Anglophone boys using *BonPatronPro* to engage in and improve French writing

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Abstract

This action research project investigated the engagement and achievement in the writing of senior level English-speaking boys as they used the web-based grammar and spell checker the *BonPatronPro* to correct their French compositions. Changes in linguistic accuracy (achievement) were found among boys who wrote at least six compositions, who verified their work (engagement) more than 40 times and who were engaged in the follow-up activity of reflecting upon their work.

Introduction

As a secondary school teacher of Core French in an Ontario private boys’ school following the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program\(^1\), I have witnessed first-hand successes boys can have with learning French as a second language, which runs counter the myth that boys are poor language learners. Despite those successes, one of the areas of improvement is in the boys’ writing. The purpose of this study is to introduce an online editing tool called the *BonPatron* (BP) and determine its effectiveness in helping students improve their writing.

For the writing component of the language course, students produce 250-word compositions serving various communicative purposes. Linguistic accuracy counts for one-third of the overall written mark, with the other two-thirds allotted to discursive and organizational aspects. It has been my experience that in the first year of the IB program, my students’ writing improves in task appropriateness, idea development, and clarity of message. However, I have found that language accuracy improves only minimally. Marking often feels like déjà vu, correcting the same grammatical errors across compositions. Reports from examiners who have externally graded our students’ final papers also cite grammatical inaccuracies as a shortcoming.

A second challenge for me has been in providing timely feedback. These compositions are time consuming for the students to write and also for me to mark, and consequently, I must limit their number despite knowing the importance of frequent practice and feedback in developing skills. Furthermore, because I mark them as summative pieces students consequently associate writing in French with being evaluated, rather than as a process for becoming better writers. Upon receiving marked compositions, many students look at the marks without reading my comments, leaving me feeling that my time was wasted. For these reasons, I turned to an online grammar and spell checker as alternative means of feedback for students. The *BonPatronPro* program was developed as a pedagogical writing tool for detecting Anglicisms and common

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\(^1\) a two-year rigorous pre-university course of study. All students are expected to graduate with second language credit. At the end of the two years the students’ skills and knowledge are assessed through standardized exams marked by the IBO. See [www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org) for additional information.
morpho-syntactic errors of English-speaking French language students (Burston, 2008). The feedback is generated through a feedback feature designed as an information box. When the cursor hovers over a particular error, an information box appears, providing feedback. The student then reads the explanation given, looks at the example provided, and decides how to make the correction. Once verified, the BP generates an error summary with subcategories (e.g. word order, word choice, and subject-verb agreement). Verified texts are archived for access at a later date. In addition, grammatical exercises associated with their errors are suggested for practicing the problematic concept. More than a simple grammar and spell checker, the program provides guidance to students so that they can reflect upon their errors, edit their own work and ultimately build knowledge. However, due to its reliance on metalinguistic explanations, it has been found to be most appropriate with high proficiency language learners (Burston, 2008; van Compernolle, 2010).

The overarching question for this action research project was: How does using the web-based grammar and spell check program BonPatronPro to edit French compositions enhance senior level boys' engagement and achievement? Svalberg (2009) offers an operational definition of engagement that includes behavioural, affective and cognitive aspects to frame the construct (see Figure 1).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{expanded_definition_of_engagement.png}
\caption{Screen shot of Svalberg’s (2009) definition of ‘Engagement’ (p. 447)}
\end{figure}

For this research I am defining achievement as the construction of knowledge demonstrated by a shift in the interlanguage of the learner. I wanted to see if the program would assist my student in better understanding the type of errors they make and how to correct them. Interlanguage can be defined as an intermediate linguistic system where learners make approximations about the language (Selinker, 1972). Research has shown that as second language learners engage cognitively, affectively and socially with the language, their interlanguage shifts toward becoming more proficient and I wanted to see if the use of this tool would assist in this process.

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**Literature review**

I decided to use BP mainly because I found that reviews from students, teachers and professors have described BP as an easy-to-use tool able to detect, analyze and explain errors while providing immediate feedback (Medynski, 2006; Burston, 2008; Hamel, 2008; Ambrosio, 2009; van Componolle, 2010; Green, 2010; O’Reagan et al., 2010). It detects 88% of errors (Burston, 2008) and students have described it as more useful than Microsoft Word (Hamel, 2008). Furthermore, Nadasdi and Sinclair (2007) found it to be just as effective as teacher corrections with the advantage of providing real-time immediate feedback. In their study, it took the computer under one minute to correct 30 250-word compositions, compared to over two hours by a teacher.

Funded by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Department of Canadian Heritage (Medynski, 2006), the BP program was developed by professors Stephan Sinclair (McMaster University) and Terry Nadasdi (University of Alberta), who have taught FSL and conduct research in technology in the classroom. A large part of the success of the program is that it uses the texts verified by its users to update the algorithms for detecting errors. Hence, the program’s accuracy and effectiveness is consistently refined (Burston, 2008; Medynski, 2006) making it a highly credible tool.

Fundamentally, the BP program assists writers first by isolating errors and then by providing corrective feedback. Errors are fundamental in all human learning (Brown, 1994) and they benefit second language (SL) by pointing out what is ungrammatical (Ellis, 1994, 2008) by letting “the learner know that a particular form is not acceptable according to target language norms” (Mitchell and Myles, 1998, p.16). They also play a crucial role in gauging language acquisition. In effect, errors are “direct manifestations of a system within which a learner is operating at the time … reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner” (Brown, 1994, p. 205).

**BP** also provides corrective feedback. In general it provides indirect feedback, particularly indirect metalinguistic feedback. In indirect feedback a simple underline or an error code such as *v.conj* (indicating a need to conjugate the verb correctly) serves as a clue, leaving the correction up to the student (Chandler, 2003; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Ellis, 2008). Explicit metalinguistic feedback permits the learner to reflect and analyze the language (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992). Furthermore, when the error was highlighted and accompanied by an explanation, the participants “showed the most learner uptake for feedback” (Heift, 2004). For advanced language learners, indirect feedback may benefit long-term retention because learners reflect on the language, making them metalinguistically aware (Yeh & Lo, 2009; Bitchener, 2008) and developing “self-repair” skills (Loewen & Nabei, 2007). It also challenges their existing interlanguage and promotes explicit knowledge of the language.

**Research Methods**

This study took place at a Canadian secondary school, with 11 students in their first year of the IB program. My class of 17 students consisted of 16-17 year old boys from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Most had followed the Academic stream of the compulsory Grade 9-11 Ontario Core French Curriculum. Four of the students came from the enriched stream. These students spoke with fluency and had a vast vocabulary base, however, their writing often mirrored oral speech, exposing a number of grammatical
errors. The rest of the students came from the Core French class and generally had a better sense of the grammar rules, but the language came less easily to them, and some expressed insecurities about their French. In late September, I explained my intention to conduct this action research project and received written permission from participants and their parents.

Spanning from late September to late March, the students wrote a total of eight compositions. All of the compositions, except for the summative ones, were assigned as homework. The compositions reflected the types of writing (argumentative text in a formal letter, narrative in a personal diary entry and summarizing in a personal letter), topics/functions (such as expressing opinions, feelings, one’s point of view, agreement and disagreement, certainty/doubt) and literature covered in the curriculum. They handwrote three of the compositions typed the rest. Two of the handwritten compositions were summative evaluations, marked using the IB scoring rubric. After handing the summative compositions back, the students typed them up and edited their work using BP.

Once students verified their compositions, BP gave them four types of feedback: grammar to modify, grammar to verify, spelling to modify and spelling to verify (see Error! Reference source not found. for an example). It was up to the students to edit their work and re-verify it until the program no longer identified errors.

![Figure 2: Example of feedback generated by BonPatron (based on sample text provided by program)](image-url)

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The students took a screen shot of their first draft error summaries (see Error! Reference source not found. for an example), which outlined their errors and gave quantitative information (the number of words written and a BP mark calculated using a formula where 4% is removed for every error within a sequence of 100 words (Nadasdi, 2011). After analysing the error summary, they wrote a reflection about their errors.

![Error! Reference source not found.]

Figure 3: Example of summary of errors generated by BP (based on sample in Error! Reference source not found.)

The final data I collected was a questionnaire eliciting information about students’ behaviour, attitudes and opinions regarding their experiences with the program. Two Likert-scale questions assessed the degree of agreement to statements about the usefulness and features of the program. Another two sections assessed how frequently they used the additional features such as grammar exercises and archived texts. The rest consisted of open-ended questions about their experiences with the program.
Table 1: Summary of Data Collected

I analyzed the data by reading over the compositions, error logs, reflections and questionnaire results in two different ways. First, I looked for trends in all four data sets across students by reading all of the compositions at once, then all the error logs, followed by all of the student reflections and questionnaire results. Then, I read over the four data sources for each student, looking for student-specific patterns. By noting recurring patterns, ways of thinking, words and phrases in the error summaries, reflections and survey responses, I developed coding categories to aid in sorting the descriptive data I collected (as suggested by Bogdan & Binklen, 2003). The codes later served as units of analysis to examine the data from a qualitative perspective.

In addition, I conducted an error analysis (Brown, 1994) for each participant. I read over each participant’s error logs, comparing the types of errors made within the subcategories, each time looking for errors that subsided over time. I did the same with the compositions and reflections. I then compared the error analyses with data from other data sets. For example, after reading the grammar points mentioned in the student reflections, I went back to the error logs and compositions to see whether those errors decreased in subsequent compositions. Finally, I carried out a separate error analysis comparing the data related to the two summative evaluations.

Quantitative data analysis was possible by using data from the error logs, the reflections and the questionnaire. The error summaries provided an overall BP mark in percentage, the number of words written, the number of errors, the date verified and the number of times verified. I counted the number of errors related to the subcategories of the BP error logs (spelling, agreement, word order, word form, word choice and punctuation). I also recorded the number of reflections made, the number of words for each reflection and the average number of words per reflection. After entering all the data into the spreadsheet, I calculated sums and averages.

Finally, for the questionnaire results, I copied the students’ answers in a table, recording the answers in a separate column. I transformed the response rates into
percentages. I then looked for patterns in the results and compared those results to other data sources.

Results

I first examined the compositions, error summaries, reflections and questionnaires across participants looking for generalized findings within the group. Of the eleven students who participated in the study, six of them completed all the compositions and verified them using the BP program. Of the five who did not complete all of them, three missed only one, one missed two and another one only wrote four. In addition to the assigned compositions, three students used the program to verify a supplementary composition and notes for an oral presentation.

In terms of the types of errors, 50% were related to punctuation, 16% to word form, 13% to agreement, 12% to spelling, 7% to word choice and only 2% to word order. Although punctuation and spelling were frequent errors, in terms of the quality of the language they were of minor importance in comparison to glaring errors of agreement, word form, choice and order.

There was a substantial variation in student reflections. One student wrote 716 words for five reflections, whereas another completed none. The students reflected on grammar points, made evaluative statements and, to a smaller degree, comments about discursive and lexical features discussed in class. Many students referred to specific grammar points such as subject-verb agreement, masculine vs. feminine and the misuse of a comma before the word “et”. Evaluative statements included an awareness of careless mistakes, improvements, or a need to edit work more carefully. In some cases, students set objectives such as practicing more or focusing on verb tenses.

The questionnaire results revealed that the students found using the program to be a positive experience. All students agreed or strongly agreed that the program was easy to use, that the explanations were clear and understandable and that the process of verifying and correcting helped them to learn. Ten out of the eleven students responded that they were more aware of the need to edit work and eight of them felt that the program made them a more careful editor. Furthermore, nine felt that the BP was an important tool for a language class and that their writing improved. The most cited reasons for liking the program were the immediacy of the feedback and the program’s ability to identify errors. All participants wanted to continue using the program next year.

When asked about the features of the program, all of the students agreed that the summary of errors was useful, but about one-third did not use the archived texts or the grammar exercises features, with another third being neutral about their usefulness. As for their practices before and after using the program, the most common included reading the error summaries, writing a reflection and recalling errors made. The least common practices involved practicing the suggested grammar exercises, reviewing the archived texts and reflections to prepare for the next composition. The reasons given by students for not completing the grammar exercises included forgetting, not knowing they were there and, in individual cases, not having time, feeling lazy and seeing them as unnecessary. None offered reasons to explain why they did not review the archived texts.

Despite individual variation across the data sets, three general categories were identified: students who made considerable progress, those who made moderate progress and those who made little progress. The four students who made significant progress had
better $BP\%$ scores on the final summative composition when compared to the earlier summative one and stopped making errors evident in earlier compositions. This group of students wrote more than six writing samples with a total word count of more than 1500 words; verified their compositions over 40 times; completed four to five reflections writing more than 275 words in total and in their reflections, pointed to specific errors and made positive comments about their work and/or statements about elements to improve.

In the mid-range, four students made moderate progress: either their $BP\%$ increased on their final composition or their compositions showed qualitative improvements. Like the boys who made considerable progress in their writing, two of these boys wrote lengthy reflections and verified their work over 40 times. Unlike the first group, these boys struggled with basic grammar and conventions. In contrast, the other two students in this mid-range were fluid writers and wrote more than 1000 words. However, they wrote fewer than 250 words in their reflections and made fewer than 20 verifications in the compositions run through $BP$.

Of the three students who made the least progress, two had gaps in their grammar knowledge and the other was a proficient student from the enriched class. One of the writers only completed two compositions and did not write any of the reflections about his work; his $BP\%$ declined by 10 points. The second student wrote 1685 words over seven compositions and verified his texts 75 times. However, he wrote only one short reflection and his total number of errors was 333, far beyond the average of 133. The third person whose composition writing showed little improvement was one of the strongest students. His compositions had the same errors over and over again. His compositions were short (under 1200 words – much less than those of the other students from the enriched group) and in his reflections (which contained one-fourth of the total words written by those in the first group), only two points were identified - subject-verb agreement issues and a general statement about the “odd auxiliary error”.

**Discussion**

Referring back to Svalberg’s (2009) definition of engagement as a “cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social state and process” (p. 447), students in this study were indeed engaged in the editing process of their written work. The results showed that participants were affectively engaged, demonstrating “positive, purposeful, willing and autonomous” (Svalberg, 2009, p. 447) dispositions to editing their work with the program. Three participants even initiated the interaction by using the program to verify texts outside the scope of the study.

There was also evidence that they were cognitively engaged by focusing their attention during the verification process. All students, except one, re-verified their work until their $BP\%$ mark was at 100%. In this process, the $BP$ program highlighted the error, provided negative feedback to make the error salient. At that point, if they recognized a careless mistake they could correct it without guidance. In other cases, when students were not sure how to correct the error, a “gap” was noticed and they had two options. They could read the metalinguistic feedback and resolve it inductively (challenging their existing linguistic “system”) and/or study the example to make the correction more deductively. Either way, correcting the error required cognitive engagement.
Even though the participants were engaged in the correcting process, this engagement did not automatically translate into achievement, where certain errors made in earlier compositions were no longer visible in subsequent ones. The program, used on its own, may not be enough to cause a shift in interlanguage. To understand this, I analyzed the practices of those students who made the most progress and found that frequency and quantity were two important factors that affected progress. Those who showed the most progress:

- wrote at least six compositions with a word count averaging 250 words per composition;
- verified each composition on an average of seven times;
- wrote at least four reflections with a word count averaging 100 words per reflection and
- in their reflections, noted specific grammar points they had wrong and made plans of intent for future compositions.

A sufficient quantity and frequency of interacting with the language seems necessary. As Ellis (2002) explains, “language acquisition is slow. This skill, like others, takes tens of thousands of hours of practice” (p. 175). By writing frequently and in sufficient quantity, these students externalized elements of their current interlanguage in their compositions on which they received feedback, which increased their opportunities for consciousness raising and noticing. Those students who wrote less denied themselves sufficient practice to engage effectively with their texts.

A third element in determining progress seemed to be related to the thinking about the language, which was revealed in the reflections and questionnaire. As the participants verified and edited their compositions, they became more aware of their careless mistakes, the need to edit work, gaps in grammar and L1-L2 cross-linguistic errors (such as Anglicisms). However, being aware is not always enough to result in improvement. Svalberg (2007) explains that both the level and the quality of awareness of their errors are important factors. In Robinson’s (1995) study, learning was more likely to occur when the learners themselves had arrived at the rule they verbalized than when it had been provided as part of the instruction. The idea of verbalizing underscores the importance of reflecting and talking about the language.

The data showed that those students, who fully completed the editing cycle in BP, improved the most. Students wrote a composition that reflected their language level at that moment in time. They received feedback noticing the gap in their writing and when they wrote in their reflections about those gaps, they were able to generate a change in their subsequent composition. Editing led to change in linguistic accuracy; however when the writer engaged perfunctorily in the cycle or he did not complete some steps in the cycle progress was only moderate.

Data from those students who made little progress also provided insights, but for very different reasons, and in very different ways. One of students had only completed two compositions, which did not give him enough practice. There is a need to clearly communicate the importance of writing resolutely and engaging persistently in all aspects of the writing, editing and reflection process. When this does not happen, an intervention would be necessary. Results from the most proficient student in the class provided additional insights. Although he completed all of the activities, he wrote the bare minimum in his compositions and reflections, so the feedback he received was also
minimal. In addition, his reflections lacked the depth necessary for noticing the gap, thereby compromising his awareness of language errors. This lack of linguistic progress is not uncommon for advanced language learners, whose interlanguage temporarily halts due to the plateau effect (Richards, 2008) - a phenomenon when advanced-level language learners reach a plateau in their development hampering further progress toward a more exact use of the language (Mard-Miettinen, 2006). For him to take his language beyond the plateau he would need to produce and engage more in the process. In future years, I will need to look out for the plateau effect in my strong language learners and ensure that they receive the necessary feedback to promote their language skills and advise them about the risks of complacency.

The final student had written the most, almost 1700 words, and verified his texts 75 times. Dealing with such excessive quantity is time consuming, making it difficult to hone in on specifics. In terms of follow-up, he only completed one short reflection. He explained his discouragement in his questionnaire, “I don’t enjoy writing reflections. I have already experienced it and finished the composition and did not want to write more about what I did wrong”. In retrospect, this student needed guidance in focusing his attention on a few aspects of his interlanguage for feedback to lead to a learning experience. In future lessons, I will need to coach students like him to develop strategies for “selecting out only those stimuli which are important for further processing” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 15). What distinguishes efficient from inefficient learners is indeed “the ability to select relevant from irrelevant information and focus attention on how this can be remembered and used” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 16). By being more aware of this, teachers can guide students to become increasingly efficient in their learning.

Conclusion

I began this action research project outlining the challenges of developing linguistic accuracy in my senior level French students’ composition writing, within the constraints of a busy curriculum and limited classroom time. I introduced the BonPatronPro as a tool for overcoming these limitations and found that it was useful in the editing phase of writing. It provided immediate, personalized feedback for a large number of compositions in a short period of time, which would be impossible for me to do. The participants found it engaging and have expressed the desire to continue using it next year. One notable fact is that some students even decided to use this tool on their own outside the assigned tasks.

The discussion revealed that the process of editing itself does not lead automatically to change in interlanguage development. In terms of classroom implication, the program itself provides adequate feedback to help students edit their work, however merely using the program, as an editing tool, does not seem to automatically lead to a shift in learning. Based on the results of the study, in order to maximize the benefits of using BP, students need to write an adequate quantity for it to be a worthwhile exercise and reflect on their errors.
References


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