

CHAPTER 19.

THE TEACHING OF WRITING SKILLS IN FRENCH UNIVERSITIES: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITÉ STENDHAL, GRENOBLE III

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The article is divided into three parts. The first recounts the evolution of the teaching of writing skills in French universities since the 1980s and shows how university traditions in this matter have been subject to a profound shift in recent years. The second part gives a brief presentation of the Université Stendhal in Grenoble, which was required as of 2010, like all other universities, to put in place classes focusing on writing skills. Finally, the third part seeks to analyze the effects of a pedagogical measure that has been tested over the past three years at the Université Stendhal in the context of a class in the methodology of academic writing for first-year linguistics students. The pedagogical methods put into practice intend to bring together knowledge (academic learning), expertise (command of written skills), and interpersonal skills (construction of a point of view), whilst at the same time working both on engaging with the subject and respecting standards, and on graphic reason and graphic creation.

THE CHANGING FACES OF THE FRENCH UNIVERSITY

In France, the question of teaching writing skills at university level is relatively recent.¹ Until the 1990s, the teaching of writing skills was considered to be the remit of primary school (6-11 years old) and collège (12-15 years old). Pupils were supposed to have mastered all elements of writing, in particular the formal aspects (spelling and grammar), by the time they entered lycée educa-

tion (15-18 years old). Thus, implicitly, it was assumed that students arrived at university with the requisite skills in this domain.

From the 1980s onwards, the situation in France slowly began to change.² Politically, the national aim was henceforth to attain 80% success at the baccalauréat³ (end of secondary education diploma providing entrance to university, on a non-selective basis) in order to raise the level of education of the country within a more and more competitive global scene. In parallel, the socio-economic situation, characterized by a rise in unemployment, was pushing young people into a race for qualifications. This led to a massive increase in numbers of students attending university (referred to as the “democratization” of “mass” higher education), which in turn entailed a substantial modification of an audience that had hitherto been fairly homogenous. Henceforth, universities (in the Humanities and Social Sciences in particular) welcomed students from all backgrounds, including the less advantaged.

Yet from the mid 1990s onwards a decline in numbers at public universities began and continued in a worrying manner until 2008, with holders of the baccalauréat seeming to prefer selective vocational programmes. In addition, another process has been accelerating since 2000 and causing a profound shift in the demographics of higher education as it contributes to the dwindling numbers at university. The *Grandes Ecoles*,⁴ formerly reserved for training the nation’s elite, are attracting more and more young people from the middle and higher classes, who are eschewing university in favour of the classes préparatoires which offer training for the entrance exams to these prestigious institutions. In a context strongly affected by the economic crisis, there is a general desire to choose the right strategy for success. The sacrosanct university degree no longer affords sufficient protection against the soaring unemployment that affects first and foremost those in the 18-25 age group. Furthermore, the progressive withdrawal of state backing of public services (since 2008, government policy has indicated the aim of the non-renewal of one civil servant post in two [Conseil des Ministres, 2007]) has perhaps contributed to the deterioration of the image of universities in public opinion. That said, the most recent figures available would seem to indicate a rise in numbers for the academic year 2009/2010 (MESR- DGESIP, 2010).

In parallel, the national curriculum for French in primary and secondary school education has been far heavier since 1995 than was previously the case, and this goes hand-in-hand with a significant drop in contact hours given over to this subject. In other words, teachers are being asked to do far more in far less time. In such conditions, teachers of French in the collèges cannot have the same expectations regarding the normative correction of written work.

Since 2000, we, as researchers in linguistics and writing, have seen a growing awareness of the fact that students reach university with incomplete written skills in French. Indeed, the new students are often very surprised by the importance that is suddenly given to the linguistic aspect of their studies and the pressing necessity to improve their level. At the same time, academics, who often have little training in teaching writing skills, tend to consider that it is not up to the university to take this side of things in hand, and that it should be dealt with beforehand. However, failure rates, relatively substantial in the first years at university (one student in two fails their first year, according to MESR, 2011) have begun to call these assumptions into question. It is undoubtedly the implementation of the “Réussite en Licence” or ‘Success in Undergraduate Degrees’ project⁵ by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2008⁶ that has placed the question of written skills in Higher Education in the public eye, whereas previously it had remained in the background.

Due to a sudden and unexpected influx of funds, this highly publicised government project led to a large number of pedagogical initiatives within universities, with a view to better supporting students entering higher education, in particular through a substantial tutorial system. At least twenty of these universities chose to place the onus on the question of written expression and in particular upon spelling, which in France has traditionally been the locus of debates concerning written ability. This small revolution, echoed in the press at the start of the 2010/2011 academic year,⁷ led to different innovative pedagogical experiments according to the university, with a general view to allowing students to better master the written work that they would be required to produce.

At the Université Stendhal, which will be our focus here, the question of teaching writing skills is somewhat older and grounded in research carried out from 2000 onwards by a team of lecturers in linguistics and pedagogy⁸ (linguistic knowledge and skills, usage and representations) in a pedagogical perspective centered upon the writing subject, enabling the learner’s relationship to writing to be taken into account and helped to evolve. Before outlining one of the measures put in place by this team as part of the “plan réussite en licence,” we shall briefly describe the institution in question.

THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITÉ STENDHAL, GRENOBLE III

Located in the Rhône-Alpes region (South-East France), the Université Stendhal is a medium-sized institution (approximately 12,000 students) that offers programmes grounded in the humanities: foreign languages and cul-

ture, linguistics, literature, and communication studies. Although, in accordance with institutional expectations on a national level, this university seeks to diversify and consolidate the professional prospects of its graduates, the skills envisaged by the study programmes remain traditionally strongly linked with written skills. Students enrolled in such “humanities-orientated” universities as the Université Stendhal are often destined for teaching (primary or secondary education, and language teaching, including French as a Foreign Language), translation, speech therapy, journalism or business communication. In these different domains the concours (competitive entrance examinations for training programmes, or for obtaining the professional qualification in question) are generally highly selective, and written skills are an essential criterion albeit a criterion that corresponds to different categories depending on the concours. In particular, “written skills” refers to the formal elements of writing (overvalued in France in comparison with other countries: in France spelling mistakes are particularly badly viewed) and the generic dimension of texts. Students in France are trained from the lycée onwards in the production of canonical academic writing such as essays or summaries.⁹

At the Université Stendhal in Grenoble, there was a desire to take this question of training in writing skills seriously, by offering courses allowing the combination of work on language (spelling and grammar) and the implication of the writer, through a measure focusing on a genre rarely used at university: academic fiction.

AN INNOVATIVE MEASURE: KNOWLEDGE BUILDING THROUGH THE WRITING OF ACADEMIC FICTION

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section we shall outline and analyse the effects of a pedagogical measure that has been tested over the past three years at the Université Stendhal in the context of a class in the methodology of academic writing. This measure originates in our team’s research in reading/writing practices as modes of knowledge building in Higher Education. This field has already given rise to numerous publications,¹⁰ particularly in linguistics and didactics. This research places the onus on the difficulties facing young students when they are first confronted with specialist texts in their disciplines, difficulties that are essentially of two types:

- Difficulty in approaching the “theoretical knowledge,” in integrating and reconstructing notions and concepts in a precise manner, in problema-

tizing, in objectivising knowledge and in including the words of others in their own discourse (Kara, 2004).

- Difficulty in taking up a point of view (Rinck, 2004) and in linking theory and practical experience in the field (Frier, 2004).

This research also focuses upon the heuristic function of the written text and on the reflexive dimension of writing practice that encourages knowledge building and the “written codification of knowledge” specific to “graphic reason” (Goody, 1979).

In this context, “graphic reason” is seen as the best tool for implementing the systematic classification of reality that then allows abstraction, distance, and scientific objectivity. Consequently, non-reflexive writing such as narration, viewed with some suspicion, is sometimes seen as antonymic to academic discourse. This no doubt explains at least in part that such texts are rarely worked upon at university.

However, recently another side of didactics is more specifically focusing upon the role played by narrative in the building of knowledge, and in particular of academic knowledge: in other words, the didactic function of narrative in different disciplines (Reuter, 2007). Indeed, studies of various horizons call into question the restrictive vision of scientific knowledge and how it is built, by giving a place to narrative in academic teaching.

Following Bruner’s (2005) seminal works, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

- “Rational” thinking, imagination, and experience work in perpetual interaction in the process of elaborating academic knowledge.
- In order for knowledge to be appropriated, it must be made to have resonance with personal experience and understanding: a necessary link must be made between the singular and the generic (two spaces that are usually hermetically detached in the context of formal learning).
- It is by activating “ordinary creativity” (Chabanne & Dunas, 1999) that the mechanism of appropriating academic knowledge, in all its complexity and diversity, is set off.

THE PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT PUT IN PLACE¹¹

The project in question is aimed at students enrolled in the first year of Language Sciences in a class on methodology of academic writing that entails 48 hours of contact time, divided into 24 sessions of 2 hours. This class is organized around 6 themes (The Origins of Language; The Acquisition of Language; Birth and Transformations of Writing; Natural Language Processing; Language and Deafness). The pedagogical methods put into practice intend to bring together

knowledge (building of knowledge in an academic field), expertise (command of written skills) and interpersonal skills (demystifying theoretical knowledge and fostering confidence, appropriation of knowledge by the subject and construction of a point of view). Above and beyond these aims, the intention is also to combat the huge writerly insecurity at the beginning of undergraduate studies at university, to bring out the “unrecognized knowledge” (Penloup, 2007) of our students, to encourage their creativity and to get them to engage in and through writing on the path to knowledge.

Within this new pedagogical project, the text to be produced includes fiction (invented story) and narrative (situations, fictional characters or staging of the protagonists of different debates) and is thus supposed to entertain the reader. However, it is also a narrative showcasing ideas, a point of view on a question, an academic problem, as well as the fictional aspect. It therefore also has to inform the reader: the academic information has to be presented in different forms, and within this piece of writing extracts of academic writing are to be found: fragments of texts (quotes), notions, reformulated ideas, arguments, theoretical trends, names of authors, dates, etc., are inserted as the story unfolds. These two requirements (entertaining and informing) have to find a balance in the text. We chose to prepare students for, and support them in, the writing of this fictional text using writing workshops.

PROMISING RESULTS¹²

The analysis of the corpus of fictional pieces gathered in the context of this project (2008-2011) shows that academic fiction is largely conducive to a tangible and solid evolution of the written abilities of students, if they are offered the correct support throughout the process. Each in its own way, these fictional narratives interweave with more or less competence the elements considered to be objective parts of academic knowledge (definitions, authors’ names, theories, dates, etc.), the fictional elements supposed to provide a context for the question asked by the text, and elements of argumentation (point of view put forward). The systematic presence of these three intentions signifies, in our view, a considerable evolution of the abilities of the students who authored these texts, insofar as this capacity to navigate between different stances in language is progressively constructed through the texts produced throughout the year. The appendix includes some commented extracts from a text entitled “At the Origin of Writing,” which illustrate this ability.

After completing this work, the students no longer write in the same way. Engaged over the long term both on an individual and collective level in a ritualized project of training/support in writing, they progressively become aware

of the formal, but also enunciative and textual stakes of their productions. Paradoxically, it is through a psycho-affective implication in their writing that they manage to distance themselves from it in intellectual terms. The final quality of the texts is often surprising, both regarding creativity and the appropriation of academic knowledge. This is why this gamble of working in parallel on both engaging with the subject and on respecting norms, on both graphic reason and graphic creation, seems to have paid off in part within the context of this experiment.

These initial results need, of course, to be both qualified and examined in more depth. Narratives cannot be seen as a miracle solution that could allow students' erroneous representations, academic approximations, or methodological problems to be erased. However, it could be said that the implicational function of the narrative (Reuter, 2007) that allows and encourages the writing subject's engagement with his text makes it an efficient tool for bringing to the fore representations that can then be formalized, considered on a conscious level, and discussed with a view to possible evolution.

Our results show that the narrative, by linking the universe of concepts to that of the subject's affect, sensory perception, and dreams, contributes to combining "graphic creation" and "graphic reason." It generates emotions, sensations, and ideas all at once. This is why it should find a legitimate place alongside the other genres of writing used in building and assessing knowledge at university: by putting thought into movement, the narrative creates the right kind of chemistry for producing results and promoting discovery.

SUMMARY

The project described above is an example of a pedagogical initiative that has recently proven its worth. This initiative has become part of the curriculum for Language Sciences degrees. Moreover, our team is now writing a textbook for French teachers who would like to implement effective literacy pedagogy in their classes. However, in France this kind of initiative remains relatively marginal and localized. In the absence of training centres in teaching writing skills—unlike many other Western countries—and of national programmes in the subject, the French university system is not yet ready to respond in an organized fashion to students' weaknesses in the field of written work. Although descriptive analyses of students' written production abound in the emerging field of academic literacy, these only rarely give rise to carefully thought out pedagogical actions, which, moreover, remain on a local level and are not shared. We would therefore argue strongly in favour of the training of future

higher education practitioners—training that remains insufficiently developed in France—to take this dimension into account. It is undoubtedly through training that pedagogical practice in academic writing and literacy has a chance of progressing.

NOTES

1. This article is drawn from a research project entitled “Ecrits Universitaires: inventaire, pratiques, modèles” funded by the Agence Nationale pour la Recherche 2007-2011, theme “Apprentissages” ; Project leaders: I. Delcambre (Théodile-Cirel) and F. Boch (Lidilem).
2. Between 1981 and 1997, the proportion of 18-24 year-olds enrolled in public higher education rose from 9,6% to 20% (INRP, 2005 :9).
3. This aim was declared in 1985 by the Minister of Education of the time, J.P. Chevènement.
4. The “*Grandes écoles*” are a French specificity. These highly selective establishments accept a very small number of students. The grandes écoles train high-level engineers and managers, but also specialists in art, literature and humanities. The programmes within the grandes écoles and specialist institutions generally take place over five years, including two initial years of training for the entrance examinations to these institutions. The very principle of the grandes écoles is controversial. They are criticized in particular for being a tool for social reproduction. Indeed, although the majority of grandes écoles are public and free (with the exception of those in business studies), the funding allocated per student by the state is considerably greater than at university, and the students in question tend in general to be from higher social classes: a sort of “back-to-front redistribution” to use Lebègue & Walter’s (2008) phrase.
5. A *Licence* is the equivalent of an undergraduate degree: the diploma achieved, in the French system, after three years of university education.
6. The Minister for Teaching and Research “Valérie Pécresse outlined her pluriannual project for success in undergraduate degrees with a view to cutting in half the failure rates in the first year at university. Provided with 730 million Euros funding in total for 2008-2012, a 43% raise in funds in five years, this project makes provision for personalized support to be provided to students: five extra hours of weekly pedagogical contact per student, as well as a Faculty advisor for each year group, tutorials, etc.” (Government press release: <http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr>).
7. Many major French national newspapers and magazines (such as *Le Point*, *Télérama* and *Le Monde*, etc.) and television channels (regional and national) devoted a feature or a programme to the question of the teaching of French language (and in particular

spelling) at university.

8. Laboratoire LIDILEM: linguistique et didactique des langues étrangères et maternelles, cf. <http://w3.u-grenoble3.fr/lidilem/labo/web/presentation.php>.

9. On the question of the written genres worked upon at French universities, cf. Delcambre & Reuter (2010).

10. Cf. Boch, Laborde-Milaa & Reuter (2004) for a summary.

11. Inspired by Sauzeau & Triquet (2004).

12. These results have given rise to a more detailed publication, cf. Frier & Chartier (2009).

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APPENDIX: TEXT BY JULIE, A FIRST YEAR STUDENT IN LANGUAGE SCIENCES

The heroine of the story is a student who has been imprisoned following a raid and who, from the depth of her cell, is trying to understand what happened: who betrayed her and why. However, her efforts are in vain as, deprived of everything, and in particular of writing, she is unable to organise her ideas: "without a medium, I couldn't manage to sort out my thoughts. My anger got in the way of my ideas, and so did the fatigue. I needed to set things out, sort through what I could remember and structure my memory." The heroine's quest is thus to be able to write because writing alone can help her to find her past, to think and to move forward. The situation-problem raised by this narrative is thus clearly identified from the outset and placed in a double perspective: the question of finding a way to write and of recovering the primitive source of writing.

The explicative aim of the text alternates between two levels of response to these issues:

1) the first is grounded in matter and in reverie: "*For several days, I had been mechanically using my spoon to etch small vertical lines into the soft wood of the old plank that served as a bed for me, so as to count the days and try and regain some points of reference in time. I had done this without thinking. The*

primary graphic scratching was the only way for me to occupy my hands and my mind . . . I imagined that I was in a prehistoric cave, scratching small mammoths and sketching out the first steps of writing”

From a psychoanalytical point of view, the resonance of this extract with the notion of a return to limbo, a return to the original womb that precedes rational thought, can be underlined.

2) The second level of response refers to objective knowledge: *“I suddenly remembered a text by Jack Goody, an English anthropologist who, following his imprisonment in Italy during the Second World War, had written a book about writing. I seemed to recall that he referred to the difficulty of thinking and bringing together ideas without the medium of writing. In “The Consequence of Literacy,” he had explained the veritable intellectual mutilation that was the impossibility of reading or writing . . . I had the remedy for my torture as an erudite!”*

These two extracts illustrate the way this text regularly shifts between a metaphorical, dreamlike thinking, grounded in the material nature of the elements (here soil) and a more rational mode of thinking, working on the basis of stable reference points (dates, author’s name, title of book, concepts) and of objective facts. Hence the idea of obtaining some soil, in secret, on the daily outing in the prison courtyard so as to make slabs of clay from it in order to write: *“I threw myself to the ground on my stomach and began to scratch away at the moist soil so as to stuff large handfuls of it into the pockets of my trousers and coat. . . . With the end of my bent spoon, I implanted my alphabet into substance. . . . I felt like a modern Sumerian in Mesopotamia, engraving my clay tablets in 3500 BC!”*

The ending of the narrative excels at this intertwining and contrives to create an almost inextricable mixture of objective arguments imbued with concrete experience and traces of the initial reverie: *“And so I began again my cuneiform mixtures with each of the heaps I had kept under my bed, and once the tablets were full and dry I hid them beneath my covers, safe from harm. Each grapheme rooted in the earth freed my mind a little further and made room for a larger reflection. I could list names, reformulate my notes, and remember details without further cluttering my memory . . . Everything became more visual at last and far clearer. I could easily understand how our “civilisation of the written word” had been an intellectual leap for mankind—I was experiencing this revolution firsthand! The long Darwinian trains of my thought could now be uncoupled and recoupled on command. It was as if I were putting my brain in a computer and printing everything that was inside, so as to then be able to erase from my memory what was now before my eyes, leaving twice as much space as before! I had understood the technology of words. . . but above all, the name of the traitor now sprung to mind with clarity.”*