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**IMPACTING ON PRACTICE... EXPLORING CURRICULA
AND PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS**

**Grammatical Difficulties in Foreign Language Writing:
The Case of Maltese Learners of French as Target Language**

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Abstract

This study attempts to describe Maltese learners' foreign language (FL) grammatical difficulties within the context of the teaching and learning of the writing skill in French as a Foreign Language (FFL). An in-depth analysis is carried out of a corpus of 120 French essays provided by Year 10 and Year 11 students of FFL (fourteen to sixteen-year old learners) in six Maltese secondary schools. Grammatical errors in seven distinct grammatical categories are counted. Special emphasis is laid on the verb category, which appears to be the most problematic word class. Errors concerning verbs are divided into four further sub-categories according to their type: wrong conjugation, wrong tense, wrong mood, and absence of an obligatory verb. A descriptive analysis of these main difficulties illustrates learners' most frequent errors. An interpretation is attempted of the possible sources of error: although learner motivation issues may partially account for the observed situation, a linguistic explanation can be provided through the fact that grammatical performance lies naturally within learners' interlanguage (Selinker, 1972), based on a structurally intermediate status between the native and the target language. Within this interlanguage, the corpus includes errors seemingly caused by different processes: some patterns are borrowed from the L1, others are extended from the FL itself, and attempts at expressing meanings using already known words and grammar are observed. Questions are asked in relation with main themes concerning the teaching of grammar and writing, involving institutional constraints, the need to adopt improved teaching methods and teacher training, and the washback of the current examination system.

Keywords: grammar errors, application, writing, sources of error

Grammatical errors in learners' written texts

Developing competence in writing is no easy feat, especially in a foreign language (Harris & Mason, 2005; Kurk & Atay, 2007). Grammatical errors are a recurrent phenomenon in foreign language (FL) writing (Bentayeb, 2012; Namukwaya, 2014). The scope of grammar teaching in learners' training for the acquisition of the writing skill has long been a subject of debate by teachers and researchers (Torgerson et al., 2006). Whereas in traditional language teaching, grammar was presented explicitly and massively, in more recent methods, its role is not always well-defined (Manley & Calk, 1997). With the advent of the communicative approach, Canale and Swain (1980) propose a theoretical model in which communicative competence is based on grammatical, sociolinguistic, discursive and strategic competencies. The focus of this study is on learners' grammatical competence, so fundamental in language that if one were to exclude it completely, communication would be restricted to the use of isolated words, sounds and

gestures (Azar, 2007). Since writing is a major tool for communication, grammatical ability is important within the framework of written language competency.

In Malta, the educational sector comprises State Schools, which cater for around 55% of the population, Church Schools (around 33%), and fee-paying Independent Schools (around 12%). Students choose a FL, from among a choice of proposed languages, to study as from their entry into the secondary cycle. French is traditionally the second most chosen language, after Italian, although for a number of reasons, French is rapidly losing ground to other languages (Bezzina, 2016). Students who show lack of advancement in their language acquisition after two years of studying a foreign language may, especially in State Schools, opt to continue their studies following the Subject Proficiency Assessment (SPA) route, which offers the possibility to revise the basics and is geared towards building proficiency in a balanced way across the four sub-skills. The majority of students follow the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) syllabus. Students need to sit for SEC examinations at the end of their secondary education, to obtain a number of passes allowing them to proceed to post-secondary education. SEC language examinations, as well as end-of-year secondary and post-secondary examinations, give a lot of weighting to the written component, and thus to grammatical accuracy. Sammut (2017) explains how in the French SEC examination, 70% of the marks are allotted to components falling within the brackets of writing.

Our experience in the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) locally has made us aware of a substantial level of difficulty encountered by learners at Secondary, Intermediate and even Advanced levels of learning, especially when learners need to produce longer texts calling for more complex written structures (Sammut, 2012; 2017). It seems to be more than just our personal impression that learners are knowledgeable about grammar rules, but that their performance is generally poor when they need to apply these rules in longer writing. In fact, the Examiners' Report (2016) for Paper 2A of the French SEC examination states that candidates' general performance was 'good' or 'satisfactory' in grammar exercises 3 and 4 (respectively requiring matching and fill-in-the-blanks), and that it was 'a pleasure' to note that even the Pluperfect tense was worked out correctly (Chairperson, French SEC Examiners' Panel, 2016, p. 5). The same could not be said of candidates' performance in the writing tasks, in which verb tenses 'presented huge pitfalls' and sentence structure 'proved to be problematic' (2016, p.4). The report is precisely concluded by the remark that 'Candidates need to understand not only the particular grammar points but also their application so as to strengthen their linguistic performance' (2016, p. 5). Examiners' Reports for the MATSEC Advanced French examination, which local candidates sit for at the end of their Sixth Form course, also stress learners' linguistic shortcomings, especially in essay writing. These grammatical difficulties, as well as learners' struggling to develop and organize ideas, whilst transforming them into a legible text, create frustration and a negative attitude in the students towards the practice of writing (Sammut, 2012; 2017).

It is important for students to avoid distortions to their intended message because of their inability to use grammar adequately. However, mistakes are part of a natural process of competence building along the language learning journey. Far from reducing the teaching / learning of a new language to imparting / memorizing grammatical rules, grammar must be treated as a tool for effective communication. The question arises of how much local FL teaching effectively follows the aim of enabling learners to communicate in real-life situations, which are pertinent to the students' likes and needs. In recent years, academic research based on observations of Maltese FFL lessons, with or without recordings, has increased. How far can one attribute to coincidence the fact that researchers observe a vast majority of grammar and comprehension lessons, as

opposed to training for production, both orally and in writing? Teachers themselves confirm this imbalance favouring the teaching of grammar rules (Sammut, 2017).

The notion of error in FL learning

One characteristic of errors in the moral domain is that they are involuntarily committed, whereas mistakes are produced in a state of awareness of the infraction (Messina Ethé & Onana, 2014) and are thus defined as an infringement of a rule or a principle (Le Robert-Dixel, 2012). This is in line with Corder (1974), who, from a didactic point of view, proposes that mistakes are non-systematic and appear in the use of the L1, being the results of fatigue, tension or other psychological causes. Errors are, on the other hand, systematic because they appear in the practice of the FL, and are linked to the lesser degree of competence in the target language (TL). Self-correction of mistakes, but not of errors, is thus more possible (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

In the traditional system of language teaching, language was seen as a set of rules and exceptions, so grammar was explicitly taught, focus was on writing and reading, and language errors were systematically sanctioned. The Direct Method, applied as from the end of the 19th century, marked a radical shift, as it strove to make learners acquire a solid practice of the spoken language. However, it still did not tolerate errors and it was expected of learners to avoid them. The spoken language continued to be given preference in the Audio-lingual and Audio-visual approaches of the 1940s up to the 1960s, where learning of structures by imitation and automatic production of morpho-syntactically correct sentences were paramount. In contrast with these rigid impositions, the Communicative Approach developed as from the 1970s targets learners' communicative needs, whilst providing for an improvement of their linguistic competencies. While the four sub-skills supposedly receive attention and are practised in authentic contexts, errors occurring in any of them are perceived as necessary and as a natural reflection of the state of evolution of the learner's interlanguage (Porquier, 1977). To the nowadays appreciated value of formative assessment corresponds an increased significance of errors as an indication, to teachers and learners alike, of effective progress as well as persisting difficulties. The different sets of beliefs which succeed each other in FL teaching, rather than die out completely, tend to leave traces in teachers' pedagogical practices. This may happen, if for no other reason, because teachers will often have witnessed, in their young age as students, a certain teaching ideology, even though they will subsequently receive training to teach according to another set of methods. It is thus important to understand how errors have been perceived and treated in the different teaching methodologies, because each of these, to a greater or lesser degree, contributes to forge a basis of teaching tradition. Thus, in the Maltese FL scenario, one often speaks about a rather traditional, grammar-based and teacher-dominant approach which still tends to be observed in classrooms (Camilleri Grima & Caruana, 2016; Bezzina, 2017; Sammut, 2017; Bezzina & Gauci, 2018).

Major types of error in target language (TL) writing

Errors related to form can be of a syntactic, lexical, morphological and orthographic nature. Corder (1973) places grammatical errors within four categories: omission, or the absence of an obligatory element, addition of elements unnecessary to the utterance, substitution, or the incorrect use of a morpheme or structure, and word order, when a morpheme or group of morphemes is wrongly placed in an utterance. A distinction also needs to be made between errors, which somehow distort the global message of a text, and minor errors, which do not have a direct effect on the message (Burt, 1975).

Possible causes of errors

It is proposed here that causes of error can be classified into three categories, namely situational,

affective and linguistic. Situational causes refer to the learning context, and may include a bad choice of textbook / teaching method, or an inferior level or style of teaching. Secondly, errors may also be the result of a lack of motivation on the learner's part, leading to negligence, or of insecurity, leading to the learner's reliance on words, phrases or idiomatic expressions known in the L1 or in other previously learned languages, which s/he literally translates. Finally, a linguistic explanation of the occurrence of errors can be provided through the fact that grammatical performance lies naturally within learners' interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). The interlanguage, or intermediate status of language knowledge, follows a process of development leading progressively further from the L1 and closer to the TL. However, in a learner's interlanguage, the partial knowledge of the FL differs from both the native and the target languages, as the learner effects a restructuring of the TL using rules which are connected with the L1 and / or the TL (Koutsoukos, 2002). Within learners' interlanguage, errors can be both interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual errors result from interference of the L1 or other previously known languages, which cause negative transfer of structures, vocabulary, morphology and pronunciation. Intralingual errors are directly connected with the acquisition of the FL, which, as we have said, for a foreign learner would be at an imperfect and provisional state. According to Richards (1971), learners experience overgeneralization (using the wrong form on the basis of other existing forms in the TL), lack of knowledge or rule constraints (applying rules in contexts where they are not applicable), inadequate application of rules (lacking knowledge to apply a structure which has been well learned), and the construction of false systems or concepts (having difficulty to completely understand distinctions within the TL).

Locally, there have been a few studies on the possible sources of errors appearing in the performance of Maltese learners of FFL. Bezzina (1999) provides an analysis of problems in the pronunciation of French specifically by Maltese learners. Skinner (2010) deals with errors in using the *passé composé* (perfect) tense in writing by FFL learners. Morpho-syntactic difficulties, which are our main object here, are the focus of Seychell (1996), and Seychell (2007) deals with interference on the morpho-phonetic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels.

The research design

Several issues were kept in mind when designing the nature of empirical data that needed to be acquired for this study, and data procurement methods. The main problem to be investigated stemmed from the observation that students find difficulty in applying rules in writing despite the observed emphasis on grammar instruction. We thus wanted to examine the grammatical errors made by Maltese learners by analysing their written texts. Therefore 120 participant learners (20 learners from six Maltese secondary schools) were asked to write a short essay totaling between 100 and 150 words, at home. The number of words was kept this low in order not to discourage learners from participating. They were invited to choose one out of four titles, ranging from narrative to descriptive or circumstantial, in keeping with the SEC syllabus corresponding to the writing task. All learners were bilingual (Maltese / English) prior to commencing their learning of French. Two groups of learners came from boys' church schools, two from girls' church schools and two from state schools. The targeted level was A2. The written productions were obtained from Year 10 and Year 11 students. In order to retain as much homogeneity as possible in the level of language mastery, the Year 11 written work was collected between October and November, while the Year 10 work was collected between May and June. It would have been difficult to obtain the required number of works from one year group only, given the naturally voluntary basis for participation.

We notice that students' writings are often riddled with errors pertaining to these seven

grammatical phenomena: noun determiners, nouns, adjectives, verbs, conjunctions, pronouns and prepositions. We retained these categories for our analysis. Data collection was inspired by four related research questions: 1) which grammatical points are found most difficult by Maltese learners after four years of learning French, and at which frequency they appear in their work; 2) whether possible sources of grammatical errors can be identified; 3) which grammatical features are perceived by the learners themselves as being the most difficult to grasp and which problems they identify in writing French; 4) which are the most prominent challenges faced by teachers in relation with the teaching of the written competence. Of these axes of research, the present study focuses solely on questions 1 and 2, bearing upon the concrete corpus data. Questions 3 and 4, which deal with perceptions and personal experiences, are dealt with in another study (Sammut & Bezzina, forthcoming).

The investigation objectives related to research questions 1 and 2 warrant an analysis of descriptive data, which can illustrate grammatical errors present in the written texts.

Error analysis

Each error pertaining to one of the seven grammatical categories retained for this study was manually identified in the 120 learners' written texts, and totals and percentages were calculated. Each error was also placed in a sub-category representing a sub-type of error within the larger grammatical category. It was important to understand each occurrence of error in its context within the written text; thus errors were documented and described in the whole sentence where they appeared. Table 1 shows the different types of errors identified as sub-categories within the grammatical category of verbs (for the other grammatical categories see Sammut, 2017).

Grammatical category	Error type
Verbs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wrong structure or conjugation 2. Absence 3. Wrong choice of verb mood 4. Wrong choice of verb tense

Table 1: The different sub-types of errors within the grammatical category of verbs

4.0 Frequency of errors pertaining to the grammatical categories and sub-types

A total of 1,243 errors classified within the seven categories retained for this study were identified in the learners' texts. Table 2 indicates the extent to which learners find each category problematic in numerical terms. Errors in verbs account for 32.1% of all errors and verbs are thus the most challenging grammatical category for the learners, followed by determiners (28.16%). Errors in prepositions and adjectives are also non-negligible (14.88% and 14.16% respectively). At the other end of the scale, there seems to be better mastery of the use of conjunctions (2.49% of errors) and nouns (2.33%).

Results indicate that within the category of Verbs, the most problematic sub-types of features are verb structure or conjugation (54.14%), followed by the choice of verb mood (24.31%) and of verb tense (12.53%). Absence of necessary verbs accounts for 9.02% of all verb-related errors.

Grammatical category	Frequency of errors (in numbers)	Frequency of errors (in percentages)
Verbs	399	32.1%
Noun determiners	350	28.16%
Prepositions	185	14.88%
Adjectives	176	14.16%
Pronouns	73	5.87%
Conjunctions	31	2.49%
Nouns	29	2.33%
TOTAL	1,243	100%

Table 2: Frequency of errors made in each grammatical category

Descriptive analysis of learners' errors

The qualitative description of errors actually occurring in the corpus will likewise be limited here to the verb category (for a description of all grammatical points retained for the wider study of learners' errors see Sammut, 2017), with its sub-types of wrong conjugation, wrong choice of verb mood or verb tense and verb absence. Within these cases, only a small selection of errors will be shown (for more examples see Sammut 2017), with sentences taken faithfully from the corpus. Therefore, they will also up to a certain point allow a glimpse of other types of difficulties in sentence constituents other than the verb, which however will not be commented on here. A strictly objective and linguistic perspective is adopted in this description.

Wrong structure or conjugation

This sub-category accounts for more than half of all errors regarding verbs. Many students encounter difficulty to conjugate verbs in the present indicative. This may even happen in the most basic, common irregular verbs:

- (1) *Quand je petite, j'aime Paris parce qu'il **sont** une belle ville.
- (2) *Je **sont** très content.
- (3) *Nous **allez** danser et parler avec nos amis.
- (4) *A Gozo vous **peut** allez au la plage.
- (5) *On **allons** visiter 'Azure Window'.

Example (5) shows that the learner hasn't grasped the point that although the third person singular pronoun 'on' may be semantically equivalent to the first person plural 'nous', the verb has to be conjugated to agree with the third person. Errors frequently occur even in the simple, regular verbs of the first group (-er verbs; exs. 6-8). The less common verbs of the -ir and -re groups are on the contrary very rarely used (9).

- (6) *Je **regards** ton letter pour ton vacance à Malte.
- (7) *Je **organisez** un week-end à Gozo au mois de juin.
- (8) *Et ils **aime** beaucoup le été aussi.
- (9) *J'espère tu **répondez!**

Both regular and irregular verbs, in both the simple (10-11) and near future (12-13) tenses seem to be problematic. The near future 'aller (conjugated in the present) + infinitive verb' was at times replaced by a literal translation from English 'to be (go)ing to' (12):

- (10) *Quand vous **êtes** ici, tu **fera** de la plongée, c'est mon passionnée et tu **fera** du shopping avec ton famille à la Sliema.
- (11) *Quand nous **arriver** à Xaghra, nous **allerons** à la maison que à une pictine et c'est devant la plague de Ramla.
- (12) *Nous **sommes aller** a Dwejra pour inspecter 'Azure Window'.
- (13) *Le weekend prochain, nous **avons organizer** un week-end à Gozo au mois de juin.

Conjugation errors become even more frequent when the noun phrase of the sentence is a lexically full subject, not a pronoun. This may be because conjugations are practised with pronouns. A pattern emerges because third person singular forms (14-16) are privileged. Inversely, third person plural forms are also at times used when the subject calls for a third person singular form (17-18).

- (14) *Les touriste **aime** beaucoup les paysage maltais!
- (15) *Les plages de Malte **est** très magnifique.
- (16) *Mon parents et moi **visite** plus restaurants à la matin à l'après-midi et le soir.
- (17) *... il y a beaucoup de plages où toute la famille **peuvent** être contente et relaxée.
- (18) *Paris **ont** un 'heaven' pour le shopping...

The use of the passé composé tense is marked by numerous errors stemming mainly from (i) wrong choices of auxiliary verbs (19-20), (ii) absence of auxiliary verbs (21-22), (iii) wrong forms of the past participle (23-24) and (iv) errors related to agreements of past participles (25-26).

- (19) *Quand nous **avons arrivé** en France, nous sommes allés à l'hôtel.
- (20) *Nous **sommes visités** l'Arc de Triomphe, la Tour Eiffel et le Louvre.
- (21) *Nous **allés** toutes les musées, le Louvre et l'Orsay.
- (22) *Je **dormi** l'avion.
- (23) *J'**ai vois** beaucoup de monuments, musées et j'ai mangé dans beaucoup de restaurants.
- (24) *Nous **avons prendrons** le bout pour Gozo.
- (25) *Quand mes amies **sont partis**, j'ai nettoyé tout la table et je me suis couchée.
- (26) *... nous **sommes resté** dans une maison a la campagne.

Wrong choice of verb mood

Of the 97 errors related to the choice of verb mood, most consisted of the use of an infinitive when a conjugated indicative was necessary (27-28), or vice-versa (29-30).

- (27) *Je **passer** une semaine à Paris.
- (28) *J'espère que cela était bon aide et **répondre** pour plus conceils.
- (29) *Il y a beaucoup de plage a Malte que vous pouvez **visité**.
- (30) *Vous devenez **apportions** vêtements clairs.

Another category of errors concerned the inappropriate use of an attempted past participle instead of verbs conjugated in the indicative:

- (31) *Si tu **préfère** j'irai dans le vacance, c'est un bon idée aussi!
- (32) *Nous partons à Gozo à sept heures de matin et **reterné** à Malte dimance à onze heures de soir.

Whereas the infinitive form should normally follow prepositions in French, the corpus contains several instances where past participle (33), present indicative (34), and attempted simple future (35) forms appear in this context:

- (33) *J'ai beaucoup de Plaisir parce qui était intéressant à **vu**.
- (34) *Moi je suis... fatigué parce que je vient de **retourne** à Malte après une semaine à Paris.
- (35) *Nous payerons Eur30 par personne pour utiliserons la ville et pour **venerons** la nourriture et les boissions.

Although the present subjunctive lies within the local secondary French syllabus, at this level learners cannot be expected to apply it in their writing. The only instance when it was needed was when a learner ventured to use the conjunction *bien que* (although); the subjunctive was substituted here by the indicative:

- (36) *Bien que Malte **est** une petite île, sa population est grande.

Wrong choice of verb tense

Within the category of verb-related errors, 12.53% were wrong choices of tense. This happened mostly when learners chose to answer the two titles where the passé composé was needed as the main narrative tense, but often substituted the passé composé by the present indicative:

- (37) *Le premiere journe nous **visitons** le Tour Effiel.
- (38) *Je **arrive** hier.
- (39) *Je **retourne** à Malte jeudi dernier.

However, the passé composé was also replaced by the imperfect tense (40), the near future (41), and the present conditional (42).

- (40) *Ils me **donnaient** des cadeaux et nous avons commencé notre fête.
- (41) *En samedi nous **allons depenser** un tout jour shopping.
- (42) *J'**achèterais** beaucoup de vêtements.

The imperfect tense, which needs to complement the passé composé (the main past tense) by being used for descriptions, repeated and longer-lasting actions in the past, was also substituted by the present indicative. In example 43, in spite of the simple relation of coordination between the two clauses, the present was used in the second clause even if tense choice was appropriate in the first. In example 44, the imperfect is substituted by the present indicative and later by a past participle which is generally pronounced identically to the imperfect form by Maltese learners as foreign speakers of French.

- (43) *Le climate en France était très frois et il y **a** de neige.
- (44) *Je ne **sais** pas je suis aller parce que le voyage **été** une surprise.

Some learners attempt structures with multiple verb sequences which prove too complex

for them. In example 45, the correct sequence would have been *dire* conjugated in the *passé composé* followed by the conjunction *que*, the third person plural pronoun and the conditional perfect. It needs to be appreciated that the learner took the risk to attempt to express him/herself and that s/he managed to more or less communicate his/her idea. This type of error should not be sanctioned because it goes beyond any expectations of what the features of A2 learners' interlanguage should be like at their learning stage. The same applies for the third verb cluster in example 46: the learner here needed an imperfect followed by an infinitive, which may be expected to be problematic at A2/A2+ level. The complexity of the sentence undertaken by the learner is however remarkable.

- (45) *Ils me **disent auront aller** pour en picnic. (for *Ils m'ont dit qu'ils seraient allés à un pique-nique.*)
- (46) *Je **vais me réveiller** à 7 heures parce que je **serai** trop excité et je **vais devoir** aller à l'hôtel pour se préparer à mon parti. (for *Je me suis réveillé à 7 heures parce que j'étais trop excité et que je devais aller à l'hôtel pour me préparer pour ma fête.*)

Verb absence

Omitting an obligatory verb accounts for only 9% of errors concerning verbs but quite regular patterns emerge in students' difficulties of omission. Simple, single-verb sentences are also effected. Copular verbs are the ones which are most often missing, especially the verb *être*, in both singular and plural forms:

- (47) *Le histoire très intéressante.
- (48) *Les magasins belles.

Omissions become more frequent in complex sentences. This happens in cases of both coordination and subordination. In the second coordinated clauses of examples 49-51, it is semantically full verbs like *vivre*, *voir* and *aller* that are left out, possibly because of a (momentary?) lack of availability of the verbs in the learners' lexical repertoire:

- (49) *Il y a mon première experience en France et je une experience très belle.
- (50) *Je suis allée musées et je des monuments intéressantes.
- (51) *Chaque jour nous mangeons dans une restaurants différents et tout bien.

In the case of clause embedding, the verb is at times absent from the matrix (52) and at other times from the subordinate clause (53, 54). In example 52, the verb appears to be replaced by the preposition *en* within a phrase where the meaning is extremely hard to decipher. In example 53, it seems that the student may be attempting to write the expression containing a verb *c'est*, but ends up substituting it with the demonstrative adjective *ce*. Example 54 is just one illustration of several subordinate clauses in the corpus, opened by the conjunction *parce que* and left without a verb:

- (52) *Je en un bot petit déjeuner qui était crêpes.
- (53) *Elle est un payée petit et la population ce de 500,000 que ce une petite nombre.
- (54) *France a un histoire riche et varié parce que des monuments très special.

It is interesting to note that verbal collocations such as *faire du shopping*, *envoyer un message à quelqu'un* are dissected in such a way that the verb is discarded and the noun is elected to carry out its grammatical role:

- (55) *Nous sommes allés shopping du matin et achetée beaucoup de vêtements.
(56) *Si vous pouvez venir, me message.

Considering that the above are but a small selection of the mistakes pertaining to the verb category taken independently of the other grammatical categories, it is generally observed that the learners' written sentences are riddled with errors that distort the flow of the text and at times prevent its understanding. To address the situation, it becomes important to attempt to interpret these results, especially in light of their potential causes and linguistic sources.

Significance of the study's results

An evaluation is attempted here of the observations emanating from the research questions' investigation. It aims to establish some degree of comparison between these results obtained in the local scene and conclusions of similar investigations conducted in other formal FFL learning contexts.

Frequency of errors in the seven main grammatical categories

The above basic statistical calculations and descriptive analysis of errors indicate two realities: firstly, the high number of grammatical difficulties in Maltese FFL learners' writing, and secondly, the existence in the educational system of factors which must be contributing to learners' lack of a better mastery of the written competence. The reasons for this second cause of concern will mainly be tackled in a different study targeting learners' and teachers' views related to the observed situation (Sammut & Bezzina, forthcoming). The focus is here on the frequency of errors attested in learners' written production. Thus, the first hypothesis expecting difficulties in applying grammatical rules in communicative situations spanning beyond the small-scale grammar exercises is not only corroborated, but surpassed, as it is observed that many errors produced after four years of learning of the FL are related to the most fundamental grammatical concepts, covered in the first two years of exposure to the language. The extent of the problem is surprising, considering that it is observed by the research and confirmed by the teachers themselves (Sammut, 2017) that grammar tends to locally be the main focus of FFL teaching.

This confirms Macaro and Masterman, (2006) in that electing grammar as a privileged component of language teaching does not necessarily imply a better mastery of the writing skill.

Another conclusion in relation to the first research question is the classification of the seven main categories of grammatical difficulties in order of frequency. It was expected that verbs would be the most problematic category (here accounting for 32.1% of all errors), confirming the high frequency of verb-related errors in FFL learning in studies conducted in Turkey (Delen Karaağaç, 2012), Sudan (Mohamed and Mohamed, 2013) and Uganda (Namukwaya, 2014). However, the extent of learners' difficulty in handling determiners (28.16%) was a surprising observation. In fact, Cardell (2013) finds that the majority of Swedish FFL learners show mastery of determiners and use number and gender forms appropriately. Nonetheless, Morana (2006), Darne (2011) and Gonac'h and Mortament (2011), respectively working on the Maltese, Polish and Afghan contexts, do remark that their learners are often in difficulty when confronted with the need to choose the correct noun determiner.

It was expected that difficulties in using prepositions (14.88%) and adjectives (14.16%) would be less frequent than in verbs, although perhaps not that errors in each of these categories would be less than half as common as for verbs. The low score obtained for problems with pronouns (5.87%) is probably attributable to a rather rare use of object pronouns than to actual mastery of

the grammatical category. In our practice we actually observe that confusion of direct and indirect object pronouns, as well as incorrect placing of the object pronoun in the case of compound verb tenses, tend to persist at much higher levels of learning. Whilst it was somewhat expected that difficulties with conjunctions and nouns would be lower than for the other categories, the very low degrees of difficulty obtained in these two cases (2.49% and 2.33% respectively) is interpreted as a positive result.

Possible sources of error

In response to our second research focus, which questioned whether errors could be traced back to possible sources, it can be said that while most errors seem to be attributable to the learner's interlanguage stage of TL learning, some of them appear to be the result of inappropriate extrapolation to areas of the L3 (French) of grammatical features belonging either to the L1 or L2 (Maltese or English) or to the L3 itself. For reasons of brevity, examples will be few and once again concern verbs only (see Sammut, 2017 for more examples concerning verbs and other grammatical categories).

Among the interlingual errors, one can detect the influence of Maltese for instance in the absence of obligatory verbs, owing to the fact that nominal sentences are very common in Maltese, where the copular verb is optional. Thus structures natural to Maltese like "*l-istorja nteressanti*" (literally: the story interesting) and "*il-ħwienet sbieħ*" (lit. the shops beautiful) seem to be the reason why learners wrote **l'histoire intéressante* and **les magasins belles*. The one-word Maltese perfect tense, and / or the English past simple, may be at the origin of the error of omission of the auxiliary of the compound passé composé tense, leading to reduced structures such as **nous mange*, **je dormi*, **mes parents bu* and **nous rencontré*. Inversely, habitual use of compound tenses in English, such as the present continuous and the past continuous, seems to explain why some simple tenses in French, like the present indicative and the imperfect, were attributed a superfluous auxiliary, as in **Nous sont habiter* for *Nous habitons* (English: We are living), **Je suis organiser* for *J'organise* (Eng. I am organising), and **nous étions danser* for *nous dansions* (Eng. We were dancing).

Intralingual errors also appear in the corpus and some seem to be attributable to overgeneralisation of grammatical rules of the TL to areas where they are not applicable, as the learner strives to construct hypotheses on the FL on the basis of his limited experience of this language. Difficulty to apply rules already covered in the teaching-learning process of the language is evident. As regards verbs, overgeneralisation of the two rules listed below is present in the corpus:

- i. In the passé composé tense, the auxiliary needs to be followed by a past participle → subject + auxiliary (verbs être or avoir) + past participle
- ii. A semi-auxiliary (modal verb, etc.) needs to be followed by an infinitive → subject + semi-auxiliary + infinitive verb

Learners seem to mix the two rules. At times they place a past participle or a verb conjugated in the present indicative after a semi-auxiliary, as in **vous pouvez visité*, for *vous pouvez visiter*, **j'espère écouté* for *j'espère écouter*, **vous devez apportons* for *vous devez apporter* and **on peut marche* for *on peut marcher*. At other times an auxiliary is followed by an infinitive verb, as in **nous avons organiser* for *nous avons organisé* and **nous sommes rester* for *nous sommes restés*.

There is also extrapolation of the agreement of the past participle in the passé composé tense,

necessary in verbs which take être as an auxiliary, but sometimes extended in the corpus to verbs conjugated with the auxiliary avoir. Thus one finds **nous avons regardés* for *nous avons regardé*. At other times verbs which need to be conjugated with the auxiliary avoir are on the contrary conjugated with être and are thus also given an unnecessary ending of gender and number, as in **nous sommes visités* for *nous avons visité* and **le temps sont étés belles* for what in a literal translation would give **le temps a été beau* (the proper expression being however *il faisait beau*).

It can thus be concluded that Maltese students of FFL in their final two years of secondary education encounter grammatical difficulties emanating from the influence of Maltese and English. This influence could occur unconsciously or even consciously, as word for word translation from previously known languages may also be a factor which induces learners into negative transfer. The partial mastery of the TL is another contributing factor.

Final remarks

The present study is limited by its focus on grammatical difficulties pertaining to seven particular grammatical categories. A more thorough investigation on learners' ability in written production would also need to take into account other types of error, as well as spelling, punctuation, sentence construction (see Sammut, 2012 for complex sentence construction by Maltese learners of FFL), etc. Learners were constrained by the four assigned essay titles; a wider variety of writings would allow more objective results. Since learners were asked to carry out the essay writing at home, they may have resorted to different sources of help like online translation tools, which will have impinged on their performance.

It appears that the FL teaching system in Malta, allowing for three or four lessons weekly in the language, a number of which are however lost due to various school activities, is not giving highly satisfactory results. It may be that the learners' degree of motivation for FL learning is not ideal. FFL textbooks in most Maltese educational sectors are outdated (Bezzina, 2016). What is clear at the end of this study is however that the often observed and teacher confirmed emphasis on teaching grammar is not leading to the desired results when learners need to apply this extensive grammatical content in longer, written communicative tasks. It would be interesting to investigate the level of grammatical accuracy when learners need to communicate orally. To date, no such study has been carried out, although recordings of learner talk, for instance of role play in studies which have focused on the spoken interaction abilities of Maltese learners of FFL (Micallef, 2003; Bondin, 2014; Zammit, 2018), seem to suggest that extensive grammatical difficulty is not limited to written production.

Teachers need to be aware of the nature of learners' errors in written production. According to Ferris (2003), correcting mistakes remains a priority for most teachers who see, in correction, the most effective strategy to improve their learners' writing. Through correction, teachers guide, motivate and encourage them in this skill (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982). It must be ensured that the apparently dominant mode of work in the FL teaching programme, based on grammar exercises, is sufficiently complemented by tasks and activities in which learners practise their grammatical knowledge in longer stretches of writing. Writing workshops may be periodically set up in the FL lesson. Learners' willingness to expose themselves to the FL beyond the classroom would also be beneficial.

Teachers need in fact to work on learners' attitudes to FL learning and on their motivation, which have such a determining power on success or failure. This could be achieved by shifting the priority given to summative evaluation, which may demotivate learners since it involves assigning

marks, which frequently tend not to be high. It is believed that the educational system would benefit from giving more weight to formative assessment, which would consider errors as a tool and an opportunity for learning, and which would place more interest on the development of learners' FL competence rather than on the social classification of learners through placing them within marking bands. This objective can only be attained if teachers dispose of sufficient time to adequately correct and analyse learners' FL production in order to give them constructive feedback. In the current system where the FFL syllabus in Malta is significantly loaded with grammatical content that has to be covered, on which teachers hardly have any control or say, teachers claim that they feel stressed (Sammut, 2017) and as a result that they cannot really transmit a positive attitude towards FFL learning. The situation may be partly improved, therefore, if teachers are more centrally involved in decision taking processes concerning the teaching programme and evaluation methods.

Teachers' feedback needs to be sufficiently explanatory and to help learners avoid repetition of errors. Class correction and discussion of common difficulties can create awareness regarding correct forms, as well as a wise use of self and peer evaluation which lead to in-depth reflection. Since it would be logistically difficult to allot more lessons to FL teaching, a revision of the syllabus would be more practical, with a re-sizing of the grammatical content which would allow teachers to quit the rather traditional way of language teaching, which is being observed in the research (Bezzina, 2017; Sammut, 2017; Bezzina & Gauci, 2018), and give scope for more practice of production skills. The final Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examination, with, among others, its traditional grammar, metalinguistic, culture and dictation components, is a determining factor suspected to exert a washback effect on the teaching practices currently observed. The inclusion of such components in the final summative evaluation does not seem to be improving learners' performance. It is hoped that improvement in learners' performance will be noted with the current plans and actions being undertaken to reform local language examinations in such a way as to finally be more in line with the recommendations of the CEFR (2001, 2017), based upon equal weighting of speaking, writing, listening and reading skills, as well as integrating formative assessment as a way of enhancing learning.

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