher intermediate and lower-advanced levels of proficiency.

Each test not only covered the same skills but also had the same format with the same tasks. The time allotted for completing each task was also kept constant. The French and English materials used in the reading and listening tasks were authentic materials of similar length or duration, not adapted for language learners, and dealt with identical or similar topics. The use of authentic materials offers also some guarantee for equivalence of linguistic (phonological, morpho-syntactic, lexico-semantic, discourse-pragmatic) complexity. Obviously, the two tests were administered under the same conditions, using the same procedures, namely at school during regular French and English class hours.

To further establish crosslinguistic equivalence and overall validity, both tests were evaluated and compared by a specialist panel consisting of expert teachers, members of the inspectorate and French-English bilingual linguists specialized in language testing.³

The French and English test were administered separately, with at least a week difference to avoid external factors such as test fatigue and test familiarity to colour the results.

Before proceeding with the results, we will briefly describe the form and content of the auditory comprehension and oral production components of the test battery.

Auditory comprehension. Based on the descriptive guidelines of the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe 1998:172-175), auditory comprehension was operationally defined as follows:

Learners can understand:

- standard spoken language, live or broadcast, on both familiar and unfamiliar topics normally encountered in personal, social, academic or vocational life;
- recordings in standard dialect likely to be encountered in social, professional or academic life and identify speaker viewpoints and attitudes as well as the information content;
- most of radio documentaries and most other recorded or broadcast audio material delivered in standard dialect and can identify the speaker's mood, tone etc.

Accordingly, for each of the two target languages, two authentic radio broadcasts of similar duration and dealing with similar topics were selected, each representing a major regional variety of the target language (standard French-French vs. standard Belgian-French; standard American-English vs. standard British-English). The two texts also represent two major registers: a formal register (news report) and a more informal register (a radio interview).

This listening task required students to (1) listen for the general idea of the text as well as certain details; (2) comprehend the vocabulary; (3) use strategies such as tolerating ambiguity, listening for keywords, interpreting anaphoric chains, and using such paralinguistic cues as tone of voice.

The students heard each text twice and then answered a set of questions, containing multiple choice, closed and half-open questions. The answers were scored using parallel sets of answer keys.

Oral production. Oral production was operationally defined as follows (Council of Europe 1998:180-188):

Learners can:

- use language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, academic, or leisure topics, marking clearly the relationships between ideas.
- communicate spontaneously with good grammatical control, adopting a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances.
- enter unprepared into conversation of familiar topics, express personal opinions, and exchange information on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life.
- use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes including emotional and allusive language.

In this study oral production skills in each of the two target languages were measured in an individual 15 minute interview with a (near-)native speaker of French and English. The interviews were designed to elicit a variety of discourse types (personal conversation, narrative, descriptive, expository) that could be

³ Complete crosslinguistic test equivalence may well be a utopian goal. It can only be determined with certainty against the test performance of a reference sample of test-takers which has been shown by some other, independent metric to be ambilingual or balanced bilingual in the two target languages. To our knowledge, such a metric does not exist. Ambilingualism and balanced bilingualism are themselves operationally defined constructs, which would lead to circular definitions.

expected to contain a variety of linguistic structures. One of the elicitation procedures used is the *Frog story*, which is well-established in research on L1 and L2 acquisition (e.g. Berman & Slobin 1994). The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed on computer in CHAT format (MacWhinney 1995).

The first step in the analysis of the production data consisted of identifying and measuring linguistic features that might be validly related to the linguistic component of the students' oral communicative competence in English and French. The French and English interlanguage data were compared on three linguistic parameters: text length, lexical richness, syntactic diversity. These were computed on the basis of the narrative speech data which the students produced in their retellings of the Frog Story.

The first parameter, text length in controlled language tasks, was used as a general (and admittedly crude) estimate of overall productive oral ability. It was operationalized in terms of number of words produced in telling the Frog Story, calculated with the help of the *FREQ* programme in *CLAN* (MacWhinney 1995). Self-repeated and self-corrected words were excluded from the counts.

Using the type and token counts from the *FREQ* programme, several type-token ratios were computed for all learners' utterances in an attempt to capture their lexical competence in French and English. Finally, *number of verb types (lemmas) produced* was withheld as the simplest and most reliable index of lexical development for our crosslinguistic purposes. Theoretical motivation for our choice comes from research on the L2 lexicon (see Harley 1995), which has shown that although nouns may predominate in the speech of beginning learners of L2, verbs appear to be the most centrally involved in lexical development. For instance, Broeder et al. (1993) found that an increase in the proportion of verbs relative to other word categories in the data from untutored adult learners of several target languages was positively associated with overall lexical richness, whereas the opposite was the case for nouns: the higher the proportion of nouns in a learner's lexicon, the lower the overall lexical richness tends to be. Broeder et al. (1993) suggested that: "An increase in the proportion of verbs corresponds to a development in the structuring of learners' utterances" (p. 159), an observation that appears to concur with Dietrich's (1990) view concerning the status of nouns and verbs in interlanguage development. Most importantly for our purposes, the number of verb types appears to correlate well with other, more general measures of linguistic competence (Dietrich 1990).

Narrative speech also provides a rich context for the investigation of learners' mastery and deployment of particular syntactic constructions. The ability to produce both a semantically coherent and a structurally cohesive story requires a set of linguistic devices for linking and integrating the different events in the story and for signaling their relative information status (i.e. primary or foreground information versus secondary or background information). One of these devices is subordination. Research on narrative development in language acquisition (Bamberg 1987; Berman & Slobin 1994) and on clause combining in SLA (Giacalone-Ramat 1999; Véronique 1997) has found that in the early stages of acquisition, when grammatical means for proposition linking are missing, events are simply juxtaposed, without any marking of semantic relations, differences in information status or of episodic structure. In a next stage, different propositions are linked through co-ordination. As acquisition proceeds, learners use an increasing range of more complex subordination strategies to package multiple propositions within the contours of a single sentence (e.g. complementization, relativization). The third parameter of the students' oral production skills investigated in the present study, *syntactic diversity*, sought to capture this aspect of the learners' FL proficiency. Following procedures in Reilly et al. (1998) and Papp & Kesckes (2000), the number of individual complex sentences in a student's story were tallied to yield the *Frequency of Complex Sentences*. This number was divided by the total number of propositions or clauses in the learner's story to give the *proportion of complex sentences* or *Complex Sentence Score*.

Using the written transcripts (125 for EFL, 125 for FFL), each parameter was tallied by one bilingual French-English researcher. A representative sample of the transcripts was checked by two independent scorers (one for English, one for French). Special care was taken that the same procedures and criteria were followed for the two target languages. Disagreements were discussed until resolution was achieved.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we shall present statistical data from tests indicating differences in performance of the same students on the English and the French oral and auditory proficiency tasks. Emphasis will be on average comparative scores for English and French. In addition, standard deviation scores facilitate comparison between schools of the spread of results in particular test measures, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the findings.

Auditory Comprehension Scores

Global scores

Table 1 presents average percentage scores based on the number of correctly answered questions for the listening comprehension tests EFL and FFL across the five schools (A to E).

Table 1: Average listening comprehension scores.

Target Language		Schools					Total
		A	B	C	D	E	
French	%	53.6	37.6	59.1	53.0	51.1	50.9
	Stdev	0.98	0.98	1.04	1.18	1.07	1.14
English	%	59.6	55.0	59.4	64.0	56.0	59.5
	Stdev	0.81	0.80	0.97	0.84	0.98	0.88
<i>t</i>		ns	***	ns	**	ns	***

t: t-Test (two-tailed, paired); $p \leq 0.001 = ***$, $p \leq 0.01 = **$; $p \leq 0.05 = *$; ns: non-significant.

The overall means of scores over the two target languages shows that relative to the level of listening comprehension set forward, these students' listening skills can be called satisfactory for English (59.5%) and just sufficient for French (50.9%). The global difference of 8.5 percentage points in favour of English is highly significant statistically: overall, the students perform significantly better on the English than on the French listening comprehension. This general conclusion must be somewhat qualified when considering the standard deviation scores and comparing the results per individual school. The scores for French are more heterogeneous than for English, and the superiority of the English scores is significant in only two of the five schools (B and D); in the other three schools the differences are less outspoken and non-significant.

These qualifications notwithstanding, the conclusion is that these Flemish students have better developed listening skills in English-FL than in French-FL. This points to the impact of extra-curricular factors (contact with the target language through the media, favourable predisposition) which are more advantageous for English than for French and which, in this specific context at least, outweighs the impact of the curricular factors such as quantity of classroom contact, which are more advantageous for French. Another possible explanation for this finding could be *ease of lexical processing*: listening comprehension heavily draws on the processing of individual lexical items, a task which for native speakers of Dutch may be easier in English than in French given the greater number of cognates and near-cognates in English and Dutch than in French and Dutch.

Scores per task

The findings in the previous section on the basis of global average scores are put further into perspective by a comparison of the scores on the two components of the listening comprehension tests (see Table 2). Recall that the listening comprehension tests for each target language consisted of two texts, reflecting

two dimensions: a dialectal dimension (French-French versus Belgian-French, British-English versus American-English) and a register dimension (a formal newsreport versus an informal interview). **Although these two dimensions are conflated in the current design**, a breakdown of the scores allows us to make some inferences about the learners' ability to comprehend the major regional and stylistic varieties of the two target languages to which they are exposed either at school or in the wider context.

Table 2: Listening comprehension scores per listening task.

Target Language		<u>Schools</u>					Total
		A	B	C	D	E	
Belgian French (informal)	%	59.3	43.5	68.2	64.3	62.8	59.8
	Stdev	1.38	1.40	1.19	1.14	1.29	1.39
French French (formal)	%	47.8	31.7	50.0	41.8	39.4	42.0
	Stdev	1.38	1.41	1.68	1.60	1.30	1.52
<i>t</i>		*	ns	**	***	***	***
British English (formal)	%	72.5	59.6	61.7	72.5	61.7	67.1
	Stdev	1.09	1.07	1.09	1.16	1.22	1.18
American English (informal)	%	46.7	50.3	57.1	55.5	50.3	51.8
	Stdev	1.28	1.47	1.27	1.21	1.16	1.28
<i>t</i>		***	ns	ns	**	**	***

t: t-Test (two-tailed, paired); $p \leq 0.001 = ***$, $p \leq 0.01 = **$; $p \leq 0.05 = *$; ns: non-significant.

As can be deduced from table 2, the students in all five schools performed consistently better on the Belgian-French and the British-English listening tasks than on, respectively, the French-French and American-English tasks. Although there is some variation by school, the differences in total scores between the respective regional varieties is highly significant.

This finding may be significant: the students appear to perform best on the tasks which involve texts in the regional variety which is also the variety predominantly used in the foreign language classroom at school (i.e. British English and Belgian French).

No consistent pattern emerges when the scores are compared across the formal-informal distinction: for French, the students perform better on the informal task but for English they do better on the formal task. It seems, then, that regional variety is a stronger determiner of these students' listening comprehension skills than is register.

These findings enable us to further refine our conclusions about these students' listening comprehension skills. There is unquestionably a significant overall advantage for English over French, which points to the influence of extra-curricular contact with the target language, overriding curricular factors such as amount of formal instruction received. At the same time, however, listening comprehension skills are also positively correlated with the varieties that are familiar to the learner from the language classroom

(BE and BF), to the extent that the scores on the Belgian-French task (59.8%) even exceed scores on the American-English task (51.8%). This may leave us with a paradox as far as English is concerned, given that American-English is probably the variety which predominates in the extra-curricular context.

Oral production

Text length

Table 3 shows average scores in text length, measured in number of words, for each target language and school.

Table 3: Text length

Schools		French	English	<i>t</i>
A	Mean	263	324	*
	Stdev	80.1	102.1	
B	Mean	357	426	ns
	Stdev	124.1	123.7	
C	Mean	276	344	*
	Stdev	69.4	94.1	
D	Mean	350	393	ns
	Stdev	104.1	148.7	
E	Mean	305	364	ns
	Stdev	89.1	151.9	
Total	Mean	320	364	*
	Stdev	94.8	126.6	

t: t-Test (two-tailed, paired); $p \leq 0.001 = ***$, $p \leq 0.01 = **$; $p \leq 0.05 = *$; ns: non-significant.

The learners produced more words in their Frog Story retellings in English (364) than in French (320). The overall difference in text length is statistically significant only at $p \leq 0.05$. When we look at the scores per school, the differences between English and French are again weakly significant in only two of the five schools (A and C). On the basis of these findings, and the crudeness of this measure as an indicator of oral proficiency, strong comparative conclusions are not warranted.

Number of verb types

Table 4 shows average number of verb types (lemmas) produced in the frog story retellings for each target language and school.

Table 4: Number of verb types.

Schools	French	English	<i>t</i>
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A	Mean	27	28	**
	Stdev	7.41	6.94	
B	Mean	26	35	*
	Stdev	4.45	8.07	
C	Mean	23	33	***
	Stdev	4.98	7.92	
D	Mean	29	34	ns
	Stdev	6.60	8.76	
E	Mean	26	34	*
	Stdev	9.78	11.46	
Total	Mean	26	32	***
	Stdev	7.52	8.88	

t: t-Test (two-tailed, paired); $p \leq 0.001 = ***$, $p \leq 0.01 = **$; $p \leq 0.05 = *$; ns: non-significant.

The number of verb types (lemmas) seems a better discriminator of oral proficiency in French and English than is text length. The overall results reveal a statistically significantly higher number of verb types for English (32) than for French (26) though the differences may not always be as outspoken or significant in each of the participating schools. This suggests that the learners have a richer and more diverse vocabulary in English than in French.

Syntactic Diversity

Table 5 shows the *Complex Sentence Score* (the percentage of subordinate clauses to the total number of clauses in the frog story retelling) for each target language and school.

Table 5: *Complex Sentence Score*

School		French	English	<i>t</i>
A	Mean	13.2	13.7	ns
	Stdev	8.3	7.4	
B	Mean	10.8	21.2	**
	Stdev	4.6	7.2	
C	Mean	14.7	16.6	ns
	Stdev	5.8	6.0	
D	Mean	14.5	16.6	ns
	Stdev	8.9	5.1	
E	Mean	16.9	14.9	ns
	Stdev	7.2	4.9	
Total	Mean	14.7	16.2	ns
	Stdev	5.9	6.3	

t: t-Test (two-tailed, paired); $p \leq 0.001 = ***$, $p \leq 0.01 = **$; $p \leq 0.05 = *$; ns: non-significant.

The overall percentage of subordinate clauses is slightly higher for the learners' English oral production (16.2%), but the difference with the complex sentence score for French (14.7%) is not statistically significant. Only in one school (B) a significant difference was found. In one other school (E) the score for French was even superior to that for English but again, not significantly so.

In these oral production data, then, the Complex Sentence Score fails to discriminate between the two target languages, indicating that the students have obtained comparable levels of syntactic complexity in their two target languages.

Conclusion

The three measures used to quantify the learners' oral production skills all indicate a better mastery of English than of French, despite the greater amount of French instruction. This confirms what was found for auditory comprehension skills and points once more to the importance of extra-curricular factors in determining the rate and outcomes of the foreign language learning process. However, the differences in oral proficiency between the two languages are slight and not particularly significant except perhaps for the measure of lexical richness. This could suggest that the kind of extra-curricular contact which these students have with English, which is very much a 'passive' and impersonal contact, may promote lexical development but not, or less so, to grammatical development.

General conclusion

Although English foreign language instruction is started two years later in Flanders than French-foreign languages instruction and is considerably less intensive in terms of number of classroom contact hours, global levels of ultimate attainment in English in the domains of proficiency investigated here, auditory comprehension and oral production, exceed those obtained in French. While several factors may contribute to this result (e.g. greater typological proximity between Dutch and English versus French), impact of the wider, out-of-school socio-cultural context emerges as the most likely explanation for this observation. Flemish children are exposed to English from an early age onwards via the media (radio, television, film, internet), providing a rich extra-curricular source of input for their language learning process. In this sense, English is less of a 'foreign language' in Flanders than is French, for which such extra-curricular input is slight or non-existent, its privileged status as a national language in the federal state of Belgium notwithstanding. At the same time, Flemish children also tend to be more favourably disposed towards English, things and persons English and learning English than they are towards French (Housen, Janssens & Pierrard, 2001). The combination of additional, extra-curricular input and a stronger and more favourable socio-psychological predisposition somehow compensates for the considerable discrepancy in formal exposure between French and English in Flemish foreign language classrooms, at least for as far as final levels of oral-auditory proficiency are concerned.

A number of qualifications are in order, however. First, the impact of extra-curricular factors is more strongly manifested in the development of receptive, auditory skills, where the advantage for English is most significant, than in the development of oral production skills, where the differences between English and French are less outspoken. This reflects the nature of the extra-curricular contact that Flemish children have with English, which is very much a 'passive' or receptive contact: Flemish children may *hear* and *read* English outside the classroom much more than they hear and read French, but they do not *speak* and *write* English any more than they speak or write French. Consequently, the gains in proficiency are more strongly felt in the receptive domain than in the productive domain.

Secondly, the above should not be taken to imply that the role of curricular factors is inferior to that of extra-curricular factors of the kind described here. Obviously, the levels of EFL proficiency attained in Flemish education are the result of the combined effect of curricular and extra-curricular input factors. The net-effect of the curricular factors can be seen most clearly in the case of FFL, whose development relies almost exclusively on what the children pick up in the classroom and where fairly advanced levels of proficiency are attained. The influence of the curricular component is also manifested more subtly in the listening comprehension skills. The children in this study were clearly more familiar with, and more apt to comprehend texts in the specific input varieties of the two target languages used in their respective

EFL and FFL classrooms, and this regardless of other variables that might determine text comprehensibility such as the degree of formality.

Thirdly, in conducting this research, we were hampered by the small pool of pupils available since only five schools could be included at the time of the pilot study. It is clear that these findings cannot simply be extrapolated to all foreign language education in Flanders. Therefore, the general picture that emerges is still a tentative one. Despite the small sample size, however, we feel that this study provides interesting exploratory findings of the relationship between certain input factors and the development of oral-auditory proficiency in foreign language settings.

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