

# TENSIONS THAT IMPEDE LANGUAGE EVALUATION



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This article presents results of a study designed to identify factors that influence the decision of teachers of specialized college training programs as to whether or not to evaluate students' written French.

Most colleges require that teachers in all disciplines evaluate students' written language. If few teachers actually do so in all circumstances, it is not because they think their students do not make mistakes or that students' texts are always clear and impeccable in terms of coherence! In seven colleges, the comments and answers of 200 teachers in all the disciplines of specialized training programs who took part in our research (Kingsbury and Tremblay, 2008a<sup>1</sup>) clearly show that evaluating student language competency is particularly challenging and poses certain difficulties, regardless of the policies adopted by their colleges in this respect.

With this research we were able to identify a number of factors that determine or alter teachers' evaluation practices: available time, the students' mother tongues or specific constraints relating to the disciplinary competencies to be developed in their courses. However, the purpose of this article is not so much to list all these factors but rather to shed light on four points of tension that must be resolved in order to favour an optimal evaluation of language competency by all teachers.

## FOUR POINTS OF TENSION TO RESOLVE

### 1. DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE COMPETENCY

#### We must evaluate language mastery...

An analysis of the principles and requirements of the various institutional policies on the evaluation of student achievement in effect in the Fall of 2005 in all Francophone CEGEPs has confirmed the judgement rendered in 1996 by the CEEC (*Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial*):

"A concern for language quality is very present in each Institutional Policy on Evaluation of Student Achievement (IPESA). The great majority of these explicitly stipulate that the quality of language used in class assignments and exams is subject to evaluation in all courses, and they set a grading scale for this purpose." (CEEC, 1996, pp. 7-8, our translation)

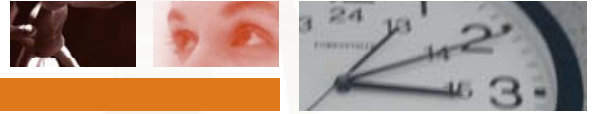
... but we do not all share the same definition of language mastery!

The policies on the evaluation of student achievement express a clear concern for language quality, but almost all the policies define it in a manner that does not favour a univocal understanding of what the teachers must evaluate or how the evaluation must be carried out.

In addition, our data indicate that for teachers, the concept of "language mastery" is difficult to define and they do not all necessarily have the same interpretation of it: for some, it refers to spelling and grammatical correctness; for others, language mastery refers to these same elements as well as to textual organization; for others still, it refers to "the basics", a concept they are unable to explain in any detail; for still others, mastering language means being able to write without making mistakes or without making too many "serious" mistakes; while for others still, it refers to an ideal of elegant expression. In spite of all this, the ability to transpose one's thoughts into writing is the single element most often mentioned by teachers in specifying what they mean by "language mastery".

Needless to say, it is difficult to evaluate the same thing when we do not have the same expectations. In our opinion, this is the first point of tension that needs to be resolved: teachers, with their college's support, must develop a common vision of what they expect of students and what it is that they must evaluate.

<sup>1</sup> The research report and the manual for appropriating the results of this study conducted from 2006 to 2008 and funded by PAREA (*Programme d'aide à la recherche sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage*) are available on the Internet. [On-line] [www.cegep-ste-foy.qc.ca/profs-langue](http://www.cegep-ste-foy.qc.ca/profs-langue)



## 2. THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE EVALUATION IN SPECIALIZED TRAINING COURSES

### Language evaluation is important to us...

To begin with, we should point out that most teachers have a favourable perception of the impact of evaluating language competency. In fact, 73% of the participants in our research feel that their evaluation of language competency has a positive impact on improving student language mastery. Their perceived role as evaluators of student language competency provides a glimpse of the causal relationship that most establish between evaluation and improvement: practically all the teachers of specialized training courses (96%) feel that by evaluating language competency, they motivate students to use quality written language at all times. On this level, their perception is in keeping with the results of the work of Monballin, van der Brempt and Legros (1995, p. 61) who established that the simple fact of raising the standards produces improved linguistic performance by students.

### ... but only up to a certain point!

Even though practically all teachers are convinced that evaluating language competency encourages students to pay more attention to the quality of their written language or to improve it, teachers do not feel totally justified in carrying out this pedagogical gesture when deducting marks for language errors could cause a student's grade to drop below the 60% threshold.

Indeed, our research shows that, in a situation in which a student risks failing a course if marks are subtracted for language errors, teachers reduce the

depth of their evaluation: 29% refuse to take off all the marks relating to language evaluation and 40% tolerate a certain number of mistakes before taking marks off. This attitude is illustrated in the comments of one participant in our research: "I do not want a student to fail my course due to a weakness in French when that student understands the subject matter." (Our translation)

Our data indicate that many teachers blame language for the failure of certain students in a course, even though marks deducted for language errors are generally few compared to marks lost due to strictly disciplinary content. An examination of institutional policies indicated that marks subtracted for language errors very rarely exceed 10% of the grade, which is, in itself, insufficient to cause the "failure" of a student who has a greater-than-minimal mastery of the disciplinary content. Many teachers however establish a cause and effect relationship between the few marks that may be subtracted for language errors and failure: "I feel that 10% is a lot. Not because I don't find language to be important, but in relation to the final grade, if a student has 65% and we subtract 10% leaving a grade of 55%, then I have a problem with this 10%." (Our translation)

*[...] many teachers blame language for the failure of certain students in a course, even though marks deducted for language errors are generally few compared to marks lost due to strictly disciplinary content.*

For us, attributing this failure to language illustrates that language mastery, in the minds of many teachers, is subordinate to the mastery of disciplinary competencies. We also take this to be an indication that these teachers consider that students who demonstrate a lack of language mastery are already being punished when it comes to disciplinary competencies: it is harder for them to demonstrate their development of these competencies. Bergeron and Buguet-Melançon (1996, Chap. 9, p. 10) underscore this inseparable link between evaluation of learning and evaluation of language. For them, these two evaluation objects have a reciprocal influence on each other, since the act of demonstrating disciplinary competency often requires the student to use language.

This point of view is shared at the university level as shown by Derive and Fintz (1998, p. 48) who specify that universities must see to it that disciplinary knowledge is acquired at the same time as the "acculturation to writing" and that it is "absurd" to maintain that we are only evaluating disciplinary competencies: the insufficient mastery of language by students necessarily has a negative impact on their ability to demonstrate their disciplinary competencies, since, in most cases, this development is evaluated to some extent through their writing. (Our translation)

In the end, language is very often the vehicle students use to demonstrate the development of their disciplinary competency and, in this respect, one is linked to the other. It appears however, that the risk of academic failure represents the threshold which many teachers of specialized training courses do not wish to cross when it comes to language evaluation. The fact that the risk of academic failure is not exclusively linked to language has no bearing on the issue because the risk of failure is a determining factor both of deciding whether or not to evaluate language competency and of the depth of that evaluation. To be fair to students and to encourage them to value the quality of their language, it seems essential



that teachers work on standardizing their perception of the value of evaluating language competency. It is also essential that they adopt a common position with regard to the possibility of students failing a course due to an inadequate mastery of language, even though they may have mastered the disciplinary competencies to a minimal degree.

### 3. COMPETENCIES AND THE SUPPORT REQUIRED TO DEVELOP THEM

#### I feel that I am competent...

Among the widespread hypotheses used to explain the fact that teachers of specialized training courses are more or less willing to take charge of language competency evaluation, one hypothesis relates to the level of language competency of the teachers themselves. Our data show very clearly, however, that teachers' perceptions of their own language mastery has no bearing on their decision as to whether or not to evaluate the students' language competency: in other words, their own language mastery has no influence on whether or not they evaluate the students' language mastery. On the other hand, teachers also feel that their own level of language mastery determines the depth of their evaluation of language competency, as illustrated by the comments made by one participant in our study: "Tackling language correction does not bother me in the least. [...] I simply work within the limits of what I know." (Our translation)

Participants in our study feel quite confident about their own language competency: 96% of them are convinced that their language mastery makes it easy for them to evaluate their students' language mastery. However, given that 41% of teachers never resort to reference works, even when they have doubts, it would be worthwhile to improve teachers' language competency. In light of the fact that a large proportion of teachers never use a dictionary or a grammar book, it becomes all the more necessary to make sure that the knowledge they possess be as developed as possible in order to ensure that they are in a position to make an in-depth evaluation of the students' language competency. In addition, only a minority of teachers in our study (28%) ever work on their own language improvement, whether during their studies or on the job. As one of our participants stated, language is not "naturally" perceived as being part of their professional development, while other dimensions of the teacher's role are: "I would have needed a refresher course from time to time. [...] You see, I take courses relating to pedagogy, [...] and I have also done things with regard to group animation. As for language, never!" (Our translation)

#### ... but at the same time, they should offer us support!

In spite of the assurance that teachers express with regard to their own mastery of written language, 17% of them believe that they do not catch all the errors when evaluating language: "When I find a lot of mistakes in an assignment, it is because there are, in fact, very many." What is more, 13% of teachers admit to feeling inadequate when it comes to evaluating language competency. This is another good reason for developing teachers' language competency, since it would serve at the same time to facilitate and to deepen the evaluation of students' language competency. (Our translation.)

In addition, "language competency" does not automatically mean the competency to correct language. It is possible for a teacher to make few mistakes, yet still have problems detecting those made by students or in explaining why, for instance, a particular way of formulating a sentence is faulty. This has a necessary impact on the way teachers evaluate: "If I am a little unsure about a certain rule, [...] I will not correct that possible mistake because I am not in a position to do so if I myself can be confused about the question." Although practically all teachers feel secure with regard to their language competency, this is not the case with regard to how they feel about their competency to correct the language of others: 38% admit they need some training to improve on this level. One teacher who participated in our study expressed this lack of training in this way: "We never received this kind of training. What exactly is involved in correcting French? No one ever told me what correcting French involved." (Our translations)

The need for feedback and support from the college with regard to language competency and its evaluation was mentioned by a vast majority of teachers who were not always able to see the consistency between the obligation imposed by their college to evaluate language competency and the college's actions to facilitate this task.

Along this line of thought, many teachers emphasized that their college never provided them with feedback on the French exam they were required to take prior to being hired, other than their having been informed that they had passed the test. As a result, this conveyed the message to them that their language competency was sufficient for the job; but they were never informed as to whether certain aspects of their



language posed a problem or, if this was the case, how to improve these weaknesses. The teachers who took part in our study made the same observation with regard to their competency as language evaluators, and the situation that they describe seems even more disconcerting: their competency to correct language was almost never evaluated when they were hired and not one had ever received any feedback on this matter.

*It seems clear that, while teachers express a need for a concerted effort, they want to maintain their full and complete autonomy when it comes to language evaluation.*

Many teachers mentioned that the training and support provided by their college with regard to their own language competency and their competency as evaluators of students' language are "natural counterparts" of their obligation to evaluate the students' language. Thus, 86% of teachers feel that their college should offer teachers the means for improving their own mastery of written language and 87% think that their college should offer teachers the means for improving their ways of evaluating the students' written language.

At the same time, our data indicate that a much smaller number of teachers think that it is necessary for their college to provide them with particular feedback on the quality of their written language (42%) or their way of. If it is necessary for colleges to support the development of teachers' language and correction competencies, it is logical to assume that, for the majority of participants in our research, this support would seem necessary – above all out of a concern for consistency with their establishment's regulations on language competency evaluation and also to meet their colleagues' needs.

It is possible to think that these data reflect the ability of most respondents to cast a critical look on their own level of language competency and on their abilities as correctors and that, following an analysis of their own competencies, they would find any feedback from the college to be superfluous. Rather, our results show this to be a consequence of the fact that close to 60% of teachers who took part in our study want to maintain their full autonomy when it comes to decisions relating to evaluating the written language of students. Or, it is a consequence of the fear of admitting to personal weaknesses: "It is not normal for a teacher to not know French. [If] teachers [...] should ask for help in French [...], this would raise questions about [their work]... Are your course notes well written? Is the material you hand out to your students in good French? Do you really correct French the way everyone else does? Do you really respect the 10% rule or do you simply skip over this aspect?" (Our translation)

#### 4. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE GROUP AND THE INDIVIDUAL

##### **I want strict and uniform rules...**

While 94% of teachers feel that it is their duty to evaluate their students' written language, it seems that few of them fully apply the policies in effect at their college regarding language evaluation. Although 89% of them say they often or always evaluate the students' written language in assignments or exams held outside the classroom, only 55% state that they evaluate it often or always in assignments or exams that take place in class.

Thus, even if 82% of teachers feel dissatisfied when they do not evaluate their students' language competency, various factors intervene that result in their not always carrying out this task or in their limiting its scope. In fact, some of the teachers' interpretations and certain contexts impact their practices: that is, their decision not only whether or not to evaluate language but also the depth of this evaluation<sup>2</sup>.

##### **... but I also want the right to be exempted from them!**

Among these factors, one of the major paradoxes evidenced by our research is the tension between individual autonomy and the rules governing the group. It seems clear that, while teachers express a need for a concerted effort, they want to maintain their full and complete autonomy when it comes to language evaluation.

The most eloquent illustration of this paradox can be found in the fact that, on the one hand, 87% of teachers feel that in order to be consistent in conveying messages to students, there needs to be a concerted effort on the part of teachers regarding the evaluation of written language; 86% of teachers feel the same way for reasons of fairness; and 24% feel that all teachers need to get involved in the evaluation of language competency in order for students to be personally motivated to follow suit. On the other hand, 58% want to maintain their full autonomy with regard to language competency evaluation and 29% of them believe that their college must accept the fact that the teachers' autonomy should supersede institutional rules.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on these interpretations and contexts, see KINGSBURY and TREMBLAY, 2008a.





This situation, in which teachers are basically doing what they feel is necessary, possible or legitimate to do, seems to be related to the fact that teaching professionals wish to maintain their autonomy; but it also seems to be partially linked to a lack of commitment to common rules and for reasons that are diametrically opposed. Thus, although 8% of teachers feel that institutional rules are too demanding with regard to language competency evaluation, 60% of teachers feel that they are not demanding enough. These data are indicators of the problematic link between the needs for co-operation as expressed by individuals in the name of fairness, coherence and motivation on the one hand, and, the need to meet these needs collectively on the other. This difficulty of reconciling these divergent individual viewpoints within the group can also be observed in the fact that 16% of teachers feel that the obligation to evaluate language competency is not legitimate, while 14% feel their college's success rate objectives are incompatible with the obligation to evaluate language competency.

This whole question of tension between the institution's control over language competency evaluation and the teachers' professional autonomy seems to be crucial with regard to mutual understanding, commitment to the rules in matters of language evaluation and, ultimately, to the teachers' practices in this area. Although it was impossible to do so within the framework of our study, we feel it is essential to establish where teachers draw the line between a strong orientation on the part of the institution and what could be perceived as the college interfering with their autonomy.

#### ▶ PATHWAYS FOR RESOLVING THESE FOUR POINTS OF TENSION

In colleges where evaluation practices are diversified, there can be a lack of harmony or consistency in the message conveyed to students with regards to language competency. This question has already been raised by the CEEC (2004, p. 17) within the broader framework of the evaluation of learning. In our opinion, this question also arises very specifically with regard to the evaluation of language competency: the less harmonization there is, the greater the risk of disparity between the evaluation in different courses taken by the same student and, consequently, the less effective the message conveyed to students who could fail to understand why language competency does not seem to have the same importance in all courses.

The four points of tension discussed in this article detract from the development of common practices; they impede the sharing of expertise between teachers; and ultimately, they limit the teachers as a group from taking charge of language competency evaluation which nevertheless remains necessary. For the students, a rigorous and constant evaluation of language competency results in greater fairness and greater effectiveness in the evaluations, a more coherent perception of the practices which leads to a greater legitimacy of evaluation and, in the end, an increased motivation for improving their language competency. As many researchers have stated (Castinaud and Zakhartchouk, 2002; Moffet, 2000; Maisonneuve, 1997; Viau, 1999 and 2000; Lefrançois, 2006), the quality of the students' written language is not solely the responsibility of French-language teachers; and each teacher must make a commitment to implement the means whereby students can improve. The research manual for appropriating the results of our study (Kingsbury and Tremblay, 2008b) offers a few pathways colleges could follow to resolve these points of tension.

These should not be the only pathways: beyond the actions that a college may take to reinforce the coherence of practices in effect, teachers can also contribute to solving these problems. In order to develop a common vision regarding which practices to adopt, it seems essential that the points of tension described above be discussed within a department or program team.

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It also seems essential that teachers in specialized training programs find a way to develop a common vision of their roles with regard to the development of student language competency. Even though most policies oblige teachers to deduct marks for the language errors students make, none encourages or obliges teachers to inform students as to: what they could do to improve their language competency, the specific aspects of language they should work on most, those they master well, the nature of mistakes that they make most frequently or that pose problems in reading or in demonstrating the acquisition of disciplinary competencies, etc. This problem was in fact identified long ago by Moffet (1995, p. 97).

One pathway that seems promising is to explore other ways of evaluating language competency. Our analysis of institutional policies of evaluation of student achievement (IPESAs) shows that, for most CEGEPs, the evaluation of language competency consists in deducting marks when students make language errors. However, recent articles suggest that other strategies could be



more valuable both for students and for teachers who do not specialize in French. Among these, we should mention the work of Fortier and Préfontaine (2004, p. 46) in which they propose the following avenues: positive reinforcement when the choice of vocabulary is particularly apt; in the evaluation criteria, giving students credit for precise thought organization and validity of arguments; the teacher making comments on the students' use of vague expressions that render their answers inadequate; the teacher increasing students' awareness of the positive impact of quality language and appropriate textual organization on demonstrating the development of strictly disciplinary abilities, etc.

Additional pathways will emerge from discussions among teachers as fostered by the colleges. These discussions may be arduous at times, because they touch upon fundamental aspects of teaching, but they will surely be fruitful if they are centred above all on the need, recognized by all, to help students to achieve better writing skills. ●

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