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Introduction: Definition and Problem

Grammatical gender is a feature of the French language that is especially foreign to native English speakers. French nouns all have gender and thus can each be qualified as masculine or feminine. For English native speakers, the distinction of these basic parts in a foreign language is not a natural skill. Whereas in English gender is semantic and not grammatically marked, gender in French is a formal component of its grammar (Ayoun,119). The problem lies with the fact that only 10.5% of nouns in French have semantically based gender (Ayoun,119). For the English native speaker which only rules gender semantically, the French grammatical gender system is seemingly completely arbitrary. Why a table is feminine and a book is masculine is a question that plagues the learner of French as a second language. It is what many might describe as a guessing game. The simple fact that inanimate objects are either feminine or masculine is troubling to students of the French language.

Though knowing whether a word is masculine or feminine will not hinder communication in most circumstances, it is indispensable to becoming fluent in the second language. A speaker accidentally using *le table* instead of *la table* will likely successfully communicate about a table while the only repercussion may be a grimace. In writing, grammatical gender becomes all the more important when agreements must be made with nouns, pronouns, determiners, adjectives, and past participles. The round table becomes *La table ronde*. The incorrect *le table rond* not only now has *two* errors, but the pronunciation changes and thus hinders clear communication. Not to mention those nouns whose gender changes meaning and can change *le foie* from the liver, to *la fois* the time.

For second language learners of French language, native-like knowledge of grammatical gender is a persistent problem if not a seemingly unattainable goal.

To further demonstrate how complicated the gender system in French is, Ayoun classifies the different types of gender in French language. The first is semantic gender, based on the natural gender of the referent. Example: un frère, a brother. Second is morphological gender which is the same lexical word but whose morphological form changes based on the gender. Example: une ingénieure, un ingénieur (no audible difference) or américaine vs américain

(audible difference). Third is syntactic gender which is the relation between the determiner (e.g. le/la) and the noun or the noun and the adjective. There is finally a category called "les épicènes" which describes nouns that have both genders and nouns whose gender does not change despite the gender of the referent. For example, un enfant/une enfant (a child). (Ayoun, 120).

In addition to these types of gender, there exists a subset of nouns that are gender homonyms where spelling is the same, however, changing the gender changes the meaning completely as in the example "un moule", a mold, or "une moule" a mussel. There are also homophones which although they are spelled differently they sound the same and mistaking the gender could hinder communication as seen in the earlier example of "un foie" a liver and "une fois" a time. Synonyms may also have differing genders such as *un vélo* and *une bicyclette*, both referring to a bike.

Further complexity lies with compound words. As Sisson delineates, compounds that are left headed have the same gender as their left-most noun, as in the case of une pause-café, which is composed of une pause and un café. Deverbal compounds, which are composed of a verb plus a noun are always masculine, for example, *un porte-monnaie* (porter=to wear, monnaie=feminine noun)

Another complication is that there exists a small group of words whose gender changes as number fluctuates. *Amour,* love, begins singly as *un amour* (masculine) but becomes feminine when it is plural, e.g., les belles amours. This also includes *délice, orgue*, and *œuvre.*

French learners also face nouns that are preceded by determiners of the opposite gender. This occurs occasionally with nouns that begin with vowels as a phonetic feature of the language as to not repeat two vowels in a row. An example that is frequently used is that of *ton amie,* your friend (female). "Amie" here is the feminine word for friend, but it is preceded by the possessive article "ton" that precedes masculine nouns rather than the possessive article "ta" for feminine nouns.

The noun *gens* "people" is a commonly used noun that has very interesting gender features. Gens is a plural animate noun that may refer to either male or female referents. Gens requires both feminine and masculine agreement based on where the adjectives are placed in relation to this noun. Preposed adjectives require feminine agreement whereas postposed adjectives require masculine agreement. (Ayoun, 121)

       Les vieilles gens (the old people)   *vielles* (f) vs. *vieux* (m)

Les gens heureux (the happy people) *heureux* (m) vs. *heureuses* (f)

Grammatical gender is far from simple. Whereas the French speaker has what seems to be an innate skill with grammatical gender, it is with difficulty that this skill is acquired for the native English speaker. For the native speaker of English, the simple binary gender feature of nouns is daunting enough. When all of the complications are then mixed in, the task of acquiring grammatical gender becomes seemingly impossible. This paper will provide a study of the multiple variables that affect how grammatical gender is acquired as well as how this task is addressed in the classroom of French as a foreign language.

How is Grammatical Gender acquired?

It is first important to observe how grammatical gender is acquired by native speakers as this is the most natural occurring process of learning a language. It is safe to say that native speakers are exposed to grammatical gender from an extremely early age. Studies have proved that grammatical gender is acquired in native speakers by the age of 3 (Clark, 1985 in Sokolik 40). In "Assignment of gender to French nouns in primary and secondary language : a connectionist model", Sokolik describes that being that the age of acquisition is so early; it would be unlikely that this acquisition is a result of "formal instruction or overt rules for recognizing or using correct gender markings" (40). To the contrary, native learners acquire language and thus the grammatical feature of gender through language experience.
Tucker et al. found that French children's grammar books do not include clues or explicit instruction for distinguishing gender. They cite one elementary text that gives the child the following direction

> "Pour savoir si un nom commun est au masculine, essayez de mettre devant lui 'le' ou 'un'"   To know whether a noun is masculin, try to put 'le'/'the' or 'un'/'a' in front of it]
> (*Galichet and Mondouand in Tucker et al, 14*).

It is important to note that this direction assumes that the child already knows which nouns are preceded by *le/un* vs *la/une*. The direction is only providing the definition for "masculine" nouns versus "feminine" nouns. The child will have already formed a schema with two meaningful categories, one for masculine and one for feminine. (Tucker et al. 15)

Other conclusions we can make about the native speakers early acquisition of grammatical gender are that children receive feedback in the form of recasts likely from parents. When a child says "le maison", the witness to this gender mistake would most likely repeat "la maison" back for the child. Here, without explicit instruction as to *why* or even *what*, the child subconsciously receives this information which then adds to his schema for that noun and perhaps similar nouns.

Where native and non-native speakers differ is largely in language experience and a well-developed schema for the language information. Second language learners experience with the L2 language often comes at a much later age and in a constrained, time limited environment. In combination with this lack of experiential time, students begin with a very limited schema of the second language. The experience in a foreign language classroom is undoubtedly very different from the native speaker's experience simply by the difference between explicit training and formal instruction versus the trial and error and full immersion, therefore, the acquisition of the language and its grammatical gender will require a different approach than that of a native speaker. What may be completely subconscious process for the native speaker requires a conscious effort from the second language learner.

Sokolik describes three routes in which the second language learner can acquire grammatical gender;

1) Learn to recognize that certain orthographic and phonetic groupings in nouns are predictive of gender assignment
2) Rely upon contextual information that specifies noun gender, that is, articles and adjective agreement, over the course of vocabulary acquisitions
3) Rely upon rote memorization of nouns with associated gender marked articles. (Sokolik,40)

What appears to be a frustratingly limited list of approaches for the second language learner, many have performed studies to give more information and illuminate any tools the L2 learner might be able to use to tackle the task of grammatical gender. First I will examine a study by Tucker et al. that illuminates the French speaker's skill with Sokolik's strategy number one.

Tucker's study

To study the acquisition of grammatical gender for second language learners it is important to first understand how it is acquired for native speakers of French. Tucker performed a study addressing the French speaker's skill with grammatical gender to discover if grammatical gender in French is in fact completely arbitrary (minus the miniscule 10.5% of nouns that have semantic gender). Tucker's study aimed to determine whether the native French speaker's ability to distinguish between masculine and feminine nouns is in any way related to the inherent structure of the nouns themselves. The general method of the study was to compile lists of words based upon their endings and beginnings, therefore morphology, as well as the phonetics. To identify patterns or systems further, the study incorporated invented nouns which used word parts that were either predominantly masculine or feminine. These were mixed in the study to show whether the gender predictors were true and whether the subjects could generalize a pattern to identify the gender of an unknown noun.

The study was successful in that its results explained one aspect of the native French speaker's skill with grammatical gender. It is an example of rule-based behavior that native speakers are able to consistently assign gender to regularly occurring nouns, rare nouns, invented nouns and nonsense nouns. The rules are a series of connections between word composition both beginnings and endings (morphology), and phonology. As delineated in Tucker's study, nouns' morphological endings (mostly suffixes) include –*isme, -eur, -oire, -ege*, etc. There are over 570 endings for masculine nouns alone, disregarding exceptions and outliers (Ayoun, 123). The sheer number of endings that together compose the morphological rule that native speakers appear to follow combined then with noun phonology patterns add up to be an overwhelming learning task for second language learners. Ayoun represents Tucker's phonology findings in two tables below. (122-123)

Table 1. Consonantal final phones by tokens (compiled from Tucker et al. 1977)

phone	spelling	#tokens	M	F	%
[ʒ]	-j, -ge, -ges	1453	1368	85	94%
[m]	-m, -me, -mes	1406	1292	114	92%
[z]	-se, -ze	612	61	551	90%
[r]	c+re, +res, v+[r]+c	512	417	95	81%
[f]	-f, -fs, -fe, -fes, -phe, -phes	131	101	30	77%
[g]	-g, -gs, -c, -gue, -gues	235	172	63	73%
[v]	-v, -ve, -ves	143	45	98	69%
[j]	-v+il, ille, illes	352	114	238	68%
[n]	-n, -ne, -nes	1135	358	777	68%
[d]	-d, -de, -des	668	227	441	66%
[ʃ]	-ch, -sh, -che, -ches	290	99	191	66%
[b]	-b, -be, -bes, -bbe, -bbes	129	84	45	65%
[ɲ]	-gne, -gnes	69	27	42	61%
[s]	-s, -ss, -x, -ce, -se, -xe, -ces	1379	531	848	61%
[l]	-l, -ls, -le, -les, -lle, -lles	1126	474	652	58%
[k]	-c, -cs, -ch, -chs, -ck, cks, -q, -que, -ques	609	333	276	55%
[p]	-p, -pe, -pes	214	104	110	51%
[t]	-t, -te, -tte, -the, -tes, -ttes, -thes	2269	1162	1107	51%

Table 2. Vocalic final phones by tokens

phone	spelling	#tokens	M	F	%
[œ̃]	-um, -un, uns, -unt	17	17	0	100%
[ã]	-an, -anc, -and, -anf, -ang, -aon, -amp, -ans, -ancs, -amps, -ant, -end, -eng, -ens, -ends, -ems, -empt, -ent, -ents, -ants	1963	1949	14	99%
[ɛ̃]	-aim, -ym, -én, -ien, -en, -ain, -ein, -in, -aing, -oing, -eing, -éens, -iens, -ains, -eins, -ins, -inct, -ingt, -ient, -aint, -eint, -int	938	929	9	99%
[ø]	-oeud, -eue, oeufs, -eut, -eu, -eux	189	184	5	99%
[o]	-o, -oc, -op, -os, -ots, -ot, -aud, -aut, -ault, -au, -aux, -eaux, -aulx	865	841	24	97%
[y]	-u, -ul, -us, -uts, -ut, -ux, -ue, -ues	201	195	6	95%
[u]	-ou, -ouc, -oul, -oo, -oup, -ous, -out, -ouls, -oux, -oue, -oues	171	150	21	88%
[wa]	-oi, -oids, -ois, -oigt, -oit, -oix, -oie, -oies, oye	179	153	26	85%
[a]	-a, -ac, -ap, -ats, -as, -at	791	648	143	82%
[i]	-ic, -id, -il, -is, -it, -ix, -i, -y, -ys, -ie, -ies, -ye	2337	575	1762	75%
[õ]	-on, -om, -on+c, -om+c	2668	794	1874	70%
[e]	-é, -és, -ée, -ées, -er, -ers, -ez, -ai, -ais, -ait, -aits, - aix, -aie, -aies, -ay, -et, -êt, -ès, -ect, -ects, -ey, -egs	3416	1962	1454	57%

The first table represents the consonantal final phones common in French words. The percentages represent how accurate a gender prediction is based on the final phone. With percentages ranging from 94 to 51, the data shows that these tones do not make good predictors for gender as the phones do not belong predominantly to either feminine or masculine. This combined with the fact that there are up to nine different spellings within one final phone proves that this cannot provide a solid rule for language learners to follow.

The second table represents again the same complexity of vocalic final phones. Here, there is one phone that is completely accurate that is the masculine predictor phone of –*um, -un, -uns*, and –*unt*. Others follow that are also surprisingly accurate. These vocalic final phones seem to represent at least a group of five phones that can accurately predict gender. This is what Tucker describes as a rule that the native French speaker has acquired early in age simply by repeated exposure to this pattern in the language. Again, the data collected supports Tucker's hypothesis that the French speaker's skill with grammatical gender is an example of rule based behavior; however, it does not provide a practical approach for the second language learner.

Tucker summarizes the study's findings which are intended to provide an understanding which can "contribute, at the theoretical level, to a better understanding of language acquisition and language behavior, and also, at the practical level, to a better understanding of the problems

faced by the second language learner" (Tucker et al., 57) Tucker et al provides then a summary in five general points:

First, the native speaker does not simply rely on memory for gender assignments but that he uses the information he knows to extend to new noun situations.

Second, the native speaker does make errors in cases where an exception to the rule is a frequently occurring noun or in cases where there is limited experience. This suggests that language experience is positively correlated to a higher degree of accuracy in identifying gender.

Third, native speakers make errors more commonly than expected with nouns that begin with a vowel. This supports the theory that the native speaker relies heavily on contextual/syntactic support.

Fourth, the non-native speaker performs with what seems to be a completely random classification system and perform very poorly. The lack of experiential language exposure leads to poor performance. Tucker had completed another study of university students and tested introductory, intermediate and advanced learners and found that performance increased as the years of experience increased.

Fifth and lastly, the results of the introductory students suggest that the arrangement of the nouns matters. If the nouns with similar endings with showed together, students might be able to see the similarities and patterns which would further help them adopt this rule-governed behavior in acquiring grammatical gender. (Tucker et al., 58-60)

General Discussion

Ayoun describes the results of this study as "comprehensive system of gender assignment rules based on morpho-phonological and semantic rules [that] appears to form a coherent and relatively reliable system, but it is quite complex and fraught with numerous exceptions and highly variable predictive values."(121-122) We know that there is in fact a system to the seemingly arbitrary gender assignment to French nouns, however, the native English speaker must understand the complexity in using this approach to acquire grammatical gender. The fact that morphology appears to be a predictor of gender for native speakers illuminates Sokolik's #1 as, though daunting, an effective strategy for learning grammatical gender for the second language learner. Numerous lists of word endings categorized by gender are readily available to the second language learner online. A very comprehensive list is available on about.com at http://french.about.com/od/grammar/a/genderpatterns.htm by Laura. K. Lawless. The lists are

complete with many exceptions listed and provide a great reference for the second language learner. Another useful tool that uses the word-ending approach to learning grammatical gender is the Ipad application "French Gender."

This app has a list of the 66 word endings and the exceptions for each one. The list visually represents the usual gender of the word ending by color, pink for feminine and blue for masculine. Under each ending is a brief summary about the pattern, a list of example conforming nouns and a list of exceptions. A great feature of the application is that under the summary of the pattern is a personalized "comfort percentage" of how well the user has performed on the selected pattern in the practice modes. These practice modes include guided, random, and patterns only. Guided is practice that repeats certain patterns that the user struggles with. Random is a mix of any or all noun endings to the user's selection. The user can limit or add patterns in order to practice certain patterns. Patterns only mode shows only the ending and the user must determine the typical gender of the pattern. This excludes the exceptions which follows the recommendation of Tucker.

These practice modes give the French word, what pattern it belongs to, then a feminine symbol and a masculine symbol that the user clicks on to identify. The bottom also optionally includes the English translation. A yellow bar at the top shows the user's mastery of the word ending, the yellow darkens as proficiency improves. When the user is incorrect, a pop up describes the error by telling whether the word example is a typical word of the pattern or if it is an exception to the pattern.

Example of the random practice mode:
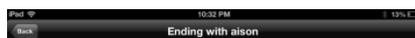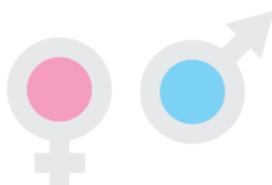
The creators describe the application as a tool to build up the "reflex" of grammatical gender. This application provides a tool for second language learners to practice recognizing nominal gender based on word ending. It is a thorough program in that it allows flexibility for focus by the individual user as well as to track the individual's competency and progress with each specific pattern.

There is an area of this application that is consistent with Tucker's study, that is the practice does not allow a certain amount of time for the learner to acquire the general rule with positive examples before it starts giving exceptions. As discussed in point three of the Tucker study results, the nouns that are exceptions to a general pattern or predictor of gender pose difficulty for native speakers. The results showed that native speakers struggled with nouns which are exceptions to a general rule of gender by morphology or phonology. Tucker stresses particular importance on the exposure to exceptions. With the understanding of this area of error for even native speakers, the approach on exceptions for second language learners must take some further consideration. Tucker describes that in addition to an arrangement supporting morphology patterns, "vocabulary could be taught with somewhat more leniency; that is, students could be permitted to make "errors" on the far-out exceptions so that the basic regularities could be learned and the associated changes in sentences attendant on gender made and used with more confidence."(61)

Arrangement/Sequence:

Something that Tucker also explores in his discussion of the study results is that of the arrangement of nouns by grammatical gender patterns. Tucker advises "words with distinctive ending characteristics could be congregated to highlight the regularities so that the student could infer the underlying regularities for himself in a fashion analogous to the native speaker of the language."(60) This purposeful arrangement would be advantageous in addition to explicit direction to call the student's attention to the patterns. A side study "suggests that the non-native who receives explicit training similar to the indirect training received by the native may quickly master this feature of the language"(61).

Surridge proposes that native speakers experience a chronology of acquisition. Her study proposes that native speakers acquire language in a sequential order that is based on linguistic features that is conducive to acquiring grammatical gender. The study was completed with the Dictionnaire du francais fundamental as a representative of nouns acquired in the early ages (86). The results show that the words that native speakers are first exposed to are mostly single

morphemes, some suffixed nouns and only a few compound-nouns. From the data, Surridge proposes that the speaker's beginning learning follows the following pattern (87).

This timeline represents the overall focus (phonology, morphology, exceptions), while the text underneath represents what information the learner is being presented.
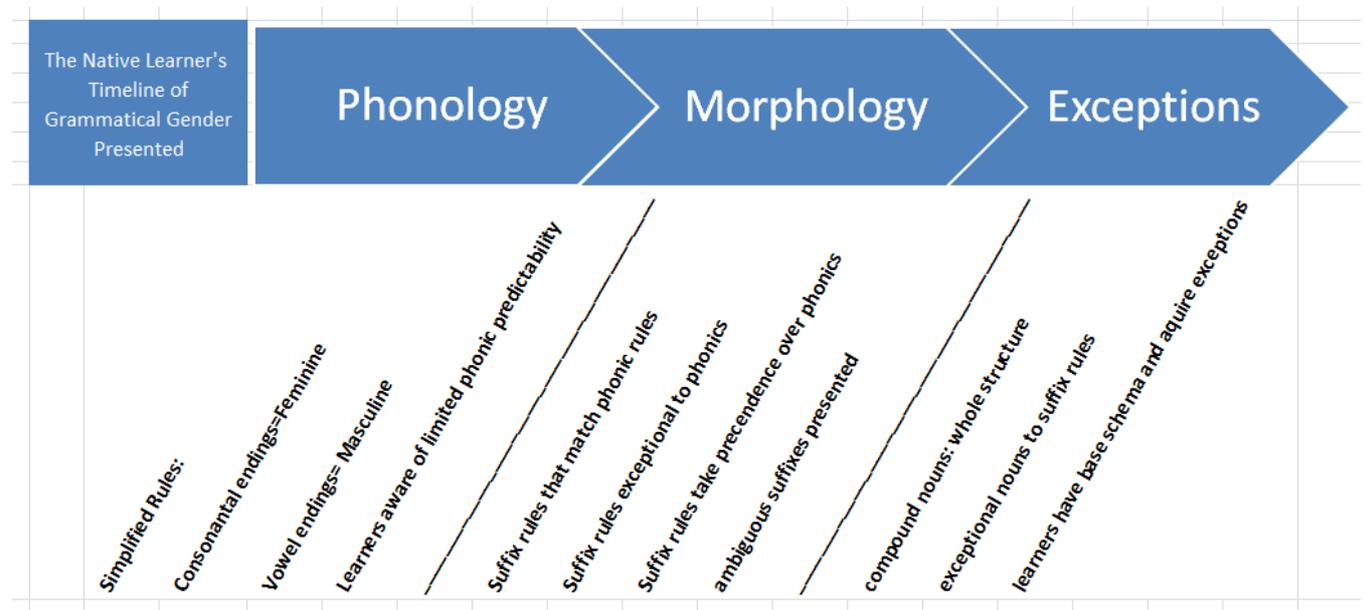
This timeline shows the relative sequence that the native speaker may encounter. The arrow continuing on after the "exceptions" segment signifies that the learner will continue to adopt exceptional rules from this point on. In this sequence, conflicting information is not presented simultaneously and therefore the speaker has time to process the information given. Surridge notes that in the phonology stage and the morphology stage, "irregularities are tolerated at the level of best known forms"(89). Altogether, the results from her study suggest that the native speaker first acquires simple words that follow phonological patterns, then learns to recognize morphological word endings, and then be exposed to items such as compounds that are exceptional and do not follow any obvious pattern (87). Surridge then proposes several approaches to grammatical gender for the second language learner based on her results from this study (see curricula).

In general, Tucker explains that the native French speaker naturally picks up the concept and the usage of grammatical gender simply by exposure to the language. Whereas the native speaker can over time pick up on these subtle differences simply by experience with the language, the second language learner does not have the same constant language experience. This lack of experience seems to be the general reason for the poor performance of second language

learners on gender identification. The second language learner does not often have the type of language experience of a native speaker readily available. Acquisition is undeniably going to be different for the second language learner. Learning lists of morphemes and phonemes is not the way native speakers become familiar with grammatical gender. For the second language learner it may be that Sokolik's step 1 of learning word morphology/phonology (as seen in Tucker's study and Surridge's sequence) in combination with step 3 of rote memorization must be combined for the most advantageous grammatical gender comprehension.

Feedback/Recasts

The exposure to language also involves one important aspect of acquiring a language, that of feedback. The native speaker likely receives corrective feedback while learning grammatical gender. It is as simple as a parent or teacher repeating what the child says with the correct gender determiner. This feedback allows the native speaker to make adjustments to his/her schema. Feedback is important distinguisher between a native speaker's acquisition of grammatical gender and that of a second language learner. Dasse-Askildson performed a study on the effects of corrective feedback in foreign language instruction, specifically with grammatical gender. Dasse-Askildson cites "Schmidt's (1998, 2001) Noticing Hypothesis, that awareness of specific linguistic items in the input is necessary for language learning to occur"(2). Feedback requires the learner to process the input for a second time. One method of feedback is that of recast, which is a way to not interrupt the student's output but rather to paraphrase with the correction. Dasse-Askildson hypothesizes that positive evidence is not sufficient to acquire grammatical gender; therefore, corrective feedback is necessary. The main question of the study was if negative feedback in the form of recasts would have a positive effect on student learning. The issue of feedback brings motivation into question as well. Corrective feedback can be effective only if attention is paid and therefore, the learner must be motivated. This study also considered the correlation between the degree of motivation and student learning.

Dasse-Askildson performed this study with first semester university students of French. It included one control group with no feedback given and one recast group who were given feedback in the form of written recasts. The test also included a questionnaire on motivation. The subjects were tested over three days. The study results were not significant. The data showed that students who received recast feedback made improvements between the pre-test and the post test. There were not, however, significant differences between the control group and the recast group. The motivation results also were not significant, the recast group showed overall more motivation. What was discovered was a high level of anxiety as well as very low

self-confidence with the material which is consistent with the content (grammatical gender) and the level (university first semester French).

Dasse-Askildson draws conclusions from the study results that recasts are not extremely effective for beginning students and perhaps can only be useful when the student is cognitively ready (15). Advanced learners may be more able to process the information presented and therefore the recasts would prove more effective. Second, the motivation results were ambiguous. The recast group was more motivated and performed better overall. It is unclear if the students performed better as a result of higher motivation or if they performed better as a result of perceiving the corrective feedback or whether the results were based on chance since the results were not statistically significant. Knowing that the study subjects did show improvement, one can assume that recasts will not have a negative effect on learning.

Grammatical gender acquisition is based on recasts as is questionable because of the numerous exceptions to the rules that Tucker's study reviewed. The hypothesis, that feedback improves the learner's ability to distinguish between masculine and feminine, would require that specific attention is paid to grammatical gender in order for the second language learner to acquire. For native speakers, specific attention is not necessarily paid to grammatical gender. Similarly, in the foreign language classroom, the attention given to grammatical gender is slim. Danso-Askildson states "grammatical gender is considered very difficult to acquire because it is of low communicative value while being overly present in the language (Danso-Askildson, 4). Teachers of French as a foreign language are concerned with overall comprehension and language output and therefore attention is focused on the larger picture rather than minor errors of nominal gender. As discussed in the study's summary, more advanced students of French may have mastered the communicative goals and would have the ability to focus attention on the accuracy of grammatical gender. Essentially, any attention given to grammatical gender could improve the learner's proficiency and recasts provide a great opportunity for reflection. The questions remain of how effective oral or written feedback is, at what level, what activity can they be used for maximized learning.

Deaf: Relation to sound

Another support to Tucker's explanation of the French speaker's skill with grammatical gender being related to phonology is that of French deaf speakers' struggle. *Cued Speech and Language Acquisition: The Case of Grammatical Gender Morpho-Phonology* provides a study of how this skill is acquired in deaf children illuminating the aural qualities associated with acquiring

grammatical gender. Hage, Alegria, and Perier performed a study of 9 deaf children who have been trained with Cued Speech, symbols made near the mouth to clarify the vocalization of words, thus to represent the phonology of the words spoken rather than the sometimes unclear formation of the lips. The subjects were shown a picture representing a word while being presented the cued speech. They had to identify the gender of the word represented, both words that were in their lexicon and words that were not in the children's lexicons. The results show strong performance with familiar words but results of 50% correct with unfamiliar words. This suggests that "without phonological gender cues, the child cannot decide whether a noun is feminine or masculine, except for the familiar words… In conclusion, subjects know the grammatical gender of words from two different sources, one lexical and rote-based, and the other productive through a rule-based process." (Hage et al, 397)

Much like Sokolik's three methods that the second language learner can acquire grammatical gender, children with deafness must rely on rote memorization, and slowly learn the rules/patterns associated with morphology and phonology with explicit attention. Tucker also cited the study of Borel-Maisonny which also noted the difficulty that deaf French speakers face in making correct gender assignments. Tucker states that this is a result of grammatical gender's strong association to the sounds of the French language. Tucker continues that "to acquire this skill with gender, speakers must be able to listen to language, and then develop some type of schema." (59) This applies not only to the deaf native speakers but also to those who lack language experience and a French language schema, therefore second language learners of French.

Determiners & Authentic Texts

Tucker's study demonstrated the native speaker's struggle determining the gender of nouns that begin with a vowel. Nouns beginning with a vowel pose a problem because the determiners change form to create flow in the language. The definite article, originally a gender marker of either *le* or *la,* will become *l'* and the preposition "de" becomes *d'*. Nouns beginning with a vowel then do not have reliable contextual clues for the learner to determine gender. Similarly, plural determiners are consistent between masculine and feminine nouns thus not allowing the learner to pull any gender distinction. These include the definite article "les" the, indefinite article "des" some, demonstrative "ces" these, and possessive "mes" my. Another extremely common phrase "beaucoup de" or "a lot of", the preposition "de" in this case does not change and therefore does not show the gender of the following noun. These determiner types compose a number of unreliable clues to gender that are commonly used in the French

language. Ayoun (2007) performed a study on authentic texts to find how reliable the grammatical gender clues are and therefore how much information the learner can acquire from the text. The texts in the study are representative of what the second language learners might be exposed to. It is proposed that the native speaker's "major source of information in this process is the other words with which the noun is associated with and which mark gender unambiguously."(Holmes and Dejean de la Batie in Ayoun, 127)

Ayoun's study focused on determiner phrases (DP) composed of a noun and either a determiner, adjective, or past participle. The authentic texts included popular recent magazine and newspaper articles. The determiner phrases were then classified into three groups; DGM or determiner gender marker, AGM or adjective or past participle gender marker, and NGM or no gender marker.

The results of the study proved that the majority of nouns in authentic texts are presented with no gender marker (NGM). Out of 5,016 determiner phrases, 9.01% of the nouns had gender marked adjectives, 41.22% of the nouns had gender marked determiners and 49.76% of the nouns had no gender marker (Ayoun, 128). This shows that almost half of the nouns presented in authentic text are not accompanied by a gender marker. For the second language learner, grammatical gender information can only be inferred from half of the nouns presented that is if the learner is even sensitive to or aware of these gender markers. As Ayoun comments in the results of this study, "L2 learners actually need to do two things: First, they need to realize that adjectives/past paticiples bear agreement markers depending on the noun they modify, and second they need to (consciously/unconsciously) parse the sentence looking for gender marking on these adjectives/past participles." (134)

To further study how students are exposed to grammatical gender in texts one can explore typical texts used in the foreign language classroom for AGM, DGM and NGM. At the middle school level, a book series called *Les Aventures d'Isabelle* by Karen Rowan and Donna Tatum-Johns is a text that is for very introductory French; therefore, it is one of the first demonstrations of nouns within a text for second language learners. A higher amount of determiner gender markers is expected being that the text is introductory and as a result, fewer nouns with no gender marker are expected. Similar to the results of Ayoun's study, there is a large percentage of nouns with no gender marker although a slightly lower percentage, at 36%.

Classifications of Nouns in Chapter 1

- DGM 52%
- AGM 12%
- NGM 36%

In the first chapter, there are 25 nouns. The following table represents the data with the list of nouns in the chapter.

DGM	AGM	NGM
Ma mère	les cheveux blonds	ans
Ma mère	les yeux bleus	ans
son travail	les cheveux noirs	les yeux marron
un appareil photo		des aventures
un album		beaucoup de photos
un pirate célèbre		mes aventures
un pirate normal		présidente
un pirate très célèbre		présidente
une actrice célèbre		danseuse
Un vétérinaire célèbre		
Un vétérinaire célèbre		
Une danseuse célèbre		
une danseuse		
52%	12%	36%

(Les Aventures d'Isabelle, Karen Rowan and Donna Tatum-Johns, 1-2)

These results show that about half of the nouns had determiner gender markers. There were only three instances of adjective gender markers although some of the nouns had both determiner and adjective markers. Then, many of the nouns did not have any gender markers again similar to the results of Ayoun's study. As expected, this introductory text is simplified and

shows more determiner gender markers. However, the 36% of unmarked nouns is a surprisingly high amount.

The NGM column of the data exemplifies many exceptions related to grammatical gender. These include nouns beginning with vowels such as *ans* "years". Also, the plural determiners "des" and "mes" which do not mark gender are used. The form *beaucoup de* which does not mark gender is in the text. Lastly, there is an exception with the example "les yeux marron" or the brown eyes. This color is an exception that does not change form to agree with either gender or number. Being that the noun is also introduced by the plural indefinite article "les", the determiner phrase is ambiguous for the reader.

Also noted in the nouns are a few semantic nouns which are almost all represented with a determiner, these are *mère* "mother", *danseuse* "dancer" versus the masculine form *danseur,* and *actrice* versus the masculine form *acteur.* Second language learners who are native English speakers may pick up on this pattern because semantic gender is present in the English language. Something as subtle as adjective agreements of the colors is a gender marker that would likely be overlooked by the beginning French learner.

Survey of High School Students

I created a survey of 24 items to be completed by high school level students to further examine grammatical gender acquisition of current second language learners. This survey was designed to see if students could identify words as either feminine or masculine and with what degree of accuracy. The survey was completed by a French Level 2 class, a French level 3 class, a French level 4 honors class and a French level 5 honors class. In these four classes there were four native speakers of French (who have a parent at home who speaks French), and one Italian exchange student. All together there were 55 survey samples. An example of the survey is pictured below:

In addition to just filling out the m or f for marking gender, I asked three out of the four classes to comment on the bottom how they might have learned gender, how they practice it, and how they feel they know it. The results showed students who admit to struggling with determining gender, and those who do have a strategy for learning this feature of the language.

I designed the survey with to follow different patterns in order for me to make conclusions about certain morphological and semantic patterns. The survey resulted in 15

feminine nouns and 9 masculine nouns. I was able, because I was currently either observing or teaching the classes, to design the survey to apply to the students.
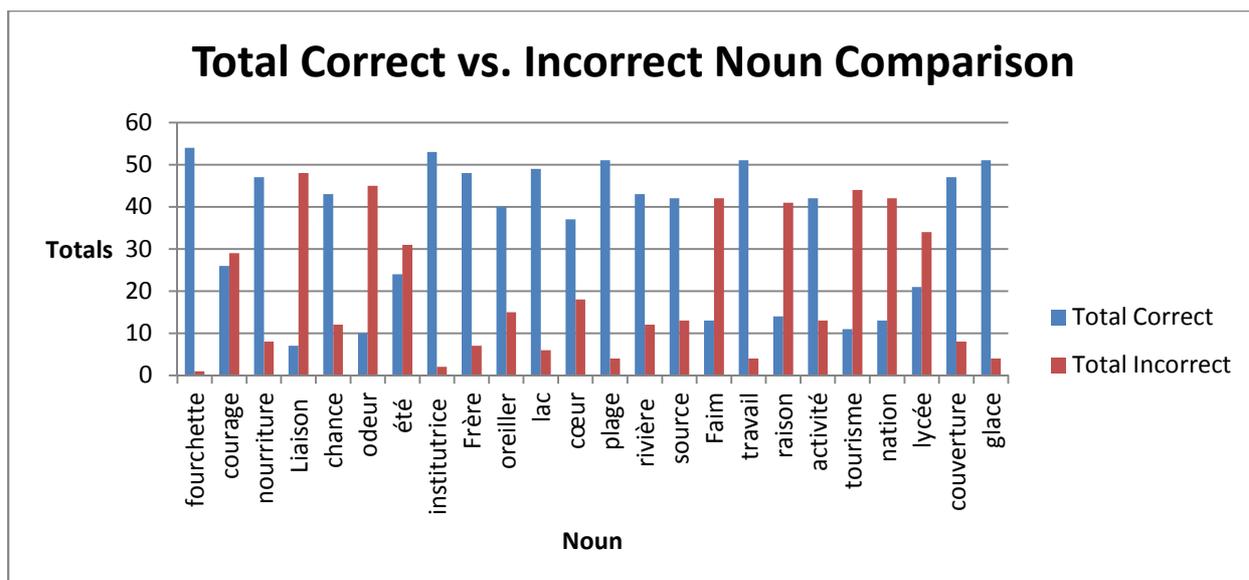
First, I included two specific nouns that I knew the classes were learning or have learned. The masculine noun "oreiller" and the feminine noun "nourriture" were currently being studied by the French 2 class. I knew that consequently, the other levels had been taught the words previously. The other noun was "source", feminine, which the level 5 class was currently studying, I knew that the lower levels had not specifically studied this word although they may have been exposed to it. Second, I included some nouns that begin with vowels as this is an area of common error in both native and non-native speakers. Third, I included nouns that followed a word ending pattern such as raison and liaison which use the termination –aison that marks feminine gender with no exceptions. Fourth, I included nouns that are exceptional to a general rule such as word ending pattern or the commonly noted –e ending rule. For example, été is an exception to most words ending with té being feminine. I also wanted to observe nouns that are often used in a context without a determiner or adjective. I chose to include words that students might encounter regularly or that they would have personal links to in class such as activité and lycee.

Overall, the survey represented a group of nouns that reflect a wide variety of the factors which affect both the acquisition of grammatical gender and the second language learner's ability to mark gender. The data provided by the survey results are evaluated and analyzed throughout the report and in the conclusions:

Survey Results

The survey suggests that the average high school student marks gender correctly approximately 64% of the time. Students of all the levels surveyed show a decent margin of error within the classification of nominal gender. The data demonstrates both interpersonal and intrapersonal inconsistency. Though there are some nouns that present trouble for students more so than others, the data appears to be somewhat random which reflects perhaps a random approach to identifying gender.

The following table represents the average accuracy overall for each noun:

Total Correct vs. Incorrect Noun Comparison

A bar chart titled "Total Correct vs. Incorrect Noun Comparison" showing Totals (y-axis, 0 to 60) for various Nouns (x-axis): fourchette, courage, nourriture, Liaison, chance, odeur, été, institutrice, Frère, oreiller, lac, cœur, plage, rivière, source, Faim, travail, raison, activité, tourisme, nation, lycée, couverture, glace. Blue bars represent Total Correct, red bars represent Total Incorrect.

As depicted in the graph there is a wide range of accuracy between the different nouns. The data ranges from nouns that were very closely divided between incorrect and correct responses such as "courage" to nouns like "fourchette" where there was only a very small margin of error. This array of words represents words that French students commonly face, although they would not necessarily be found together or within the same year of instruction. We can assume that the margin of error represented in this data set is also characteristic of the average error with grammatical gender that students make in the production of French (both oral and written).

The data ranges greatly interpersonally. The student who performed the poorest had 15 of the 24 words incorrect, at an accuracy of only 37.5%. This student was in French 3. The student who performed the highest marked only one word incorrectly and therefore had an accuracy of 95.8%. This student was a member of the French 5 level class and also was the Italian exchange student. The highest performing student after the Italian student only marked 20 nouns correct with an accuracy of 83.3%.

The performance of the Italian native speaker shows a significantly higher accuracy than the native English speakers. As Italian is a language close to French in grammar that also has the feature of grammatical gender, the Italian speaker was able to extend her schema of gender to the nouns of question in French language. It is quite possible that she also has had more French language experience than the American students being that she lives near to France, has more contact with French speakers and perhaps started learning French early in school. The one word that was incorrect was *été*, the masculine noun for "summer". The word for summer in Italian is

estate and it is feminine. This error supports the hypothesis that the native Italian speaker uses his/her schema of grammatical gender in Italian and applies it to the language task in French.

While the Italian speaker's score is distinct from English native speakers, the "native" French students did not show significantly increased accuracy. The average accuracy of the four native French speakers was 64.6% which is only slightly better than the overall average.
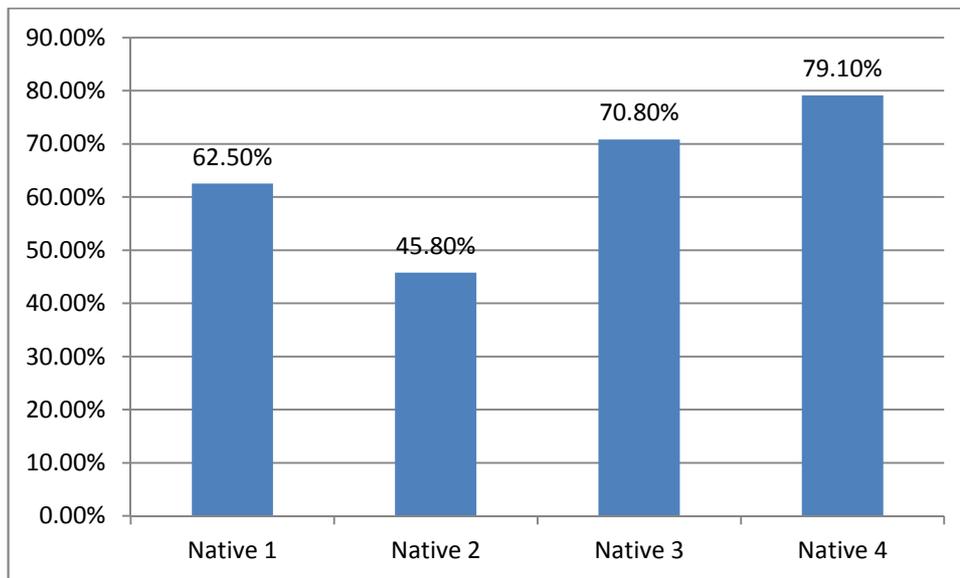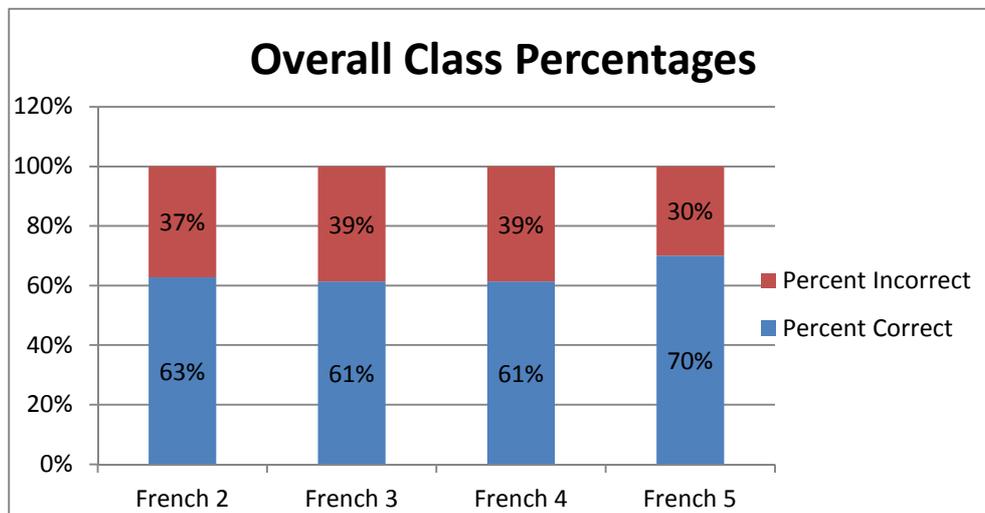

Native speaker 3 and native speaker 4 both do show a significantly increased ability to mark gender whereas native speaker 1 is average and native speaker 2 is below average. Interestingly, native speaker 3 and 4 are in French 3 and native speaker 1 and 2 are in French four. Again the results are ambiguous and do not allow me to make conclusions about the "native" speaker's accuracy. I believe the term "native" is ambiguous here. It is too subjective to label these four students as native when the definition of native is unclear. It is unclear how much language experience (how much they are exposed to and how much they use) the students have either currently or have had throughout their lives. These learners might better have been labeled "heritage learners" although this also can be an ambiguous term. From observation, these students have significantly better accents and comprehension, however, their production with grammar was not consistent and did not show a significant difference from the native English speakers. This again was true for grammatical gender. If anything, again it shows the difficult and unpredictability of grammatical gender.

By Level:

The data reveals a relatively close comparison between the levels of French and the accuracy with grammatical gender. The French 2 level class average was 63% accuracy. French 3

and French 4 both had the same average at 61% accuracy. French 5 had the highest average with 70% accuracy.

Overall Class Percentages

| Class	Percent Incorrect	Percent Correct
French 2	37%	63%
French 3	39%	61%
French 4	39%	61%
French 5	30%	70%

These results could be interpreted in a variety of ways. First, it is important to note the sample sizes for each class: French 2 has 19 students, French 3: 15, French 4: 11, French 5: 10. We can note the fact that the French 2 class had a higher average of accuracy than both the French 3 and French 4 as a possible indicator that the students assigned gender randomly. This could also be a result of having a more limited lexicon and therefore limited exposure to exceptional words. This could be the explanation for a decline in accuracy for the French 3s, that they have grown a wider lexicon and run across many exceptions which perhaps caused them to second guess their existing knowledge. What is also surprising is that the French 3 and French 4 share the same average accuracy at 61% accurate. This could be a reflection of potential similarities in the lexicon that students of both these levels have. Also, these two levels both had 2 "native" speakers, although their scores were not significant and thus did not skew the data notably.

The French 5 class shows significant improvement in accuracy at 70% from 61%. The sample size decreases only by one student, however, we must take into account the outlier in the data, the Italian student who performed with approximately 95% accuracy while the next participant performed only with 83% accuracy. Other than the high score of the Italian speaker, it can be assumed that a reason behind the increased accuracy of the level 5 class is simply because they have had more language experience. I believe the data of this particular survey does not show significant results to prove this theory because the accuracy does not show an increase

over time. Rather, it shows a very inconsistent pattern. I believe a more likely explanation could be that the students who take a French 5 level class have put conscious effort into their accuracy with grammatical gender, perhaps adopting one of the strategies or a mix.

Semantic:

This survey included two words which semantically based gender. These were the words *frère*, for brother and *institutrice* for a female school teacher. As majority native English speakers, semantic gender is the only familiar gender to the students and thus more easily acquired. These two words are both words which students would have come across in their learning and be familiar with. The following pie charts show the overall accuracy for these two words.
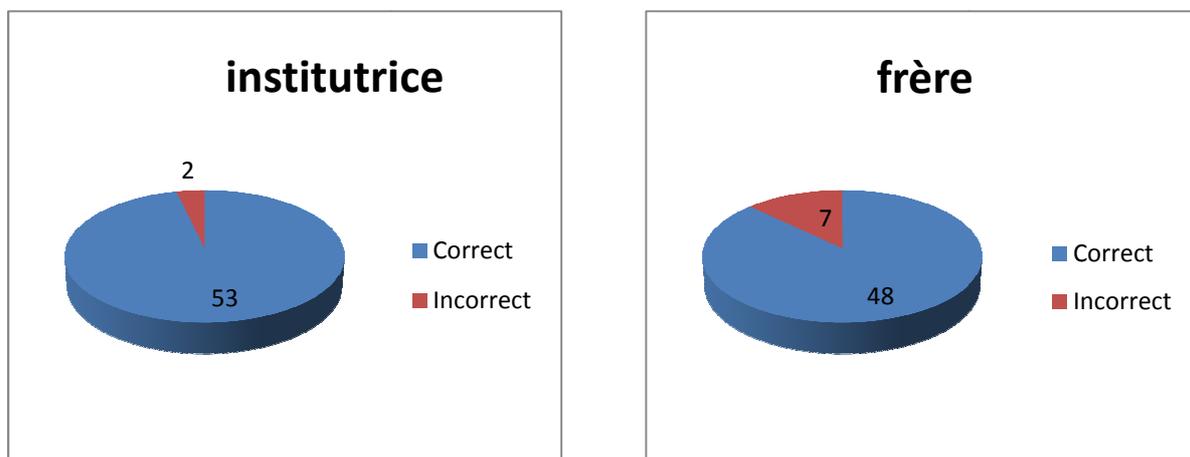
Both of these words showed a much higher amount of correct responses than other words in the survey. Institutrice has an accuracy rate of 96.4% while frère has an accuracy rate of 87.2%. Both of these are well over the average accuracy of 64%. Institutrice was only marked incorrectly twice by two students in the French 3 class. I believe this can be partially attributed to being careless when completing the survey. Frère was marked incorrectly by seven students, six of them being in the French 2 class, and one in the French 3 class. This suggests that the French 2 class may not have been sufficiently exposed to frère for its meaning. The fact that students performed with much higher accuracy on these two nouns supports that second language learners acquire semantic gender of nouns with more facility than gender without semantic meaning.

The word institutrice ends with the ending of –rice which is a typically feminine ending. I believe that students could apply their knowledge of other words such as "actrice" a cognate to help determine the gender. The ending –rice or –ice, is very similar to what in English is -ress or

–ess, a female descriptor, like in "actress" or "hostess". This link to the English and native language would undoubtedly aid the second language learner in determining the gender.

The word *frère* does not have a typically masculine or feminine ending. In fact, the word ends with an –e which is inconsistent with a strategy that many students marked: that nouns ending in –e are feminine. The meaning of the word, however, distinguishes the noun to be masculine. Students who knew the word's meaning would, regardless if they knew the gender, make an educated guess based on the semantics of the word. Although I personally believed the word frère to be more frequent in the language because it has a personal application to the student, it is not surprising that institutrice showed a higher amount of accuracy being that it is both semantic and has the link to English morphology.

Studied:

I wanted to include words that were recently studied by the students to determine whether recency is a factor in second language learners' accuracy with grammatical gender. I know that the words have recently been studied in the form of a vocabulary list which provides the definite article in accompaniment with the noun and its translation. I was aware of three conclusions I could make based on the success of students based on these words: 1. students still did not learn the words, 2. students learned the words' meanings without acquiring the grammatical gender; 3. or students learned both the meaning and the grammatical gender.

The words of question were *nourriture* (food), *source* (source or spring of water), and *oreiller* (pillow). The French 2 class had recently learned both *nourriture* and *oreiller*. The French 5 class had recently studied *source*.

If we look at French 2 student performance on the word "nourriture", 17 out of 19 students marked its gender correctly as feminine. This high rate of success can be support both my hypothesis #3 or be attributed to morphological features. The word ending –ure is typically feminine, and it also ends in an –e. Many students in this class described that when the word ends in –e it can predict feminine gender. The results from this word are ambiguous in that I do not know whether students applied this "prediction tool", knew the ending –ure is usually feminine, or simply memorized the gender.

Again looking at the results from the French 2 class, the student performance for *oreiller* was at 73.6% accuracy, 14 out of 19 students marked it correctly as masculine. This word is particularly difficult in that it begins with a vowel and therefore would be limited in its gender

marking contexts. However, this noun was presented with the indefinite article (un), rather than the definite article (l'), which marked it for gender. If we compare the accuracy of the French 2 class to the other levels with this particular word we can determine that the French 2 class did not show a significant upper hand in determining the gender. The average accuracy from the other classes was 72.2%. This would discredit the theory that recency is related to higher accuracy with grammatical gender.

The French 5 accuracy with the noun "la source" was at 90%, only one student marked it incorrectly. This is significantly higher accuracy than many of the other nouns. I can conclude that here the theory of recency is supported. It is possible that recency, as positively correlated to higher accuracy, applies to only those who are conscious of grammatical gender. The French 5 group is extremely conscious of grammar and makes conscious efforts to memorize new vocabulary with its matching determiner (frequent flashcard practice). Whereas the French 2 group may have been more concerned with word meaning, the higher level class was able to give attention to the gender of the word in addition to meaning.

Vowel beginning nouns:

To address a common area of increased difficulty with grammatical gender, I included nouns that begin with vowels. As Tucker found in his study, even native speakers struggle to determine the gender of nouns that begin with vowels because they are often provided with no gender marking determiner. The survey included *odeur, été, oreiller*, and *activité*. I purposefully am not including the noun "institutrice" in this focus simply because it has semantic gender.

The following charts show the accuracy of these nouns:
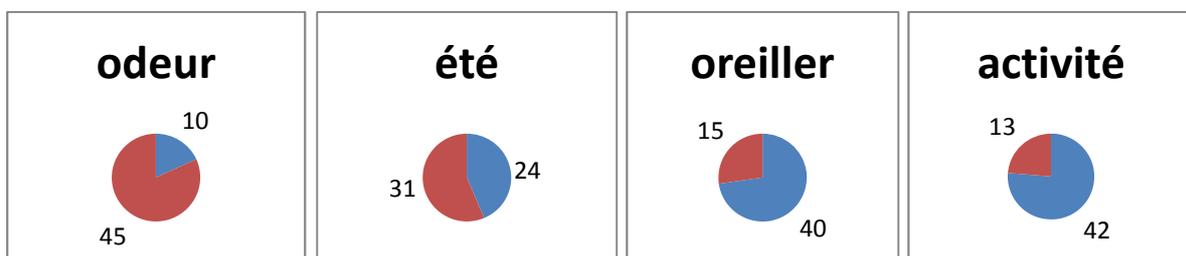
odeur: 18.1% accuracy   **été** : 43.6% accuracy   **oreiller** : 72.7% accuracy   **activité** : 76.4% accuracy

Together, the average accuracy for the nouns beginning with vowels is 52.7%. As depicted for each individual noun, there is quite a large range of accuracy, from 18.1% (way

under average) to 76.4%, (significantly above average). This amount of difference could be representative of the margin of error with nouns that begin with vowels.

It is probable that, because nouns that begin with vowels are often accompanied by ambiguous determiners, the learner must determine gender based on the word's morphology or word ending. There is a positive correlation between distinguishing gender by word ending and accuracy with vowel-beginning words. These particular words support this theory because it appears that students determined gender here based on the "rule" that words ending in –e are feminine. In the case of odeur and été, they are exceptions to this "rule" and these were the two vowel-beginning noun that were most difficult. Oreiller, and activité both conform to this rule.

It may also be noted the context in which these words are presented. Odeur may be more frequently used in the context of "l'odeur" as in "l'odeur des pommes", "the smell of apples" versus "un odeur des pommes". In this context, the gender is ambiguous. The opposite may be noted for "activité", in that this is a word frequently used in the classroom by telling students "On va faire une activité", "we will do an activity", in which the gender is marked by the definite article.

Contextual:

The context in which a word is most frequently used is related to its ambiguity. Those nouns that are almost never provided with a gender marking context, as noted with nouns that begin with vowels, pose a larger struggle for the language user. To further investigate contextual influence on grammatical gender acquisition, I turn to "faim". "faim" the word for hunger, is a word that is rarely used with the determiner. The context that the second language will most likely and most frequently encounter the noun "faim" is in describing a person's state "il a faim" (he has hunger) or "j'ai faim" (I have hunger). The following chart represents the accuracy with the noun *faim*
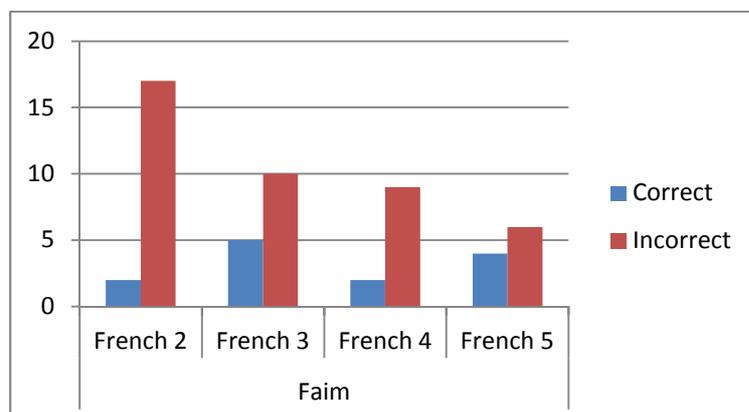
Together, the average accuracy is 23.6%

Note that I am using personal experience as a student and a teacher of French and this is only a hypothesis. I propose that as the learner sees this word in a context without a determiner, he/she is not exposed to any gender markers and therefore the gender of "faim" is uncertain. In addition to this struggle, the native English speaker who learns faim most likely will translate "j'ai faim" to "I am hungry" being that that is how it is expressed in English. The learner may not even realize that faim here is being used as a noun versus the English adjective. To complicate this, *faim* is feminine although it ends with a consonant which is an exception to the conceived –e ending "rule".

If we consider the context in which the word "plage" is used most often, we can see the other end of the spectrum of contextual influence. The noun for "beach" in French would most commonly be used in these potential sentences:

Je vais a la plage : I'm going to the beach

La plage est belle : The beach is beautiful

The context in which the beach would be used almost always uses the determiner 'la' which marks it for feminine gender. The language learner will be frequently exposed to this word with a gender marker and therefore be more able to attribute feminine gender to the word. This word had a very high accuracy rate amongst at the classes, at 92.7% accurate. The success of this word must also, however, be attributed to it following the conceived –e ending rule that the students often cited.

Follow morphology:

The nouns *raison* "reason" and *liaison* "affair" are in an unusual group of words that follow a morphological rule with no exception. In French, all words that end in –aison are all feminine. This solidity of a morphological rule is rare. I included these two words to further investigate whether students rely on morphology to help the predict gender.

raison — Correct 14, Incorrect 41

liaison — Correct 7, Incorrect 48
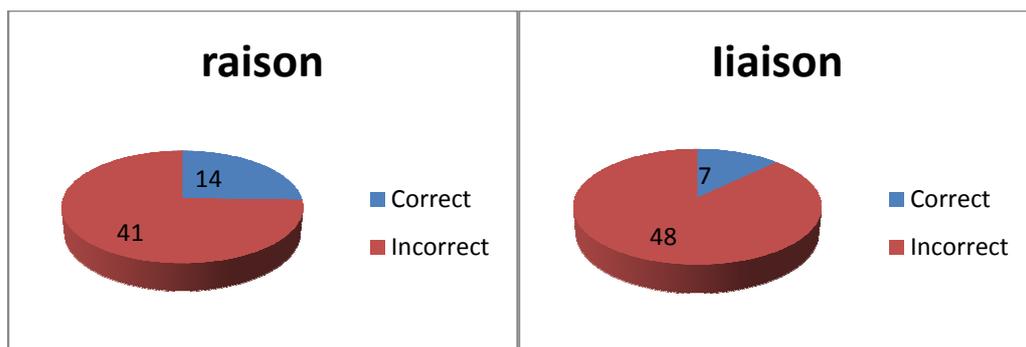
The inaccuracy of students on both of these words provides that students are not aware of the word ending rule for –aison. It also strongly suggests that the predominant rule that students follow is that of –e ending. These two nouns both end with a consonant and therefore the students incorrectly marked them masculine.

By Strategy:

Students from the French level 2, French 4 honors, and French 5 honors recorded some strategies they use when determining grammatical gender. These included the –e ending that nouns that end in e are feminine, sounding out how the noun sounds by itself or with a determiner, and rote memorization. There were a total of 17 students who claimed they use the – e ending rule, 8 students who use sounding out, and 7 who use rote memorization. Overall, when observing the data in relation to the strategy students there are subtle differences between skills with certain words or patterns of words.

First, it is interesting to view the correlation of a strategy to the level of French. French 2 students accounted for 8 out of 17 students in total that use the –e ending rule whereas the French 4 accounts for 5 and French 5 accounts for 4. This higher amount of students in the lower level French may have a relation to when the students were introduced to this "strategy". While French 2 level students may still rely on this "rule" to guide them with grammatical gender, students in French 4 and French 5 may have discovered that this is not a reliable pattern to follow. The French 4s account for half of the students who mentioned sounding out the noun for gender. This class has two native speakers in the class who noted using the sound of the noun to figure out whether it is masculine or feminine. Other students in the class may have observed and adopted this strategy from their native speaking peers. Another interesting piece of the data is that the French 5 class showed the most students who rely on memorization out of all the levels. This could demonstrate two different meanings, either the type of student who continues to this high level class is the type of student to memorize information, or perhaps

because these students have been working on French for many years they might have learned that memorization is the only approach to grammatical gender is reliable for them.

Overall, students of the different strategies performed very closely. Students who follow the –e ending rule only marked 61% of the nouns correctly while students who follow the sound strategy marked 67% correctly and students who use rote memorization marked 67% correctly. It is important to note that the sample size is significantly larger for those who use the –e ending strategy. As each strategy still performs poorly, it goes to show that these students struggle with grammatical gender and that the strategies used were not very effective. These students also marked only these particular skills and not a mix between them which could in fact be more effective.

The least effective strategy was that of the –e ending rule which proves that it is not a good predictor of gender. There are many, many exceptions to this "rule" and in this survey alone there were nine exceptions. The following graph proves the interference of this "rule" on the words that do not follow that pattern.

Percentage Correct of "e" Rule Exceptions

- 28% Correct
- 74% Incorrect
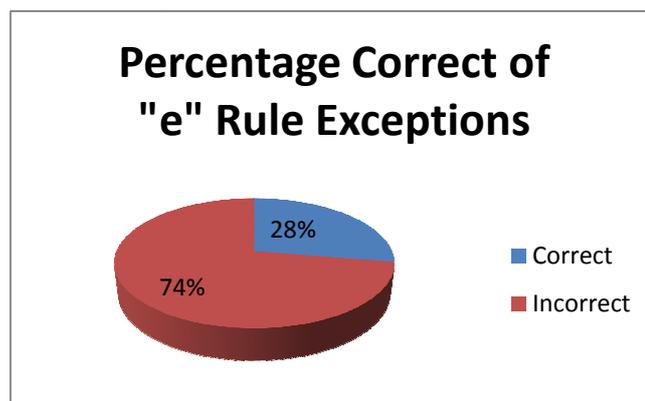
If we look at the word *le lycée*: high school, we see where the –e ending rule misleads students into believing the noun is feminine when it is actually masculine. The word "lycée" is commonly used especially for high school students because it applies personally to them. The students will undoubtedly have been exposed to the word in class discussions and presented the word in texts. Whereas 12 out of the 17 students who described their strategy as determining gender by –e endings answered incorrectly, only 5 out of the 15 students who marked either sounding out or memorizing gender answers incorrectly. That is 70% incorrect versus 33% incorrect. The margin

of error in using the –e ending rule especially with this example demonstrates that it is a commonly used but not reliable skill that students have acquired in learning French.

If we focus on the nouns that begin with vowels (odeur, ete, oreiller, and activite) and compare between the three strategies we will find that the most accurate strategy of determining gender of nouns beginning with vowels is by sound. Whereas students who use sound had 46% incorrect, both –e ending strategy and memorization strategy students had 50% incorrect. The results being so close and also straddling the 50/50 chance shows the struggle that all students face when determining the gender of vowel beginning nouns regardless of strategies used.

Conclusions:

These survey results provide what is both current and authentic data about grammatical gender acquisition at the high school level. From the data, I can conclude that students have a preexisting strategy of determining gender by word ending. This strategy, however, uses the false concept that words ending with –e are feminine. This is a large problem in acquiring grammatical gender of any words that do not follow that pattern and perhaps, an interference in learning morphological and phonological clues to gender.

These results also suggest that lexicon matters. When students have a limited lexicon they have not been exposed to as many exceptional words. It is possible that students with a limited lexicon (French 2) have not yet discredited general rules whereas students who have a medium lexicon (French 3 and 4) may have discarded general rules and taken a random guessing approach. Next, once the lexicon is large enough (French 5) the students may re-adopt patterns with the knowledge of their exceptions.

There may be a link to language experience or/and rote memorization. It is possible that students who have been learning French for a long period of time (French 5) have acquired a sufficient schema for determining grammatical gender mostly accurately. It is also possible that this is not the case and these students accuracy is a result of personality traits of continued study and memorization typical of a student who continues his/her education. It may be that there is a combination between the two of these, where language experience provides a schema and also provides the student with the knowledge that they must memorize grammatical gender.

The fact that these conclusions are some well-supported and some based on hypotheses shows the true ambiguity of the data, and furthermore the ambiguity of the study's focus: grammatical gender in French.

In the French Classroom/ The French Textbook:

Grammatical gender is first introduced to students in the French as a second language classroom. With learning any grammar in a foreign language, the second language learner is given a much more formal grammar instruction than what they would have had with their own native language. To be able to fully understand how the second language learner can acquire grammatical gender, we must understand what he/she is exposed to in being taught this complicated feature of French language.

Grammatical gender is most commonly introduced in the form of syntactic gender. That is, new words are represented with their determinant most often *le* or *la*. In an attempt to determine how the concept of grammatical gender is first communicated to the native English speaker, I examined level 1 French textbook introductions. These textbooks include the level 1 books in the series *Bien Dit, Chez Nous*, and *Bon Voyage*. To my surprise, I found that each textbook gave different advice on how to learn grammatical gender.

In *Bon Voyage Glencoe French 1*, nouns are introduced as having gender. The text describes that besides the nouns for people, gender cannot be determined by looking at the noun and rather, clues are needed to identify masculine or feminine nouns. It provides the reader with the explanation of "gender markers" which are simply the indefinite markers *un* or *une*. (26)

Whereas *Bon Voyage* leaves a lot to be discovered, *Bien Dit* also leaves the reader with a very brief introduction to grammatical gender. Like *Bon Voyage*, it introduces indefinite articles and definite articles giving the gender that they correlate with. This text also illuminates the plural definite article, les, in a table that shows the reader that les is used the same for masculine, feminine and masculine or feminine nouns that begin with a vowel. Whereas *Bon Voyage* did not provide any advice for the learner on how they might learn grammatical gender, *Bien Dit* disclaims to the reader "There are no set rules to determine which nouns are masculine and which are feminine, so you'll need to memorize the gender of the new words as you learn them." (*Bien Dit*, p. 24)

Lastly, *Chez Nous: Branche sur le monde francophone* Fourth Edition, gives the reader the most comprehensive explanation of grammatical gender. The textbook describes the binary feature of grammatical gender and that the gender determines the form of words that accompany it. This section continues to describe indefinite and definite articles and their relationship to feminine and masculine noun. What this textbook offers that the others do not is then a quick guide for predicting the gender of nouns. It takes the reader through semantic gender and then continues

to offer the following information: names of languages are masculine, words borrowed from other languages are generally masculine, and that some word endings can help predict the gender of the noun. It gives isme, age, eau, and o as endings that are predictors of masculine nouns. It provides ion and té to predict feminine nouns. It also gives a piece of advice in a "fiche practique" that tells the reader to learn a new noun with the indefinite article (un/une) rather than without an article or the definite article (le, la, les, l'). This is followed by a quick note that addresses a common misconception about nouns that end in –e. While many students believe nouns that end in –e are feminine, only about half the nouns ending in –e are feminine while the other half are masculine. (*Chez Nous*, 16-22)

Given the example of textbook introductions to grammatical gender, one can see the ambiguity that surrounds the acquisition of grammatical gender especially for a beginning learner. In an introduction, one questions what exactly the learner needs to know about grammatical gender and of what importance it is. The objective of learning a foreign language focuses on overall proficiency and thus the ability to communicate. The ability to label words correctly as masculine or feminine is therefore not at the forefront of learning. While these textbooks provide what is a quick waiver about grammatical gender, teachers also allow students to make errors.

As *Chez Nous* introduced, there are in fact some patterns and general guidelines that a second language learner of French can follow to be able to differentiate between masculine and feminine nouns. Learners need be prefaced to this feature of French language and perhaps as in *Bien Dit* and *Chez Nous*, given a helpful guideline of how they might learn best.

In *Chez Nous*, it advises to use indefinite articles rather than definite articles. Similarly, in Tucker's study of native speakers, he asked them to identify the gender by circling either an *un* or an *une*. Though neither explained this choice further, this may be the optimal choice because in the case that the noun begins with a vowel, the determinant will still remain gender marked. When using definite articles, the determinant would become *l'* which is not gender marked. In my time student teaching I observed some concern about using the indefinite articles. This concern was aroused by the simple fact that native English speakers have difficulty distinguishing between the pronunciation of un and une. The concern is that although other than when the nouns are written, students will not be able to differentiate the gender markers while learning new vocabulary.

Curricula of Grammatical Gender in French

Grammatical gender being one of the most persistently challenging features of French language must be given special approach in the foreign language classroom. To avoid the "laissez-faire" attitude about grammatical gender, the many findings from this research can be combined to create what is a "curricula" for teaching grammatical gender.

Reject the *laissez faire* attitude

The first step is to do just that, to eradicate the *laissez faire* attitude of both teachers and students. All too often grammatical gender is placed on the back burner of language studies as it is both complicated and does not have high communicative value. Competency of grammatical gender, however, can distinguish a learner as proficient in the language and can prevent a multitude of grammatical errors (agreement of adjectives, past participles, pronouns, etc). To do this, students must first know that gender in language exists. Though this is something most students might pick up on from the subtle differences notable with *le* and *la*, an explicit introduction may be advantageous. Next, students must be sensitive to grammatical gender and to know that it is important. This is something the teacher can ensure by acknowledging it constantly and pointing out its uses/effect on the language. The fact that the native speaker does not acquire grammatical gender through explicit training does not discredit its value for the second language learner

It is common, as Surridge notes, that the foreign language teacher is overly tolerant of both a lackadaisical approach to learning the genders of nouns, and of errors made. Surridge describe that "tolerance is allowed to continue in the name of 'communicative competence'." (92) Here she argues that gender mastery is essential to competence in the language. The tolerance of errors is not doing the student justice. Rather, once false assumptions of gender are initiated, the errors become self-perpetuating. Learners begin to apply this knowledge to other nouns, to the agreement of adjectives, etc.

Feedback/Recasts

One way to correct errors is by recast or feedback either orally or written. As determined in Dasse-Askildson's study, feedback in the form of recasts has the potential to improve students' ability to mark gender correctly. Although it may only be effective for students who have high motivation, any attention given to grammatical gender can improve the learners' proficiency. The teacher can also draw students' attention to the recast to ensure that they process the information while also again reinforcing the importance of grammatical gender.

Discredit the –e ending rule

The next piece of curricula is to address one of the most common sources of error by discrediting the incorrect –e ending rule that students are overwhelmingly aware of and dependent on. The results of my survey showed a large number of students who had been previously taught that words ending in –e are feminine. As feminine gender accounts for only about half of –e ending nouns, this "rule" or strategy is both false and interfering. This must be addressed before other grammatical gender instruction takes place. For the students who may have already adopted and acquired this rule, additional practice may be necessary to get rid of this misconception.

Remove Ambiguity

One strategy for continual grammatical gender instruction is simply to remove the ambiguity that surrounds it. For example, the teacher can decide to use and encourage students to use adjectives that are marked for gender. Adjectives such as *splendide, terrible,* and *magnifique* are ambiguous to gender and may obscure acquisition (Surridge, 93). Adjectives such as *important, heureux,* and *profond* (Fem: *importante, heureuse, profonde*) would make better substitutes because they change with gender and therefore the learner can both hear and see the gender marker. This is a subtle but important difference that will make for improvement over time. The same is important for other contexts of nouns such as providing nouns that begin with vowels with the definitely article (un, une) versus (l'). Another simple switch would be to use demonstratives *celle-ci* (f)and *celui-ci* (m) instead of *ça* (Surridge, 93).

Arrangement/Sequence

Both Tucker and Surridge propose that the arrangement of nouns is important to acquisition. First, Tucker describes that arranging vocabulary in accordance to grammatical gender patterns or rules may help to highlight these for the second language learner (60). This could be done either by separating vocabulary by masculine and feminine, or by word ending. The teacher could then more easily draw attention to the gender of the new word. Surridge then proposes that mimicking the sequence that a native speaker learns gender could be advantageous in the foreign language classroom. This sequence is done with a simple set of vocabulary which first focuses on how words sound, word endings, and finally exceptions. The key point about this sequence is that conflicting information is not presented concurrently and therefore the learner may adopt rules and exceptions (89). Teachers can easily follow the guideline to present conflicting items at different times to allow the learner to process and adapt their schemas.

Harley also concurs with the need to segment incoming information. When trying to teach students a general rule or get them to deduce a guideline for gender, Harley finds that learners base a generalization on one or two prototypical words and not a collection (170). Whereas the native speaker applies their collection of knowledge about a certain type of word (the schema), second language learners tend have a more limited schema to based generalizations on. It may be important to give one or two good examples that predict gender and show a pattern than to overwhelm the learner with many examples (Harley, 170).

Leniency with exceptions

The next important point is to be lenient with exceptions. The second language learner will be exposed to many exceptions but, as Tucker explains, "students could be permitted to make 'errors' on far-out exceptions so that the basic regularities could be learned and… used with more confidence."(61). It may be helpful to address exceptions as a separate category so that students can keep their pre-existing knowledge and still acquire the exceptional word's gender.

Provide Interest

Brit Harley proposes in her study of focus on form for acquisition that students must notice grammatical gender to be able to learn it. To get students to notice gender requires that they give attention and to get students attention requires interest (169). It is important that when teaching grammatical gender, students' interests are involved. The sometimes daunting and thankless task of learning grammatical gender will be just that if interest is not involved in learning procedures.

Maximize language experience

Lastly, one of the main stresses of Tucker was that accuracy with grammatical gender comes from language experience. The lack of language experience is the root of the second language learner's struggle. It is essential that teachers provide and encourage as much language experience as possible. Not only that, but *correct* language experience with nominal gender is necessary to provide students with a schema during the acquisition of grammatical gender.

The above steps provide together what are effective curricula for teaching grammatical gender in the second language classroom. This feature of French language is one of the most difficult to acquire. The research supports that explicit training is beneficial and that a

combination of these other tools can create the most advantageous learning experience for second language learners in acquiring grammatical gender.

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