Acquisition of French as a Second Language: Do developmental stages correlate with CEFR levels?

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This paper contributes to an assessment of the role of grammatical knowledge in the definition of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) levels of reference and to a discussion of the relation of the knowledge of grammar in the definition of proficiency in French as a second language. The first part is a summary of the findings about the acquisition of French morphosyntax with special emphasis on nominal and verbal groups. The second part looks at possible correlation between these results and the CEFR. The rationale is that the six levels defined in the CEFR do not imply an even split in the acquisition process or the curriculum. Some levels will take longer and require more instruction for the learner to move beyond than others. We will also argue that the sum of pragmatic and linguistic skills needed to achieve communicative success at each level makes it difficult, if not impossible, to find lexical and grammatical means that would characterize only one level.

Keywords: second language acquisition of French, Common European Framework, development of morphosyntax

1 Different scales: communicative, linguistic

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages was initially designed to provide common ground for professionals in Europe who designed language programs and assessments. To measure learners' acquisition, knowledge and skills are described according to six levels of proficiency. Each level is defined in terms of communicative skills in various activities (oral and written) that involve reception, interaction and production (Chapter 5 in the CEFR).

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Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is defined by Van Patten (1999) as being *concerned with how people learn a language other than their first*. "Basic SLA research" aims at building theories of how learners' varieties develop. Most studies in this field focus on linguistic development, commonly summed up with lexical and grammatical development. To work towards an answer SLA researchers have felt the need to obtain finer-grained results. They also felt essential that their results be summed up with the aim of pairing the development of lexical repertoire with morpho-syntactic clues in order to bring out more general developmental scales.

The background of this study results from different encounters between researchers in Second Language Acquisition and in Language Testing (see SLATE, http://www.slate.eu.org/). This article reports work done by French SLA researchers, members of SLATE. Like other researchers who work on different languages, our main goal is how to read the research already carried out in French as a second language along with conducting further research to answer the following questions: Is it possible to bring linguistic skills in line with the six levels of proficiency defined in the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for Languages? Is there any possible correspondence between the CEFR scales and developmental scales that have been found in SLA?

Previous research about linguistic development in French as a second language has been examined in an extensive survey (Véronique, Carlo, Granget, Kim & Prodeau, 2009). The French linguistic material was divided into major microsystems (Py, 1980) to report findings about the acquisition of French morphosyntax.

In this article, we will first summarize this extensive survey, with special emphasis on nominal and verbal groups. These two sub-systems being the have been most frequently studied, and developmental stages have been identified. The second part of the article offers an analysis of written productions of intermediate learners of French whose proficiency level has been assessed using the CEFR language proficiency scales. The goal is to look at possible relations between these CEFR scales and their linguistic development.

2 Acquiring French as a second language

The acquisition of French as a second language (L2) does not differ much from other cases of L2 acquisition in many respects. Key moments in the developmental path have been identified. Some are concomitant; others appear in a sequence. The gradual distinction between categories used for reference (nouns) and predication (verbs) is very probably linked to the distinction between different types of verbs: auxiliaries, modals, on the one hand, and full lexical verbs, on the other. This distinction corresponds to the switch from a learner variety based on the nominal organization of utterances to a basic variety centered on infinite utterance organization, as outlined by Klein & Perdue (1997). The basic user's variety will contain mostly lexical items and universal pragmatic and semantic principles to structure utterances.

The question which structured the survey made by Véronique & al (2009) was the following: once the grammaticalization process starts, what are the general developmental scales in French as L2?

2.1 Developmental stages across linguistic domains

What follows is a brief recapitulation of research results in L2 acquisition of French.

2.1.1 From Nouns to Noun Phrases

Looking at research done in second language acquisition of French about nouns and noun phrases, Prodeau (2009) shows that the process from using simple nouns to using complex noun phrases has been found to differ according to two major factors: the specific combination between first languages (L1s) and French L2 and the type of input, when French is a foreign language (FL) or an L2.

In the early stages of development, some steps are shared by all the developmental sequences surveyed. Speakers use nouns with a determiner in more cases than without; the number of bare nouns is smaller in written productions than in oral speech collected at the same period. When several nouns are used to express complex ideas, they are first compounded; specific means indicating the relation between the nouns appear later on. These lexical units appear in simple structures shaped by pragmatic and discourse principles, such as topic first, focus second. The first article used, because of its saliency in French, is the definite article. It appears under one form that varies depending on the phonological context. First in opposition to bare nouns, it becomes subsequently the pivot of the article system, even at later stages. Indefinite plural and partitives appear after the indefinite singular article, also under one form first. The last determiners to emerge are the demonstratives.

Disjoined forms of pronouns and the definite article appear simultaneously to form the core of definiteness (marking specific referents known to both interlocutors). Moreover, disjoined forms of pronouns can be used in the same position as lexical nominal groups: after a preposition for example. 1st and 2nd person pronouns precede 3rd person pronouns. Later on, conjoined forms of pronouns appear in the same order, first in subject position. For reasons that have to do with the choice between *il* and *elle*, and because patterns such as *c'est X QU-* are very frequent in French, competition between demonstrative *ce* and 3rd person pronoun is high. When object pronouns appear, they occupy a post verbal position, similar to that of lexical noun phrases. The move to a pre verbal position coincides with the development of verbal morphology, mainly with the use of auxiliaries and modal verbs. Use of demonstrative *ça* is a strategy that enables speakers to keep using the post verbal position, and to avoid choosing between *le* and *la*. Relative pronouns are first used in patterns such as the one mentioned above and *il y a X QU-*. The first occurrences of these two patterns are without relatives. Gradually the relative marker emerges under one idiosyncratic form before it diversifies to be native like.

When number and gender are marked on articles, the distinction between singular and plural is usually marked before the distinction between masculine

and feminine because the concept underlying these markers is more transparent. However, some L2 speakers have problems to understand the differences in degree of aperture and position of articulation, which leads to problems in recognizing these differences in their speech.

Gender is first marked when semantically founded. Pronouns are marked for gender earlier than determiners and in the articles, the definite article is marked before the indefinite one. Masculine is the default case, except when the semantic component of the lexeme is associated with females.

Adjectives are the last items to be marked for number and gender and the sequence depends on their relative position to the noun: attributive in post nominal position > predicative > attributive in pre nominal position.

Short adjectives tend to appear in pre nominal position, longer ones in post nominal.

2.1.2 From lexical to inflected verbs

According to the survey made by Granget (2009), all researchers agree on the fact that verb forms will develop according to the same criteria found by Prodeau (2009) in nominal groups (influence of the combination L1/L2 and input) only after a stage when lexical means suffice to explain Time relations. When verbal forms emerge, learners tend to use one form for a number of functions: in utterances referring to present, past or future time situations. Linking verbs and auxiliaries are treated differently from lexical verbs whose value is only lexical. When speakers start using more than one verb form, as for example in narratives, root forms tend to occur in foreground utterances while other forms occur in background utterances.

The first inflection on the verb to emerge is the subject-verb (S-V) agreement, mainly for the first, second and third person singular and coincides with the emergence of conjoint forms of pronouns in subject position. Frequent verbs, such as *être*, *avoir* or *aller* or modal auxiliaries, because they are used as protoforms in front of lexical verbs, are the first to show inflection, even though they are mostly irregular verbs.

Before learners start marking temporal and aspectual distinctions with verb morphology, they structure their narratives using natural organization principles such as chronology. Depending on where they position temporal adverbs such as *toujours* or *encore*, they can express a variety of aspectual content.

Temporal distinctions are first marked with preverbal items: *avoir* and *aller* as auxiliaries. *Avoir* appears first and the combination *avoir* + V-e marks past time situations. It is mostly used in opposition to V-ø, which marks present time situation. Then *aller* + V-e is used for the third component, which is future time situations.

Paradigms would then develop the following way: simple present > passé composé with an emphasis on the right boundary > futur périphrastique. The imparfait is the first paradigm to appear with post verbal morphemes. It first marks absence of boundaries, and is thus mostly used with state verbs. Passé composé is used in foreground of narratives, and imparfait in background.

With the diversification of contexts where existing paradigms are used, other paradigms, such as *plus que parfait, futur simple, conditionnel* and *subjonctif*, emerge. They are difficult to sequence due to a variety of variables which are to

be taken into consideration, such as the specific combination L1s/French L2, and the type of input.

However, one rule remains: auxiliaries and linking verbs are inflected before lexical verbs, and, among lexical verbs, regular verbs such as 1st group verbs (*parler*, *regarder*) are inflected before irregular ones, 3rd group verbs, such as *prendre*, *peindre*. Two factors interplay: frequency and regularity.

2.1.3 From words to complex syntax

Taking into consideration the work done in research of the acquisition of French as a second language in nominal and verbal domains (including modality and negation), Véronique, Prodeau & Granget (2009) examined the development of syntax, and more specifically, the relation between the development of nominal and verbal morphology and word order. As with nouns and noun phrases, the specific L1/L2 combination and the type of input influence, if not the global developmental sequence, at least the rhythm in which grammatical elements emerge.

First, utterances in French L2 follow informational and semantic principles, which enable learners to take turns in verbal interaction. When basic lexemes are categorized as either quasi nouns or quasi verbs, learners structure their utterances with topic first and focus last. To these, prepositions may be added, and they help learners refer to space in the absence of verbs. The first negator is anaphoric *non*, and appears at the beginning of the utterance.

The chunks that have been first memorized because of their frequency in usage provide formats in which the first analyzed utterances are built. The French specific syntactic patterns, *jãna / il y a* (there is) and *se / c'est* (it is) are also found in the first predicated utterances. These patterns are also used as a way to avoid subject-verb agreement. As long as verbal inflection is absent, the structure remains topic-focus. Most utterances are simply juxtaposed, and principles of natural order, such as reporting events in chronological order, are used. The main junctor is *et* (and) with both additive and sequential values. The first element that enables learners to report events in a non chronological order is *parce que* (because).

The frequency of use of *parce que* and other junctors, such as *puis* (then), *ensuite* (then after), *donc* (thus), varies in relation to the L1 (Japanese speakers use far more *donc* than *parce que*, while *parce que*, being multi functional for Swedish speakers, is thus very frequent in their French L2 productions). *Parce que* follows a developmental scale: temporal before causal use.

Utterances are reorganized once verbal inflection emerges. The negator is used after the linking verb '*être*', auxiliaries and modal semi-auxiliaries –the first verbs to show subject-verb agreement and tense. Scope particles and temporal adverbs are freed from their original positions set by the topic-focus organization. The first relative pronoun has a unique form, which varies between *que* and *qui*.

Other junctors include *quand* (when) to express simultaneity, *pour* (in order to) followed by a non finite clause, *si* (if), *comme* (as). With the emergence of the complementizer *que* (that), learners start using indirect instead of direct speech, but most often verb forms in the reporting and reported clauses are in present forms. Past tense forms are first used only in direct reported speech. *Que*

appears at different periods in learner varieties, depending on the proximity between their L1 and French – much earlier when L1 is a Western European language than when it is a dialect of Arabic for example.

When learners acquire French in institutional settings, subordinators appear earlier in their written than in their oral variety. With further development of their variety learners use more mono clausal and bi-clausal utterances than their native counterparts. This result is linked to the absence of hyponyms in their repertoires, which combine several lexical traits, hence the need to add information in a subordinate clause.

2.2 General developmental scales in French as a second language

A summary of the results in L2 acquisition research for French shows that grammatical development in domains such as noun and verb phrases or syntax is quite independent from one another, even though acquiring one feature in one domain may trigger modification in others.

Auxiliaries and modals are the first to mark agreement with subjects. Subject-verb (S-V) agreement takes place at the time when all conjoint pronouns are used instead of disjoint ones. The preverbal position is no longer used for the topic but from then on for the subject. S-V agreement is the first step towards full inflectional verbs. Another key moment is when complementizers are no longer left implicit.

Little more could be said about more general developmental scales in French L2 besides what has been said by many researchers (see for example von Stutterheim, 2003) at the other end of the acquisition process: once all grammatical means have been acquired and used accordingly at sentence level, the last step is to discover specific underlying principles to build discourse.

3 Data and Method

This study is based on the productions from forty learners of French whose proficiency level was assessed using a standard graded test (see below a more detailed description of the test) designed to provide results according to the six levels (from A1 to C2) on the competency scale defined by the Council of Europe.

Twenty of these written productions have been rated at B1 level; they were produced by test takers who have also been rated at the same level through psychometric calibrated tasks. The other twenty written productions have been rated at B2 level and these twenty test takers have also been rated at B2 through the same psychometric tasks.

The rationale is twofold. According to the CEFR's scale of grammatical competence, the grammaticalization process takes place at B1/B2 levels. A learner at B1 is said to *communicate with reasonable accuracy* while a learner at B2 has *good grammatical control*. Conversely, what is said for a learner at A2 is that he/she *Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes – for example tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what he/she is trying to say.* The basic variety is characterized by the absence of finiteness and utterances are organized in terms

of topic and focus components in that order. Beyond the basic variety, the learner variety includes grammatical elements. Thus, we decided to concentrate our study on the independent language user and two levels: the threshold (B1) and the vantage (B2) levels.

Moreover, test takers all over the world, taking a test in French, either to enter a French university or for professional reasons, are usually assessed at both levels, B1 and B2. Fewer obtain C1 in the four skills. It was then easier to get texts produced by test takers from very different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In addition, choosing informants who were assessed at the same level independently of the type of tasks (comprehension and production, oral and written, explicit knowledge of L2 structures) ensures that there is no bias of the test against some particular groups of test takers.

3.1 The Test (Test de Connaissance du Français, TCF

The test that was used is developed and run by the CIEP (Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques), member of ALTE (http://www.ciep.fr/en/tcf/presenta.php). This same institution is also responsible for the administrative and pedagogic management of national certificates of proficiency in French as a foreign language (DELF Diplôme d'études de langue française, DALF, diplôme d'approfondissement de langue française). The TCF is standardized to rank test-takers according to levels defined by the Common European Framework. It is designed to both assess everyday language proficiency and academic skills (see the first three versus the last two questions in Appendix 1).

The TCF is twofold: one compulsory part with psychometric reliability, designed to provide a precise statistical grading of proficiency and a benchmark of candidates' abilities using the six-level proficiency of the Council of Europe, irrespective of the session attended or the test version applied. It tests three skills: listening comprehension (30 items), reading comprehension (30 items) and use of language structures (20 items).

The optional sections of the test: a written production which lasts no longer than 1h 45min and a 15 minutes oral production, are double rated by a trained team of regular graders using the same grading scale. In both oral and written productions, test takers are asked to answer six different questions; each question defines a task linked to a level in the European framework (see Appendix 1).

The criteria used to evaluate the levels in these optional sections are various: has followed received instructions; in tune with the register, the reader or the task; connected ideas and consistency exhibited in the views expressed; lexical and morphosyntactic criteria. They are applied differently depending on the task: from a ratio of pragmatic versus linguistic skills of 0.7 in the first two to 1.25 in the last two. Out of a total score of 120 points:

- 58 points, i. e. 48.4 %, refer to "pragmatic" ability (compliance with test instructions, adequacy, risk taking, discourse building),
- 36 points, i. e. 30 %, refer to the command of the target language (TL) lexicon and spelling,
- 26 points, i. e. 21.6 %, refer to morphosyntactic proficiency in TL.

Morphosyntactic accuracy is not considered the major component of TL proficiency that needs be assessed.

3.2 Informants

The test takers who produced these answers have taken the test in various centers all over the world. For those whose productions have been rated at B1, their L1s range from Romance (Mexican Spanish (3) and Brazilian Portuguese (2)), Norwegian (1), Greek (4), Slavic (Russian (2), Bulgarian (1)) to Asian (Japanese (1), Hong Kong Chinese (2) & Taiwan Chinese (4)).

The other twenty, whose productions have been rated at B2 level on both written and psychometric parts, display a similar variety in L1: German (1), Norwegian (1), Greek (5), Slavic (Russian (3), Polish (3)), Lithuanian (1), and Asian (Japanese (1) Chinese (1) Taiwan Chinese (4))

3.3 Procedure

In order to find grammatical features typical of a CEFR level, a systematic comparison has been made between written productions at B1 and B2 levels, looking for features found in both, whether target like or erroneous, and features that are found only in B2 level (both target and non target like). In both cases, grammatical features related to Noun Phrases and Verb Phrases (from now on NPs and VPs) are specifically emphasized. Considering NPs, VPs and syntax are the fields which have been most researched in French L2 acquisition has been done (Véronique et al, 2009), some developmental scales could be used to assess the written productions.

We started with the productions assessed at B1 level, listing the grammatical features found, idiosyncratic or not (emergence criterion). The second criteria to analyze these twenty productions assessed at B1 is accuracy: what errors and how often? Then we analyzed the productions assessed at B2, using the same criteria: emergence and accuracy. At the end, we compared the results obtained for each group and attempted to find morphosyntactic criteria that would help define a linguistic profile for each level: B1 and B2.

Before looking at specific features in the testees' productions, it is important to say that the two groups of texts elicited differ in length. At the B1 level, the average number of words is 620 with a standard deviation of 188 while in the second set of data the average is 754 with a standard deviation of 153. The results indicate that the first group is a bit more heterogeneous than the second.

To make the findings comparable despite the difference in length between the forty scripts, numbers given are proportional to text length. The number of

erroneous occurrences is calculated per 1,000 words. The average of the results is calculated separately for B1 and B2 texts.

However, we are aware that most studies reported in the extensive survey done by Véronique & al (2009) were based on oral data. In order to check that the results of the comparison were not due to the fact that developmental scales were obtained from oral data, and thus not applicable to our written data, we decided to parse the forty written productions at both levels through an automatic analyzer, Direkt Profil, designed on the basis of acquisition research done at the University of Lund (Granfeldt, Nugues, Persson, Persson, Kostanidov, Ågren, Schlyter 2005, 2006; Granfeldt & Nugues, 2007). The program parses written texts to *identify, annotate, quantify and display the specific linguistic construction connected to a development over time in foreign language French* (Granfeldt & al, 2006). Descriptors used are provided by Bartning & Schlyter (2004), who posit 6 stages and give for each stage grammatical features they deem acquired (see a summary in Appendix 2). It represents the results of extensive coding of written productions of Swedish learners of French. The criteria used by the program are linguistic: lexical with word frequency, morphosyntactic including finiteness, subject-verb agreement, and average sentence length. The three machine-learning algorithms used in Direkt Profil are: the ID3/C4.5 algorithm, support vector machines (SVM) and logistic model trees (LMT) (Granfeldt & Nugues, 2007). Each classifier used 142 attributes and was trained on 317 written texts, many of the attributes being the ones we used to analyze our forty texts, such as Subject-Verb agreement, Determiner-Noun agreement in number and gender. According to Granfeldt & Nugues (2007), the two best performing algorithms are SVM and LMT.

4   Results

4.1 Composition and Structure of Noun Phrases and Verb Phrases of testees assessed at B1

4.1.1 Noun Phrases (NPs)

The B1 group uses various grammatical markers: articles (definite/indefinite), demonstratives, possessives under all forms, singular/plural and masculine/feminine. Determiners such as *chaque* (each/every) *or tout/s/e/es* (all) are distributed evenly across collected texts at this level. Articles appear under a contracted form when preceded by prepositions *à* or *de*.

Errors on gender are very frequent. In analyzing the errors, some transfer from L1 can be observed. For example, Romance language speakers are influenced by morphophonological features of L1 elements close to L2 equivalents.

1) c'est que mon passeporte a **une** problème avec **mon** foto (Mexican)
   (it is that my passport has a (wrong feminine) problem with my (wrong masculine) picture)

In every excerpt from testees' productions, every error is highlighted using bold style as in example 1. When the writer struck through a word or a couple of words we left it into the excerpts.

Overall, errors on number are not as frequent as errors on gender, but speakers of Chinese tend to mark number on the definite article only:

2) les cinq femme-**ø** dans ce tableau ~~sont~~ me semblent danser en face de moi …
pour alarmer les personne-**ø** qui sont en train de fumer (Chinese)
(the five woman in this painting seem to dance in front of me … to alert the person (wrong singular) who is smoking)

From now on, absence of explicit features will be marked with Ø in bold.

However, many errors in number show a trait found in many native speakers' texts, which is that, once there is an indication of number on the article or on a lexical element (such as a numeral see cinq in example 2), then the head noun is not marked, as it is the case in spoken French

3) Bien que il y ait le pillage de la planète il y a aussi pléthore de solution-**ø** (Greek)
(Even though there is the plunder of the planet there is too a huge amount of solution (wrong singular))

Absence of explicit determiners (also called use of zero articles, symbolized with Ø in excerpts) is found in all testees' productions even though there are some slight differences across L1 groups.

4) Les femmes en Bulgarie sont avec **Ø** characters très ford. (Bulgarian)
(The women in Bulgaria are with characters very strong)

Considering the spelling one may hypothesize the influence of English L2, which reinforces the use of zero articles with plural nouns.

Very few errors, either of morphology or of placement, are found on object pronouns. Some are using 'y' even though it is difficult to know if it is a prefabricated sequence or not on the basis of one text:

5) Je préfère le premier ; c'est le festival de films à Cannes. Et, d'abord, je choisirais cet événement parce que, à mon avis, c'est le plus intéressant. Dans un premier temps, j'aime beaucoup le cinema. J'y vais souvent et je préfère les films étrangers (Greek)
(I prefer the first; it is the Cannes film festival. And, firstly, I would choose this event, because, according to me, it is the most interesting. First, I like movies a lot. I often go there and I prefer foreign movies)

The most frequent errors (number, gender and zero article) cannot be considered specific to this level since the intra group variability is high (see Table 1). It cannot be linked to the testees' L1 either. For example, looking at the 4 Greek testees, one made no errors on number while one made 19, the other two having made 3 and 4 mistakes. Similarly, two Taiwanese testees each use two erroneous

bare NPs, a third one used three and the last one used fourteen. The same can be said of almost all features discussed above.

4.1.2 Verb Phrases (VPs)

In all texts the simple present paradigm is used overwhelmingly. It has to be related to the type of task, which is mostly giving personal opinion (see Appendix 1, exercises 4, 5 & 6). Other paradigms, such as 'passé composé' (examples 15, 16) and 'futur morphologique' (examples 11, 15), are also found in all texts. Most subjunctives, when they are used, are with 'être' and 'avoir'.

Subject-Verb agreement seems to be a major source of error.

> 6) Mais **c'est ne pas** tard. On **devons faire Ø** œuvres qui aide à éliminer ou producire moins déchets. (Mexican)
> (But it is not (wrong placement of ne) late. One must (1ˢᵗ person plural) do work which help to eliminate or produce less waste)

> 7) …tous les information**-ø** dans le monde qu'on peux savoir (Taiwanese).
> (all (wrong gender) the information (wrong number) in the world that one can (2rd person singular) know)

Even though some might be understood and linked with the use of the supra personal pronoun '*on*' (closely linked to *nous* (=we)) or some expressions such as '*tout le monde*' (= everybody, which often triggers a plural agreement on the verb in both native and non native speakers' texts), in the singular the form chosen is mostly the third person ((8) and (13)).

> 8) Ce lundi j'étai**t** au theatre (Russian)
> (That Monday I was (3rd person singular) at the theatre)

Although negation is correctly marked, the placement of the negator may be erroneous (see ex. 6), more so with complex verb forms (i.e. aux + V, pronominal verbs …, as in ex. 9).

> 9) Généralement, l'habitude veut que les femmes **se n'estiment pas** également dans la société.
> (Usually, the habit is such that women do themselves not (wrong placement of negator) estimate equally in society, meaning do not have faith in themselves as much in society)

The syntax of VP includes the following features: subordination through complementizer *que* as in (9) or (13), gerunds (11) and modal verbs followed by the *infinitive* as in (6) or (10):

> 10) Le plus intéressant dans cet événement c'est l'opportunité que les artistes donnent à leur public : quelqu'un qui sache s'exprimer artistiquement peut utiliser l'espace, comme pour faire du malabarisme ou même réciter une poèsie. … C'est, aussi, un des mes loisirs preferés. (Brazilian)

(the most interesting in this event it is the opportunity that the artists give to their audience : somebody who knows how to perform artistically can use space in order to do 'malabraism' or even recite a poem … it is also one of my favorite hobbies)

11) et on passera quelques jours la-bas en buvant les bières si légères comme les nuits norvégiennes d'été (Norwegian)
(and we will spend a couple of days there drinking beers so light as the summer Norwegian nights)

Subordinate clauses with *si* (if) and other conjunctions (*après que, bien que, soit…soit*) and connectors are also found.

12) Lorsque je sais que tu es libre fin juin, j'éspere que tu me rendes visite ! … Si tu viendras, je te propose qu'on va à Bergen à l'ouest du Pays (Norwegian)
(When I know that you are free end of June, I hope that you will pay me a visit! If you will come, I suggest that we go to Bergen in the west of the country)

13) J'espere que tu accepte mon invitation, écrit-moi si tu ne peu**t** pas ! (Greek)
(I hope that you accept (3rd person singular) my invitation, write (3rd person singular) if you can (3rd person singular) not)

Comparisons, when needed due to the topic discussed, are found with the proper structure:

14) Je pense que la voiture est plus pratique que le vélo ou le train (Japanese)
(I think that the car is more practical than the bike or the train)

Use of morphosyntactic means vary as much and maybe more in VPs than in NPs amongst speakers (see Table 2). Texts produced sometimes differ radically: below are excerpts of two testees' answer to exercise 3: You visited a museum, you went to an exhibition, or you saw a play. Tell what you have seen, give your opinion stressing what you liked best (about 80 words)

15) Ce lundi-là j'étai**t** au théâtre. C'était le concert qui s'appellait « Tango », le projet russe-français mais tout de même les chanteurs chantaient Ø toutes les langues sauf Ø français. On me promit que ça sera le ballet, mais c'était plus la pièce. Elle m'a plu beaucoup grace Ø le sujet était très simple. L'action de la pièce se passait dans **une** café près de la gare. La musique était très belle pleine d'energie, de sentiments et de tristesse. Elle était tipiquement française.
Les robes de danseuses étai**t** en soie, elles étaient très légéres et multicolores. **Le** salle **du** théâtre était plein. (Russian)
(That Monday I was (3rd person singular) at the theatre. It was the concert which was named 'tango' the Russian-French project but still the singers sang all the languages except French. One promised (only simple past) me that it will (wrong futur simple) be the ballet, but it was more the

play. It pleased me thank the topic was very simple. The plot of the play took place in a (wrong gender) near the train station. The music was very beautiful full of energy, feelings, sadness. It was typically French. The dresses of the dancers were in silk they were very light and multicolored. The (wrong gender) theatre hall was full.)

16) L'expérience de visiter la musée d'Ors<u>ai</u>s l'année dernière m'a beaucoup plu**s**. Etant **une** des musée-**ø** les plus connu**e**s dans le monde, cette musée qui contient principalement le-**ø** arts réalistes et impressionistes ~~m'a pas~~ ne m'a pas fait déçu. ~~Quand je suis entrée~~ La musée était bien décorée et confortable. La lumière difusée naturellement par le soleil donne une image vivante à l'intérieur. Tout est élégant. Les sculpture-**ø**, les ~~art~~ peintures des périodes différentes sont organisé**ø**s en bon ordre. On peut ressentir facilement le développement **d'Ø** histoire **d'Ø** art en faisant un tour au sein de **la** musée. (Hong Kong)
(The experience to visit the Orsay museum last year has pleased me a lot. Being one (wrong gender) of the most famous museum (wrong number) known (correct agreement in gender) in the world, this (correct agreement in gender) museum which mainly contains the (wrong number) realist and impressionist arts did not make me disappointed. The museum was well adorned and comfortable. The light naturally diffused by the sun gives a lively image inside. Everything is elegant. The sculpture (wrong number) the paintings from different periods are organized (wrong agreement in gender) in good order. One may feel easily the development of history of art by touring the museum (wrong gender)).

The first one is formed with occurrences of almost exclusively the 'imparfait' with two subordinate clauses while the second one is formed with occurrences of the simple present and a couple of 'passé composé' plus one gerund, one participial, two relatives (one full relative and one reduced one), one infinitive.

Such a variety of morphosyntactic means amongst the B1 group could be a trait that will disappear at the next level when learners will all have acquired and mastered all means, at least at sentence level.

4.2 Similarities and differences between nominal, verbal and other syntactic features in B1 and B2 productions

The following text is an answer to the same exercise (You visited a museum, you went to an exhibition, or you saw a play. Tell what you have seen, give your opinion stressing what you liked best (about 80 words) produced by a learner whose proficiency has been assessed at B2

17) Au mois de janvier je suis allée j'ai assisté à une pièce de théâtre. Cette pièce était mise en scène par le théâtre russe 'Lenkom' et elle s'appelait « Tout payé ».
C'était **un** histoi<u>r</u>-**ø** d'un homme qui n'avait pas de famille, mais qui avait beaucoup d'argent. Donc il a décidé de payer à trois gens pour

qu'il-**ø** soient leur : femme, fille et le meilleur ami. La pièce montrait comment cet homme a réalisé cette idée étrange.

Cette pièce m'a plue beaucoup pour deux raisons :

D'abord, les acteurs étaient **géniales**. Je crois que **Ø** tels noms come Yancovski, Sbriniev, et Churikova vont dire quelleque chose. (Lithuanian)

(In the month of January I went I saw a play. This play was directed by the Russian theatre and it was called "Tout Payé". It was a (wrong determiner wrong gender) story of a man who didn't have any family but who had a lot of money. So he decided to pay to three people so that he (wrong number) were their: woman, daughter and the (wrong determiner) best friend. The play showed how this man made this strange idea real. This play has pleased (wrong agreement) me a lot for two reasons: First, the actors were fantastic (wrong gender). I think that such names as Y, S and C are going to say something.)

Both writers, the one assessed at B1 (15) and the other at B2 (17), use mostly the imparfait. Errors in gender and number are found in both. The only difference between the two texts lies in syntax, in the use of noun clauses, relatives and adverbial clauses in (17). However, we have seen that subordination was used at a higher level by the writer of (16) who has been assessed at B1.

4.2.1 Noun Phrases (NPs)

At the B2 level, texts display the same linguistic means found at B1. Lasting errors include errors on gender, number and the use of bare NPs. Table 1 shows the most frequent errors at both levels. The frequency rate of errors decreases from B1 to B2, except when the number is erroneous on the adjective, the reason being that there are more adjectives used at B2 than at B1 (56.52% more). However, the intra group variability is too high at both levels for these features to be significantly related to a group.

Table 1. Comparison between major erroneous structures of Nominal Phrases at B1 and B2 levels

Features/Erroneus structure(s)	B1		B2	
	Average*	Standard deviation	Average*	Standard deviation
Wrong gender on determiner	6.7	3.2	4.3	3.1
Wrong gender on adjective	4.3	2.5	3.8	2.6
Wrong number on head noun	7.7	6.2	2. 7	1.6
Wrong number on adjective	2.3	1.6	3.7	2.7
Zero article	4.7	4.7	3	2.1
Determination/indetermination	3	2.8	2.8	2.1
Wrong pronoun	2.9	1.9	2.5	1.1
Prepositional construction in *de***	2.8	1.5	2.5	1.6

* Averages are calculated from 1000 words

** For example *un histoir **d'**un homme* (example 17) ou *l'action **de** la pièce* (example 16)

Other features, such as complex NPs using quantifiers has emerged at B1 (one occurrence in five different texts) and are used more at B2 (one occurrence in seven different texts and two occurrences in one) but still with an irregular distribution across the group:

18) L'inégalité entre les sexes est **un des ces problèmes** quotidiens (Greek, B1)
(The inequality between the sexes is one of these daily problems)

19) Il y a déjà dix ans que le gouvernement autrichien a décidé de réaliser **un des projets les plus chers qui** ont été jamais proposé par le Ministère de l'éducation (Austrian, B2)
(It has been already ten years that the Austrian government had decided to concretize one of the most expensive projects which have ever been suggested by the Ministry of Education.)

In other words, if the criterion is the emergence of a feature at B2 only, none has been found; if the criterion is mastery of a feature at B2 only, the answer is the same as with emergence.

4.2.2 Verb Phrases (VPs)

Errors on verb forms are still found in both groups, especially in terms of the use of finite and non-finite forms. Subject-Verb agreement is a lagging feature of both groups (with a difference between B1 and B2).
The following Table 2 shows the most frequent errors at both levels.

Table 2. Comparison between erroneous verb forms at B1 and B2 levels

Features	B1		B2	
	Average*	Standard Deviation	Average*	Standard Deviation
Wrong Subject-Verb agreement	4.7	4.2	2.8	1.7
Finite/non finite	3.6	3.5	1.9	0.8
Wrong irregular forms	3.1	1.2	1.9	1.7

* Averages are calculated from 1000 words

Expected errors arise from the confusion of *il est* (it is) with *c'est* (there is) as in (20),

20) il est le nouveau film de Vincent Cassel (it is the new film of Vincent Cassel) (Austrian, B2)

As in B1, occurrences of the purpose clause *pour V infinitif* are found as in (2) and (21):
21) *pour s'occuper à leur carrière (to take care of their career). (Polish, B2)

When the questions asked require comparison, they are marked at both levels, as in (14) and (22):

22) *le foot-ball est une forme d'amusement plus parvenu que ... (Soccer is a form of hobby more parvenu than…). (Austrian, B2)

Looking at both tables, asserting a difference in grammatical proficiency between the B1 group and the B2 group is impossible. Even though some errors are less frequent in average, the intra-group variation is too high to render these differences significant.

4.3 A different comparison of the B1 and B2 productions using Direkt Profil

To verify the results obtained by the analyses described above, we have further analyzed the data by parsing it with Direkt Profil (Granfeldt & al, 2005, 2006) "*designed to establish a learner profile based on the grammatical features of the input text.*" (please add exact quotation source including page number). Below in Table 3 are the results provided by each of the three algorithms: the ID3/C4.5 algorithm, support vector machines (SVM) and logistic model trees (LMT); these algorithms analyse word frequency, morphosyntactic features such as finiteness and subject-verb agreement, and average sentence length (Granfeldt & Nugues, 2007).

Table 3. Assessment of productions rated with the three algorithms of *Direkt Profil*

	Stage 3 (Intermediate)		Stage 4 (Low Advanced)		Stage 6 (High advanced)	
C4.5	3 at B1	1 at B2	7 at B1	9 at B2	10 at B1	10 at B2
SVM	6 at B1	3 at B2	7 at B1	7 at B2	7 at B1	10 at B2
LMT	6 at B1	3 at B2	4 at B1	7 at B2	10 at B1	10 at B2

Half the learners in both B1 and B2 groups are categorized as pertaining to the advanced stage of the high phase with the first and third algorithm. The difference between the two groups shows slightly more in the second algorithm with more advanced stage in B2 (10 out of 20) than in B1 (7 out of 20). The second algorithm shows a more balanced distribution across stages 3 (intermediate phase and stage), 4 (low stage of the advanced phase) and 6 (high stage of the advanced stage) in B1 than in B2 where the high advanced learners are dominant. The text critiquing system was designed based only on narrative texts; this version of the software may thus only bring partial results.

However, to be able to use Direkt Profil to tease apart B1 and B2 groups on a grammatical base would have been possible only if all productions at B1 were assessed at stages inferior to the ones productions at B2 were assessed. What we already observed is that some productions assessed at B1 displayed a grammatical level equivalent to productions assessed at B2. Using Direkt Profil thus confirms the findings reported in the previous section using the developmental scales found in the survey.

4.4 Summary of findings

Using the findings of research in second language acquisition of French, the analysis of the written productions at B1 and at B2 brings the following results: all grammatical means available in written productions at B2 are also found at the B1 level. As for errors, besides those in gender, which remain prominent up to a very advanced level, errors in agreement do not allow us to differentiate written productions at B1 from those at B2 – one may wonder if it is even a criterion to distinguish between written productions of native and non native speakers.

5 Discussion

The questions we raised about the possibility to bring linguistic skills in line with the six levels of proficiency defined in the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for Languages, and, about the potential correspondence between the CEFR scales and developmental scales that have been found in SLA can be summarized with the following one: can we pair communicative skills with linguistic development? This question calls for a definition of profiles typical of each CEFR level.

What this study shows coincides with what has been shown in SLA: once the grammaticalization process has started, the number of factors that influence learners' variety increases (Perdue, 1993). Even if experimental studies show that *passé composé* in French is mostly used to mark foreground and that *imparfait* is first used with stative verbs (see review by Granger, 2009), when the constraints on a task are defined in terms of communication or length, a test taker can choose how to solve the task relatively freely amongst the various grammatical means (see examples 15, 16 and 17), hence the variability observed in both groups.

Another reason for such a blurred frontier between B1 & B2 is probably related to the gradual nature of grammatical development, which implies that no neat separation can be drawn between stages of development. Each level seems to result from a coalescence of mastered features and errors, some more specific to a given stage and some recurring, such as gender and agreement (between Subject and Verb, and between head Noun and its satellites).

The only difference we observed between texts produced at B1 and B2 that may be worth to look at is the length of texts. Even though more heterogeneous in B1, most of the texts at B1 are shorter than those at B2. In writing, it is possible to convey declarative knowledge in order to produce – writers have the time to conceive and encode the message. However, the more declarative knowledge used the more time needed, which is the probable cause of such a difference. The conclusion would be that at B1 all morphosyntactic features have emerged, and that automatization takes place from B1 to B2 and probably further.

This study, but also all those in acquisition of French L2 that have been summed up, leads us – like many other researchers – to question the hypothesis that language development is a sequence of stages. The observation rather

points to a continuum in linguistic development with some differences in rhythm at certain points and no clear cut-up plateau.

As early as 1998, Nunan summed up what seems obvious from studies in SLA:

> Learners do not acquire language in the step-by-step, building block fashion suggested by the linear model. It is simply not the case that language learners acquire target items perfectly, one at a time. Accuracy does not increase in a linear fashion, from 20% to 40% to 100%; at times, it actually decreases. It appears that, rather than being isolated bricks, the various elements of language interact with, and are affected by, other elements to which they are closely related in a functional sense. This interrelationship accounts for the fact that a learner's mastery of a particular language item is unstable, appearing to increase and decrease at different times during the learning process.

From the curve used to represent U-shaped behavior defined by Sharwood-Smith and Kellerman (1989), research is now offering the mathematical representation of a sinusoid.

Attempting to pair communicative skills with linguistic development suggests that communicative skills improve with the development of linguistic means. Looking at the division of grades to assess the level of proficiency of the productions, half of the 120 points refers to pragmatic ability such as compliance with text instructions. As is explicitly said in the CEFR (2001:101), it should be recognized that compliance with text instructions is relatively independent of specific linguistic skills.

In order to carry out the tasks and activities required to deal with the communicative situations in which they are involved, users and learners draw upon a number of competences developed in the course of their previous experience.

In terms of CEFR levels, one may wonder if the broad distinction into (language) users (basic user divided into A1 and A2 levels, independent user into B1 and B2 levels, proficient user into C1 and C2 levels, CEFR, 2001:23) is not easier to operationalize in relation to linguistic development than the finer distinction in levels. As the threshold label indicates, B1 and B2 are characterized by grammaticalization at the utterance level. Looking at French L2 acquisition, few errors are persistent up to the B2 level, such as gender, subject-verb agreement and noun-satellites agreement. The first one is a trait that many L2 learners of French find difficult to acquire since it requires annotating the lexicon and errors are still found beyond the B2 level. The last two are features that are not really characteristic of L2 learners (many students whose L1s include French make the same errors).

Does it mean that the task pursued in SLATE is meaningless because the answers to the questions raised are not straightforward? Frequent referencing to the CEFR has urged basic SLA researchers to, on the one hand, fine tune their studies and, on the other, summarize all the findings to eventually discover correlations between developments in microsystems (Py, 1980) under study. Moreover it brought what Ellis (2009) called for, which is to bridge the divide between theory and practice, to rebuild the SLA/Language Pedagogy (LP) nexus with mixed research groups.

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Appendix 1: Sample writing exercises of the TCF (Test de Connaissance du Français)

Exercise 1: Draft a simple, informal message of around 40 words in length, or fill out a form.

Exercise 2: Write a personal letter on a routine subject of approximately 60 words in length. (Tests command of informal and familiar language registers).

Exercise 3: Write a summary of an experience or an event of approximately 80 words in length.

Exercise 4: Outline in writing (approximately 100 words) your personal opinion or emotions on a subject.

Exercise 5: Present and argue a case based on an input text discussing a social issue in a written piece of 100 to 125 words in length.

Exercise 6: Draft a summary of a text or document of approximately 100 words in length.

Appendix 2: Bartning & Schlyter developmental scale (Hancock & Sanell, 2009)

		Description
Initial phase	Initial stage (Stage 1)	It consists of nominal utterance structure, bare nouns but also some determiners, non-finite verbs forms (*je faire*) but also some finite and formulaic utterances such as *je voudrais, je m'appelle*.
	Post initial stage (Stage 2)	It contains polyfunctional 'base' forms (the present for past etc), some inflexion on verbs and adjectives, and the emergence of some subordination (*parce que*). The *imparfait* of *être*, *avoir* appears as well as the opposition 1st/2nd person on verbs of present but not yet the forms *nous V-ons*.
Intermediate Phase and stage (Stage 3)		Production becomes more systematic and regular. It contains present tense, le *passé composé* and the future, mostly periphrastic future. The non-finite form *je donnE* still subsists although it is less frequent. Subordinate clauses (causal, relative, interrogative and temporal) develop further.
Advanced phase	Low stage (Stage 4)	Non-finite forms disappear except some *je *lire*, *je *rire*, the use of the *conditionnel*, the *plus-que-parfait* and the subjunctive emerge. These more complex forms still appear in mainly non-complex syntax. There is also a significant overuse of *mais* and *parce que* (Hancock, 2000).
	Medium stage (Stage 5)	Inflectional morphology becomes functional. There is a productive use of *conditionnel, plus-que-parfait* and the subjunctive (Bartning, 2009). Nominal morphology still causes some problem. There is elaborate macro-syntactic use of *parce que* in complex utterances (Hancock, 2000) and an increase of multi-propositional subordination.
	High stage (Stage 6)	It contains the stabilising of inflectional morphology even in multi-propositional utterances and productive use of the subjunctive (Bartning, 2009). There is native use of the connectors *enfin* and *donc* (Hancock, 2000), of relative clauses and of causal connectors and clauses.