

Original Article

Digital Writing in French as a Foreign Language Handbooks: Exploring the Tasks and Challenges

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Abstract

This research focuses on the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) and seeks to analyse the types of writing tasks proposed, notably those that concern digital writing, as well as the challenges encountered in a corpus of seven sets of FFL training materials published between 2010 and 2016. We attempt to respond to the following question: How are Web 2.0. technologies integrated into the writing tasks in the corpus of these handbooks? We first analyse the digital writing tasks proposed before assessing how they are integrated within actual lessons. We then evaluate the objectives of these writing tasks. The analysis of the 101 writing instructions reveals that learners are invited to carry out 88 simulated digital writing tasks (instead of “real life” and multimodal tasks). At a time when learners are living in a world of multimodal texts, authors of FFL handbooks have not yet begun to take into account available research findings relative to the relationship between literacy and digital technology to implement, within FFL classes, digital writing lessons that take all these dimensions into account.

Keywords: *Action-oriented approach; French as a Foreign Language; Training materials for French as a Foreign Language*

Introduction

Web 2.0. is a space for expression, communication and exchange. It is an ideal writing space that helps transform our “written society into a writing society” (Petitjean, 2016, p.97). Digital writing¹ has gradually been integrated into class practices, especially language classes, as has been highlighted by numerous studies on teaching methods (Desmet and Rivens Mompean, 2010; Moore and Molinié, 2012; Linsel and Hamez, 2014). These studies show that foreign language teachers have attempted to take into

¹ By “digital writing”, we mean “writing on a medium using digital tools.” This definition is based on Crozat’s definition: “intentional coded inscription using software via a computer” (2016).

account these new modes of writings to develop the communicative language skills of their learners. It is widely known that technology, which has become increasingly poly-morphic and evolutionary, now makes it possible to diversify writing activities (Bouchard and Kadi, 2012; Lebrun and Lacelle, 2014). This has been enabled notably through writing software such as text generators, access to genuine texts promoting the reading-writing connection, the emergence of new forms of action-oriented writing (Anis, 1998, p.269), socialisation in writing, and collaborative writing via the Internet. (Mangenot, 2012, p.107). While teachers and learners have begun exploring new forms of digital textuality in the classroom (Mangenot, 2012), textbook publishers also claim to have integrated digital practices in their published products. Notably, they claim to have proposed both written and oral productions and reception tasks exploiting the possibilities in multimedia (Guichon and Soubrie, 2013, p.131).

This research focuses on the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL). Drawing on a corpus of seven selected sets of FFL training materials (handbooks and other workbooks) published between 2010 and 2016, it seeks to determine whether or not the materials' authors have taken into account the contributions of research studies when designing "digital writing tasks" and, if so, how they have done so.

We will attempt to respond to the following research question:

Has the nature of proposed writing tasks in textbooks evolved in the digital age?
If so, what challenges have been encountered?

We will begin by presenting a brief review of the literature because we believe it is necessary to outline the characteristics of production tasks written in the digital age. We will then present our corpus and methodological approach. Lastly, we will analyse the data by focusing primarily on two questions: What is the nature of the digital writing tasks proposed in the corpus analysed? How are the specificities of digital writing taught?

Literature review

The implementation of digital writing tasks in language classes is part of a broader reflection on the characteristics of writing tasks as defined in the Common European Framework of reference for languages (CEFR) published in 2001. In this brief literature review, we will present the studies relevant to our objective. We will focus on the CEFR and the action-oriented approach it emphasises, as well as other studies undertaken in the fields of language sciences and multimodal and media literacy (Lebrun, Lacelle and Boutin, 2012).

In 2001, the Common European Framework of reference for languages promoted a new approach to the learning of language as an integral part of social life. Teachers were expected to cease limiting themselves to simply preparing learners for occasional encounters with native speakers of foreign languages and cultures. In the 21st century, concerted efforts relative to foreign languages have become more genuine and increasingly common in our multilingual and multicultural societies. For this reason, what is now sought is "social co-action, i.e. joint practices through the learning of a language/culture within a specific social context, i.e., work, studies, and every day life" (Puren, 2011). To this end, developed by the Council of Europe, the CEFR introduced a new methodological paradigm in the didactics of foreign languages/cultures. This action-oriented approach suggests that:

While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a

wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. (CEFR, 2001, p.15).

The so-called “action-oriented approach” encourages practices which arouse both oral and written interaction and thus stimulate the development of communicative language competences in terms of reception, production and interaction. An action-oriented approach emphasises a pedagogy which proposes tasks that create a context that is close to social practices and one that is linguistically rich and complex from a sociocultural perspective. This approach revolves around joint practices which, in an attempt to meet the needs arising from the expansion of the European Union, have increasingly influenced the conception of language handbooks which have begun to propose authentic real-life tasks. In other words, this approach has broken with simply proposing simulated tasks and now promotes practices rooted in a social context (Rosen, 2009)². Moreover, it is widely known that to implement an action-oriented approach, the authors of handbooks and French foreign language teachers often attempt to make a connection between lessons and educational projects. This involves focusing on the tasks at hand by using a collaborative approach within a global project and, in our specific case, within a writing project. According to Christian Puren, the integration of a project within a lesson may be said to be successful when “the language content presented and worked upon in the previous sections can actually be reused extensively by learners during the implementation of the project” (2009, p.135). Consequently, project achievement often appears at the end of a lesson.

The implementation of digital writing projects within FFL classes paves the way for the success of the action-oriented approach. Indeed, such multimedia projects promote interactions that lead to the creation of social ties, the carrying out of common tasks, and the development of collaborative strategies. All these projects provide opportunities to envision social practices. The resources availed by digital environments actually enable learners to derive meaning from social practices, for instance, by interacting on a blog (Pledel, 2007). Moreover, such environments promote collaboration between learners in the sense put forward by George (2001, p. 49) and built upon by Dejean-Thircuir and Mangenot (2006). These researchers differentiate the forms of collective learning by distinguishing “co-action”, where actors share resources but work towards individual productions, “cooperation”, where there is a collective production but there are various different sub-goals (what amounts to a certain division of labour), and “collaboration”, where the general objective, the production, and immediate sub-goals are shared (George, 2001, p. 49).

Recent studies undertaken in the teaching of French strongly advocate the adoption of the paradigm of multimodal and media literacy in the teaching of FFL (Lebrun and Lacelle, 2014). It is worth mentioning that the concept of multimodal and media literacy was first defined in 2012 by Monique Lebrun, Nathalie Lacelle and Jean-François Boutin to take into account all environmental media, including print, audiovisual, telephony and computers. It refers to “a literacy that combines different modes (iconic, linguistic and auditory), often on the same platform and within the same production (for example, a video

² In the CEFR, tasks are divided into three categories: pre-communication pedagogical tasks consist of exercises that specifically focus on the decontextualised practice of forms; “pedagogic communicative” tasks (which are well known from the action-oriented approach) are those in which learners take part in a simulation; and a “pretend task accepted voluntarily” in order to use the target language and thus prepare oneself to carry out tasks “close to real life” selected based on the needs of the student in an out-of-class or learning context (for example reading a handbook or taking notes during a lecture).

sequence may include animated images and sounds, both of which are delivered at the same time)" (Lebrun, Lacelle and Boutin, 2012).

Lebrun and Lacelle (2014) argue that although an individual must, without doubt, learn the language code, he or she must also learn to master other codes, other modes, and other languages. According to these researchers, "semiotic-type competences are more complex than in traditional literacy because one must analyse 'combinations of semiotic modes' operating simultaneously within the same multi-text" (example: comics, films, video games, or hypertext) (2014, p. 108). Indeed, the production of digital writing requires mastery of new knowledge and know-how focused primarily on the **multimodality** of discourses, their **hypertextuality** and their hybrid nature.

In a digital environment, the writing produced is accompanied by different modalities: images, colour, and sound, which, according to Kress, ensure "different types of semiotic tasks and each individual is capable of creating his or her own meaning" (2010, p.1). As Lebrun and Lacelle state, "all these resources allow the learner to engage in multimodal tasks and, in doing so, acquire multimodal skills" (2012, p. 83). These researchers assert that multimodal skills should be developed in the classroom. These skills refer to the ability to know and recognise, analyse and use both traditional media and new media, linguistic components in a text, semiotic components of an image (fixed or mobile) and, for instance, the codes specific to reading and producing texts using hypertext technology (2012). Indeed, hypertextuality is a feature of digital writing, especially in the citation practices in internet forums and messages, as Marcoccia (2012) has shown. The production of hypertext, i.e., non-linear digital writing connected by nodes and links (Rouet, 1993), is also a learning object for multimodal and media literacy researchers.

Regarding **hybridity**, several studies in the fields of language sciences and language teaching have analysed the proximity between oral and digital writings (Mangenot, 2009). Linguists have shown that digital writing offer substitutes to paraverbal and non-verbal markers of face-to-face oral communication: smileys (Marcoccia and Gauducheau, 2007); the use of capital letters for emphasis (Marcoccia, 2000); and the use of longer characters or the repetition of characters to simulate the effect of pronunciation (Panckhurst, 2006). Moreover, digital messages are characterised by the use of simplification strategies such as abbreviations and phonetic writing (Anis, 2000; Liénard, 2007). Born of the screen and destined for the screen, Jacques Anis describes writing as "interactive": "New situations of communication have led to the emergence of interactive and dialogic writing which challenges, orally, spontaneous and immediate reactions." (1998, p. 269).

This hybridisation is particularly present in *tweets*, which use several categories of clickable language forms and "techno-languages" with a hypertextual dimension and de-linearised statements (Paveau, 2013). Naturally, it refers to linear language forms but also symbols, icons, emoticons, not clickable ASCII art forms, URL links, and clickable technowords such as hashtags or pseudonyms. Other elements to take into account include avatars, the contextualisation of statements using hashtags, the 'details' function, retweets (RT), the "Reply" compose box and the timeline if writing on other platforms (Paveau, 2013). These forms can be combined in a more or less complex manner if users have adequate knowledge of the characteristics of literary genres.

How do textbook developers take advantage of these data and studies to propose digital writing tasks?

Methods

We selected seven FFL handbooks published between 2010 and 2016. These handbooks attracted our attention because they are used in the FFL University centre where

we teach³ and this offers interesting prospects to conduct further research on how they are actually used in the classroom. The handbooks are essentially intended for young adults enrolled in a university program and are published in France by three of the leading FFL publishers (*Éditions Maison des Langues, Didier, Hachette français langue étrangère*).

Table 1. References of the handbooks used.

Title	Level CEFR	Composition	Authors	Year	Publishers
<i>Le Nouvel Édito Level B2</i>	B2	Student book + CD Workbook	Bazou, V., Brillant C., Racine, R., Schneker, J.-C.	2010	Didier
<i>Totem 1</i>	A1	Student book + DVD-ROM Digital handbook for the student Digital handbook for the teacher	Lopes M.-J., Le Bougnec J.-T.	2014	Hachette français langue étrangère
<i>Totem 2</i>	A2	Student book + DVD-ROM Digital handbook for the student Digital handbook for the teacher	Lopes M.-J., Le Bougnec J.-T.	2014	Hachette français langue étrangère
<i>Totem 3</i>	B1	Student book + DVD-ROM Digital handbook for the student Digital handbook for the teacher	Le Bougnec J.-T., Lopes M.-J.	2015	Hachette français langue étrangère
<i>Entre nous 1</i>	A1	Student book, workbook, audio CD, virtual space comprised of digital handbooks, educational guides, audio files and their transcriptions, corrections, web 2.0 activities, teaching guides, DELF (<i>Diplôme d'études en langue française</i> is a French Language Studies diploma from France's Ministry of Education for non-native speakers of French) assessment grids, a grammar handbook and a methodological handbook.	Pruvost N., Courteaud F., Gomez-Jordona Sonia, <i>et alii.</i>	2015	Éditions Maison des langues
<i>Entre nous 2</i>	A2	Student book, workbook, audio CD, virtual space comprised of digital handbooks, educational guides, audio files and their transcriptions, corrections, web 2.0 activities, teaching guides, DELF (<i>Diplôme d'études en langue française</i> is a French Language Studies diploma from France's Ministry of Education for non-native speakers of French) assessment grids, a grammar handbook and a methodological handbook.	Chati Fatiha, Huor Catherine, Malorey C. <i>et alii.</i>	2015	Éditions Maison des langues
<i>Entre nous 3</i>	B1	Student book, workbook, audio CD, virtual space comprised of digital handbooks, educational guides, audio files and their transcriptions, corrections, web 2.0 activities, teaching guides, DELF ¹ assessment grids, a grammar handbook and a methodological handbook.	Avanzi A., Malorey C., Pruvost N. <i>et alii.</i>	2016	Éditions Maison des langues

¹ Diplôme d'études en langue française is a French Language Studies diploma from France's Ministry of Education for non-native speakers of French

³ Department of French Education Abroad - University of Lille, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences.

After selecting the handbooks, we identified the writing tasks' instructions, which called for digital communication platforms such as chats, SMSs, emails, threads in forums, blog posts, sites, and postings on social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). In this set, we identified 125 instructions calling for written productions and retained the 101 instructions that called for a digital production. This figure shows that multimedia writing has become an increasingly important issue both within classroom settings and in society as a whole.

Our study is evaluative in nature (Van der Maren, 2003). Drawing on the characteristics of digital writing tasks and the specificities of these tasks as defined by the available research, we will examine the 101 instructions proposed in the handbooks and workbooks. The analysis will revolve around the two points we highlighted at the beginning of this paper, i.e., the nature of proposed digital writing tasks and the challenges encountered.

Results

Digital writing tasks and collaboration

A total of 11 tasks are to be performed individually, 37 in groups of two and 53 in small groups. It is therefore clear that the seven sets of FFL training materials prioritise collaborative learning in writing tasks. Some instructions call for collaboration with other language users or other learners, both in the quest for ideas and when drafting texts. This is the case in the writing phase in preparation of an oral reading task described below:

“Task 1 - newsflash of current positive events on a mobile device.

1. You are going to make a newsflash of current positive events. First, in groups, brainstorm all the positive news you have heard.
2. Each group should choose one positive event then write a short paragraph using the Five Question Technique: Where? Who? When? What? Why?
3. Each group must choose its presenter and decide the order in which the presenters will read the newsflashes.

Tips:

Think of unusual or funny events.

Write short sentences.

Remember to reread the newsflash amongst yourselves before filming.”

(*Entre nous* 3, 2016, p. 154)

The objective here is to encourage collaboration among learners by proposing a situation in which the overall goal, the production, and the immediate sub-goals are shared. Although this mode of collaborative work is proposed in all the instructions, these instructions do not refer to the role collaborative tools such as virtual notebooks, for instance “pads”, may play. Collaboration is encouraged during the phase where learners search for ideas, i.e., during oral discussions preceding the production of the text. This is the

case for 12 of the 23 instructions of the corpus. Below is an example:

“PUBLISH A MANIFESTO!

1. You've had enough of certain types of behaviour on social networks. In groups, make a list of what gets on your nerves: photos of small cats, people who share photos of everything they eat, people who make public declarations of love.
2. You are going to write a manifesto to criticise these attitudes. Agree on a theme:

I think we can write a manifesto criticising people who share everything they eat on social networks.
3. Write your manifesto using several short paragraphs and publish it online.
4. Read other manifestos and like whichever you prefer. Which manifesto met the greatest success?”

(*Entre nous* 3, 2016: 70).

Phase 3 of the instructions shows that digital platforms are perceived as publishing tools rather than as text editors allowing collaboration. Here, digital writing is presented as a linear process (search for ideas, drafting, publication) which does not combine the different possible modes, i.e., iconic, linguistic, and auditory modes.

Digital writing tasks: simulated tasks or authentic real-life tasks?

The first reading reveals that through the proposed scenarios, the authors of handbooks appear to take into account new uses of writing brought about by the digital revolution. Indeed, they propose a wide range of different genres of news events which learners are expected to write about in a specific digital environment:

Table 2. Reported digital writing tasks.

Types of texts	Presentations on slide shows	SMSs	Emails	Web pages	Articles on blogs	Messages on forums	Messages on digital social networks	Total
Number of tasks	5	3	23	65	5	7	3	101

We noted that proposed tasks mainly required writings predominantly presented in an exposition format when learners were asked to design articles for web pages (65), blogs (5) slide shows, and platforms for the presentation of expositions (5). Below is a good example:

“Our propaganda page.

- 1) You are going to write one page of a propaganda newspaper. First, think about unusual, funny and boring news and share your ideas amongst yourselves.

- 2) Put your ideas together under different headings: funny, boring, incredible... Then come up with a title for your newspaper's page.
- 3) In groups of two, write "a false article" using the Question Technique (when? who? what? where? how? why?)
- 4) Group your false information articles together to make your newspaper headline.

Tips:

To choose the title of your newspaper, get ideas from existing newspapers.

To get inspiration for your propaganda, look at the "Miscellaneous" section of real newspapers. You can use the site <http://clonezone.link/> (*Entre nous* 3, 2016, p.154).

There are therefore few interactive writing opportunities in this corpus of 101 writing tasks instructions. Moreover, an in-depth reading of the instructions shows that the handbooks do not necessarily call for authentic digital writing tasks but rather, simulated digital writing tasks that can be performed on paper. In a total of 101 writing tasks, 23 were expected to be performed on a digital platform but 78 of them called for the simulated writing of e-mails on paper. In the handbook *Entre nous 2* (2015), these tasks were actually placed in the "written production" section portrayed by a logo... represented by a pencil.

Table 3. Authentic digital writing tasks.

Types of texts	Presentations on Slideshows	SMSs	Emails	Web pages	Articles on blogs	Messages on forums	Messages on digital social networks	Total
Number of tasks	5	0	1	10	4	0	3	23

For example, below is a creative writing assignment that could, almost word for word, be included in a handbook published in the 1990s, i.e., dating back to the second generation of communicative approach handbooks. However, in 1990, the platform cited would have been a "Letters to the editor" section of a printed newspaper rather than a forum. Below are the instructions published in 2015:

"Written production

D. You read this message on a forum and you write a post to talk about your experience.

Psycho

The encounter that changed my life

You too have met someone at an important moment in your life? Someone

who has changed your life? Tell us about the circumstances of this encounter and how they have changed your life” (*Entre nous 2*, 2015: 180).

In this handbook, published in 2015, the writing task was to be carried out on paper. Our corpus thus only has 23 real digital writing tasks.

What can be said of the role these writing tasks play in teaching sequences?

How are authentic digital writing tasks taken into account within actual lessons

It is worth mentioning that the space accorded to digital writing during lessons varies according to the length of the text to be produced. When the task involves brief messages such as e-mails or messages written in response to a message posted in a forum, it can be placed within a lesson, for instance, after a reading assignment. In such an event, it is part of a scenario such as in the example below:

“Pierre saw these two advertisements (Throw your party in a circus tent - An Ice Bar for a memorable event!) which gave him ideas to organise his wife’s birthday party. Choose one of the two events and write Pierre’s email requesting further information.”

(*Entre nous 2*, 2015, p.115).

However, in our entire corpus, the 14 tasks requesting the production of longer texts were placed at the end of the lesson. In *Edito niveau B2* (2010), and according to the foreword to the guide, one or two pages titled “Workshops” are proposed at the end of each lesson to carry out group tasks/projects and interact in an authentic, fun and creative way. The authors specify that learners will be able to reuse the knowledge acquired throughout the lesson by using their creativity (*Édito niveau B2*, 2010, educational guide). The handbook suggests that they should create, as a class, a real food blog using *overblog.com* as a platform and drawing inspiration from online culinary blogs. There is a clear desire to make a connection between lessons and educational projects in each of the handbooks.

The *Totem* collection also focuses on writing tasks which are to be carried out in a collaborative manner within a global project. For example, *Totem 2* has eight files and each file contains an agreement page, four lessons, double page grouping activities that can be re-used and an “Action” page proposing a project. The project can be a writing project such as the drafting of a biographical dictionary to be published on the class site (*Totem 2*, 2014, p.48).

The promotional brochure of the *Entre nous* collection published by *Éditions Maison des Langues* displays, as a distinctive feature, “lesson clearly organised and structured around the achievement of final tasks” which can lead, for example, to the collective accomplishment of a newflash of current positive events on a mobile device (*Entre nous 3*, 2016, p.154).

While digital writing is thus taken into account during the implementation of writing projects, its location at the end of lessons in our corpus shows that it is perceived as the climax of lessons learned in subsequent activities (grammar, vocabulary, conjugation). It is the culmination of an entire scenario. What can be said of how the specificities of digital writing are taught?

Discussion

To analyse how the authors of the handbooks expected to develop learners' digital and language skills, we drew on two generic features of digital writing identified by Lacelle and Lebrun (2015), i.e., multimodality and hypertextuality (see 2.2.). In addition to these two features, we also focused on the hybridity of digital texts, in terms of both oral and written contexts.

Multimodality

Although digital technology has facilitated and increased the text-image association and included the sound dimension, it must be said that our corpus of handbooks encouraged learners neither to write using various semiotic forms (written, image, sound, video) nor to explore the possibilities of multimedia writing. Much like the instructions below, the other instructions in our corpus did not develop learners' knowledge concerning the possibilities of multimodal writing:

“Communication

5. How will you do it? You feel overwhelmed by the digital world and like you are no longer free. In groups of two, imagine, orally, what you can do to disconnect.

6. Detox and freedom

In groups of two, create the home page of the site www.detoxetliberte.fr.”

This is a simulated task where, admittedly, learners are encouraged to develop their language skills, but using print-based media.

Hypertextuality

One in the 23 instructions identified in real digital writing tasks (see table 3) referred to hypertextuality.

“WORKSHOPS

You are going to write a travel diary.

You will give a step-by-step account of a one-week trip: departure, date of arrival, different events, highlights. To this end, you will use photos, write and collect texts, and you will possibly add a video (or not) and links like on a travel blog if you want to share your trip online.

Approach: form groups of three or four people” (*Édito niveau B2, 2010, p.65*).

This unique instruction evokes hypermedia writing that connects hypertextuality and multimedia and encourages learners to choose the media and modes best suited to what they want to express.

Hybridity

It is worth noting that the processes highlighting the hybrid nature of digital writing are

not covered in the FFL handbooks in our corpus except in the form of practical exercises in some workbooks. Similarly, no tasks in our corpus initiated learners to the writing of tweets. The handbooks focused only on observable language forms and required linear writing, much like in the instructions below:

“Give the best image of yourself

A. Look at the pictures accompanying these tweets. In your opinion, what is the topic of the tweet thread? Discuss about this in small groups.

B. Read the twitter feed. What are respondents’ opinions and arguments?

C. Read the twitter feed and highlight the expressions that approve or disapprove the topic. Then, fill in the table.

Join the discussion by posting your own tweet. Respect the short format” (*Entre nous* 3, 2016: 70).

The only constraint imposed by this platform here is to respect the prescribed length by writing a message which respects a given number of characters. A tweet, however, is a medium which uses several categories of clickable language and techno-language forms which delinearise statements (Paveau, 2013).

Conclusion

The analysis of the 101 writing instructions revealed that the developers of FFL handbooks in our corpus are yet to develop effective practices of digital writing. Indeed, out of the 101 tasks identified, learners were invited to carry out 88 simulated digital writing tasks.

The greater emphasis on simulated digital writing tasks in handbooks is probably linked to the absence of a curriculum strategy to develop digital literacy skills that could accompany the development of the language skills defined by the CEFR. At a time when learners are living in a world of multimodal texts, authors of FFL handbooks have not yet begun to take into account available research findings relative to the relationship between literacy and digital technology to implement, within FFL classes, digital writing lessons that take all these dimensions into account. There is a need, however, to take into account the constraints handbook authors encounter. Indeed, it is possible that the instructions publishers provide are yet to allow them to direct learners towards real digital writing tasks. Moreover, FFL handbooks are intended for audiences around the world, in countries where not all classes necessarily have computer equipment. Conducting interviews with the handbooks’ authors and publishers may further enrich our exploratory research.

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