

THE EVOLUTION OF THE FRENCH FIELD OF
LA DIDACTIQUE DE L'ÉCRIT
(*DIDACTICS OF LANGUAGE PRACTICES*)

Theorizing the Teaching Practices of Writing in the Disciplines

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Abstract. The study of the role of language activity in higher education in France has been evolving, in the past few years, out of the larger field of 'la didactique du français,' the field of L1 teaching and theory across all grade levels. This larger frame has provided several themes that are now being explored in higher education writing: language activity as a mode of co-construction of knowledge in school settings rather than a transparent medium, writing, reading and speaking as intimately disciplinary activities, writing as a recursive process, speaking and writing as complementary, and the reconfiguration of the discipline of L1 French as a result of these explorations.

Keywords: didactics, pedagogy, language activity, writing in higher education, discipline, process.

Samenvatting

[Translation Tanja Janssen]

Het onderzoek naar de rol van taal(gebruik) in het Franse hoger onderwijs is de laatste jaren ontstaan uit het grotere vakgebied van 'la didactique du français', het gebied van L1-onderwijs en theorie in alle leerjaren. Binnen dit grotere raam zijn er verschillende thema's die nu aan een nader onderzoek worden onderworpen bij schrijven in het hoger onderwijs: taalactiviteiten eerder als co-constructie van kennis in schoolse situaties dan als een transparant medium; schrijven, lezen en spreken als nauw verbonden activiteiten binnen de discipline; schrijven als een recursief proces; spreken en schrijven als complementaire activiteiten, en de herbeziening van L1 Frans als een gevolg van deze exploratieve onderzoeken.

Trefwoorden: didactiek, pedagogiek, taal activiteit, schrijven in het hoger onderwijs, vakgebied, proces.

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French

[Translation Christiane Donahue]

Resumé.

L'étude du rôle des activités langagières dans l'enseignement supérieur en France provient d'une approche plus générale développée au cours des trente dernières années dans le champ de la didactique du français langue maternelle, à tous les niveaux d'enseignement. C'est dans ce cadre théorique que sont apparues plusieurs questions de recherche qui sont actuellement l'objet d'investigations concernant l'écriture dans l'enseignement supérieur: la conception des activités langagières comme construction des connaissances et non comme transcription transparente des connaissances; l'écriture, la lecture et l'oral envisagés comme des activités foncièrement disciplinaires; la description des processus rédactionnels dans l'écriture; la complémentarité des activités orales et écrites; la reconfiguration de la discipline 'français langue maternelle'.

Italian

[Translated by Francesco Caviglia]

Abstract. Lo studio del ruolo delle attività linguistiche nell'educazione universitaria in Francia si è sviluppato a partire dalla più ampia disciplina della 'didactique du français', vale a dire l'insegnamento e la teoria della L1 ai vari livelli scolastici. Questo quadro più ampio ha fornito vari spunti che sono ora esplorati nel contesto della scrittura nella formazione universitaria: attività linguistiche come modalità di costruzione collaborativa di conoscenza in contesto scolastico piuttosto che come medium neutrale, scrittura, lettura e produzione orale come attività strettamente connesse alla dimensione disciplinare, scrittura come processo ricorsivo, produzione orale e scrittura come attività complementari, riconfigurazione della disciplina del francese L1 come risultato di tali esplorazioni.

Parole chiave: didattica, pedagogia, attività linguistiche, scrittura nella didattica universitaria, discipline, processo di scrittura.

Polish

[Translated by Elżbieta Awramiuk]

Streszczenie. Studia nad rolą aktywności językowej w wyższej edukacji we Francji rozwinęły się w ciągu ostatnich kilku lat na szerszym polu dydaktyki języka francuskiego, nauczania i teorii języka ojczystego na wszystkich poziomach edukacji. Ten szeroki kontekst dostarcza kilku tematów, które obecnie są badane w zakresie pisania na wyższym poziomie: aktywność językowa raczej jako sposób współkonstruowania wiedzy w szkolnej rzeczywistości niż jako transparentne medium, pisanie, czytanie i mówienie jako aktywności ściśle związane z daną dyscypliną naukową, pisanie jako proces rekurencyjny, mówienie i pisanie jako proces uzupełniający, a rekonfiguracja dyscypliny nauczania francuskiego jako języka ojczystego jako rezultat tych badań.

Słowa-klucze: dydaktyka, pedagogika, aktywność językowa, pisanie w szkole wyższej, dyscyplina, proces

Portuguese

[Translation Paulo Feytor Pinto].

Resumo

O estudo do papel da actividade linguística no ensino superior, em França, tem vindo a evoluir, nos últimos anos, no campo mais vasto da 'didáctica do francês' que se dedica à teoria e ao ensino da L1 em todos os níveis de ensino. Este enquadramento mais vasto forneceu vários temas que estão agora a ser explorados na escrita no ensino superior: a actividade linguística como modo de co-construção do conhecimento em contexto escolar e não tanto como veículo transparente; a escrita, a leitura e a oralidade como actividades intrinsecamente disciplinares; a escrita como processo recursivo; a complementaridade entre a oralidade e a escrita; e a reconfiguração da disciplina de Francês L1 em resultado destas indagações.

Palavras-chave: didáctica, pedagogia, actividade linguística, escrita no ensino superior, disciplina, processo.

Spanish

[Translation Ingrid Marquez]

Resumen. El estudio del papel que juegan las actividades del lenguaje en la educación superior en Francia se ha evolucionado en los últimos años; del campo más amplio de 'la didactique du français', ha surgido el campo de la enseñanza y teoría de L1 en todos los grados educativos. Este marco más grande ha permitido la exploración de varios temas relacionados con la redacción en la educación superior: las actividades de lenguaje como manera de 'co-construir' los conocimientos en un ambiente escolar en vez de proveer un medio transparente; la escritura, lectura y expresión oral como actividades disciplinarias íntimamente relacionadas; la redacción como un proceso de emplear recursos; la complementariedad del hablar y escribir; y la reconfiguración de la disciplina del francés como L1, resultado de estas exploraciones.

Palabras clave: didáctica, pedagogía, actividades de lenguaje, escritura en la educación superior, disciplina, proceso.

INTRODUCTION

In the past ten years or so, the theory and teaching of L1 French (in France and in other French-speaking countries) has entered into an area of research that had until now been largely ignored: that of language practices in university disciplines and more specifically the role of writing in the construction of disciplinary knowledge.¹ This recent investment has been supported by a move to call into question, in terms of our understanding of learning to write, what have been called 'techniques of expression,' and in particular the implications of these techniques as they were introduced into certain university programs (we will come back to these). As Laborde-Milaa, Boch, and Reuter (2004) write:

After a long focus on linguistic micro-competencies considered to be the guarantor of language mastery, and then on supposedly transversal methodological competencies, theory and practice are currently converging on a discursive and epistemological approach linked to the disciplines.

But such a remark could be applied just as easily to practices and research in *la didactique du français* at the primary and secondary school levels, which is in fact the source of this observation. A strong bond is actually developing between the two levels of schooling (pre-university and university) through the institutional development of teacher-formation institutions connected to universities: this has enabled a greater number of teacher-researchers interested in theorizing teaching to invest in the teacher formation process and its setting as a research field, and thus to explore, with the didactic instruments at their disposal, the role of writing in the construction of knowledge, in particular professional knowledge (cf. Daunay & Treignier, 2004).

We have seen, in the past ten years, a real reorientation of the theoretical paradigms in *la didactique du français*, which has brought us to consider, within the field of French writing and teaching theory, the language practices of all of the other disciplines – no matter what the grade level. The question of the bond between writing (as a specific example of language practices) and knowledge construction in the disciplines has become a central concern.

The whole field of writing and teaching theory is also changing, and the development of research about university-level writing owes much to these changes. Notice in passing the fact that L1 French as a specific discipline is being removed from

primary and secondary school curricula, replaced by ‘French embedded across the disciplines,’ while at the French university, it is obviously the disciplines that have prevailed. But now the principle of integrating language development into the various university disciplines is concomitant to the constitution, in the later part of the primary school grades (students 8-11 years old), of ‘disciplinary fields,’ a move that brought the 2002 French official curriculum to proclaim that ‘the mastery of written language happens first and foremost in all of the specific subject areas.’

In other words, the evolution of research in *la didactique du français* has modified the very status of the objects we study. And this evolution has a history – one that cannot be summarized strictly in the university domain. It is this history I will develop here (of course only partially and doubtless with a certain bias), exploring in particular:

- the key moments of introduction, within L1 French didactics, of the research question of language practices in the disciplines and the epistemological conditions that favored this introduction;
- the consequences this has had on the reconfiguration of different disciplines and on the bond between L1 French didactics and didactics as related to other subjects.

1. FROM THE CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL PRACTICES TO THE USE OF NEW THEORETICAL TOOLS INTERNAL TO L1 FRENCH DIDACTICS, EMERGING IN THE 1980S

1.1. The critical observations made in the 1970s and 1980s (brought up again and summarized in Jean-François Halté, 1992, cf. as well Reuter, 1996; Petitjean, 1999) about the classical concept of writing instruction is well known – the concept that had remained dominant in the State curriculum as well as in the classroom up until the 1970s. This concept was seen as a reinvestment in fragmented knowledge, constructed around two poles: literature (discovered through the ‘explication de texte,’ (textual explication) a prototypical French writing exercise, born at the end of the 19th century) and language (learned through systematic exercises). Gradual absorption and imitation dominated in a learning situation in which the actual act of producing a written text was overlooked.

1.2. The critique of the traditional perspective legitimized research into writing and teaching theory in the 1980s, and focused on writing processes, based on the psycho-cognitive approaches of Flower and Hayes (1980), widely disseminated by Claudine Garcia-Debanc (1986) to the community of researchers in writing and teaching theory in the Francophone world. She writes in her introduction:

What do we know about the act of writing? What do we need to know in order to help students’ learning? These questions, translated here literally, begin the recent edited collection dedicated to writing processes [Gregg & Steinberg, eds. (1980)]. The nature of these questions highlights the stakes, above all pedagogical, of this research: it is because United States universities observe their students facing difficulty writing that they have decided to engage in interdisciplinary research in this domain. [...] Are these investigations useful for primary and secondary schooling as well? Do they permit us to

understand certain difficulties facing [younger] students? Can they help us to scaffold pedagogical interventions?

I have cited long excerpts from this introduction, first to highlight the programmatic dimensions of this first approach (notice, for example, the number of questions posed), but also to bring out the link Garcia-Debanc established (or questioned) between primary, secondary, and post-secondary teaching,² and finally (in particular given the theme of this special issue), to underscore the debt L1 French didactics has to United States research about this aspect.³

1.3. The critiques of traditional practices in teaching writing were also legitimized by (while they simultaneously legitimized) another form of didactics research (older but also more frequent and more widely distributed in the teacher formation institutions). This research was based on diverse efforts to construct a textual typology, a generic classification system for the types of texts to be taught: it was at its conception a way to envision the writing to be produced in L1 French classes, not as unexamined scholastic givens, but as objects able to be described according to objective criteria, objects that could also be categorized in non-scholastic classes. The origin, in L1 French didactics, of the interest in text typologies can be found in the narratological and semiotic approaches to the “récit” (the “story”), which engendered the notion of “narrative schema.”⁴ This initial grounding of reflections about texts in the literary dimension doubtless fostered their success – and permitted a double-awakening, rather than a restriction to only the literary domain, in the end: awakening to other types of texts (since the narrative schema took on a prototypical status in reference to other “textual schemas”), but also awakening to other theories, in particular linguistic theories (for a timeline, cf. Adam 1992) and psycholinguistic theories (Fayol, 1985; Denhière, 1984). (For a history of this double awakening see Adam (2005)).

1.4. This typological approach generated, in the 80s and 90s, teaching practices (theorized by French didactics researchers) among which the activity of “sorting texts” became the most important (Garcia-Debanc, 1989, 2005). But it also gave rise to a number of research projects in French didactics (with diverse theoretical, but primarily linguistic, frames) focused on texts other than narrative: in particular, explicative,⁵ argumentative,⁶ and descriptive⁷ texts. It is interesting to note that this

² *This is the same link I mentioned at the beginning of the article: we can see that the value of research in L1 French didactics is heavily centered on school teaching and it is by a movement towards post-secondary education that it has been able to begin exploring teaching at this level.*

³ *For a critical look at the didactic value of writing process models, see Garcia-Debanc and Fayol (2002).*

⁴ *The source of the narrative schema has distant roots (cf. Propp, 1928/1970) and diverse roots (cf. the references Adam (1992) calls on, p. 45-74.*

⁵ *Cf. Pratiques n° 51 (Exercices) (1986) Les textes explicatifs (Explanatory texts) ; Pratiques n° 58 (1988) Les discours explicatifs (Explanatory discourses): the shift from ‘text’ to ‘discourse’ in these two titles signals the shift in theoretical approach. Cf. also Repères n° 72*

research was largely pursued after the 1980s,⁸ but with a theoretical shift, as we will see further along. Here, I only want to highlight the fertile reflections that appeared later at the heart of French didactics about language behaviors.

2. LE “FRANÇAIS BIEN COMMUN”

2.1. Research in emerging L1 French didactics could not help encountering other disciplines, in confluence with pedagogical inquiry in the 1970s founded on trans-disciplinarity. In an article in *Le français aujourd’hui*, titled “Interdisciplinary practices,” Bernard Parzysz (1979) describes the work being done by a French-mathematics research group at the south-Paris IREM: “A child might be considered weak in mathematics, not because he doesn’t understand the math but because he doesn’t understand the texts that talk about math...” In the same issue, Bertrand Schwartz (1979: 12) writes:

As long as communication is not everyone’s concern, in school and outside of school, as long as teachers in other disciplines turn to you and say ‘This is your problem. What are you doing for us...?’ we will make no progress. And yet, you are the ones who must act...

This last sentence is interesting because, even though these are mathematicians pleading for understanding French as transdisciplinary, they still refer the research question back to L1 French researchers and practitioners. The AFEF⁹ continued to develop this research question: in 1985, the journal *Recherches* (at that time a regional publication of AFEF) published its second issue, titled *Français bien commun* (French, a common good – in the material sense of “goods”), to explore L1 French as a “language of the classroom”. Francine Darras presented an article with the same focus in *Le français aujourd’hui*, in a chapter titled “Opening” – in which, significantly, the article is side-by-side with a roundtable discussion about teaching speech and an article about French as a second language issue. The next year, *Le français aujourd’hui* refined its approach, in issue number 74: “L1 French at the crossroads of the disciplines.”

The question of writing’s transdisciplinarity is clearly treated elsewhere than in journals dedicated to L1 French writing and teaching theory. In 1988, for example, *Aster*, the journal of teaching theory for experimental science, published its sixth

(References) (1987) *Discours explicatifs en classe – Quand? Comment? Pourquoi? (Explanatory discourses in class – When ? How ? Why ?; Repères n° 77 (References) (1989) Le discours explicatif – genres et textes (Explanatory Discourse – Genres and texts; Recherches n° 13 (Research) (1990) Expliquer.*

⁶ Cf. *Pratiques n 28 (Exercices) (1980), Argumenter ; cf. also Recherches n 13 (1988), Argumenter.*

⁷ Cf. *Pratiques n 55 (1987) Les textes descriptifs (Illustrative texts).*

⁸ Cf. for example, just in terms of the work being done in Lille, THEODILE’s research program focused on description (cf. Reuter, Ed., 1998) of the current work at MSH about the récit (narrative).

⁹ Association française des enseignants du français, the French Association of French Teachers, publisher of the journal *le Français aujourd’hui, French Today.*

issue with the title: “Students and writing in the sciences.” Anne Vérin wrote in her article in this issue:

We are not focusing here on the activity of writing, on the competencies that must be mastered so that the writing act will be successful, as in French class where learning writing is a key objective. There, [...] current pedagogical practice [...] is dissociated from the writing practice of these same students in other disciplines, that is to say few are interested by the functional aspect of texts and school situations of communication into which they are integrated; we rarely attach any importance to the processes of writing up content; we work with a limited repertory of texts, mostly narratives. We rarely envision the teaching and learning of writing which is not full texts but sentences, parts of sentences, lists, tables, schemas. (p. 15)

Vérin cites Freinet and the Rouchette plan as less widespread pedagogical propositions that head in this direction. But we must note on this subject that Freinet (Freinet, 1971) and the Rouchette plan (Rouchette, 1971)¹⁰ take on the question of writing from a communicative and motivational point of view, that is, only one of the aspects developed by Vérin (“the functional aspect of texts and communicative social situations in which they are integrated”). It is elsewhere, even though Vérin appears to minimize this with these references, that we find the originality of the approach: the “processes of writing (up) content,” as cited in the quotation above.

2.2 We can see clearly the emergent character of the research question of writing in the disciplines in the fact that, almost systematically, French parallels other disciplines,¹¹ the main objective being simply to affirm that language is not just an affair for L1 French class but concerns all disciplines.¹²

The evolution of the relationship among the disciplines is seen as well in the evolution of curriculum. When the traditional configuration of teaching and learning of school-based writing is criticized, as I pointed out earlier, the central point has been that writing crowned a fragmented field split typically into language and literature. We can indeed say, with Ducancel and Astolfi (1995) that, in elementary school curricula based on this traditional configuration (before the reform of L1 French teaching, Rouchette 1971), “the writing exercise called ‘French composition’ was presented as the synthesis and the crowning moment of all teaching, for which ‘all the other disciplines’ compete.” In their historic review of the transdisciplinary

¹⁰ *The Rouchette plan was developed by a commission presided over by the Education Inspector Marcel Rouchette. The plan was an education reform targeting elementary school teaching of French, based on recent developments in linguistics and psychology. The plan re-evaluated the role of spoken activities and communication, and imagined a dialectic between freedom and structure, between ‘the need for motivation whose source is individual expression and free communication, and the need for systematic learning of a more elaborated language’.*

¹¹ *In addition to the quote from A. Vérin above, cf., as examples, Astolfi (1986, p. 56) : «The mastery of written language [...] goes far beyond the objectives of L1 French teaching» ; Ginsburger-Vogel (1986, p. 59): «The difficulties encountered by students confronted by writing can not simply be linked to language learning in French class».*

¹² *At the same time, the official curricular text ‘Lire au collège’ (Reading in Middle School) (1985) considers learning to read as cross-curricular (cf. Delcambre, 1990, p. 9).*

approach to language and science learning, the authors note that the relationship between the disciplines was modified in the curriculum of the 1970s, L1 French becoming (like mathematics) an “instrumental” discipline, written and spoken expression taking on meaning and value only in the frame of other activities (see the official curriculum of 1977), and L1 French guaranteeing “language learning as instrumental through activities, sessions, specific and systematic exercises” (Ducancel & Astolfi 1995). At this point, L1 French as language, as speaking and as writing, was no longer seen as a crowning ability but as the fundamental basis for activities and learning across all other disciplines.

It is in this context that Parzys (1979: 20) writes: ‘French is linked by its very nature to all other disciplines, because it is the language of communication; it is thus, in particular, the metalanguage of mathematics.’ L1 French is thus, in this configuration, both a specific discipline (characterized essentially by its linguistic content) and a ‘transversal discipline,’ if we can say it that way: a discipline that takes into account the textual and communicational dimensions of writing production. This is the meaning of the 1986 issue of *Le français aujourd’hui* titled ‘French at the crossroads of the disciplines’.

Astolfi’s 1986 article in that issue is a perfect example of these two dimensions: in his analysis of the ‘transdisciplinary methodological competence’ that is “mastery of written language’, Astolfi highlights, in his conclusion, the importance of activities that allow us to distinguish ‘the nature of texts being studied in different subjects’ and the need to give the student the “syntactic structures that will allow him to express his thinking’ (p. 56).

L1 French is clearly being presented here as a particular kind of ‘discipline’: it is simply the location of strictly linguistic learning and of narrative-literary texts. The other dimensions (textual and communicative) are transversal and are part of all disciplines.¹³

2.3 The transversal approaches to producing writing presented in this same journal issue are characterized by a linguistic approach to discourse, as Mortureux (1986) clearly illustrates and supports:

It is thus a linguistic approach that will furnish here the transdisciplinary procedure: the description of certain linguistic and rhetorical functions observed in literary texts [...] and in introductory life science texts [...] allows us to separate out both the shared mechanisms and the diverse effects linked to the diversity of language functions (p. 11).

The linguistic tools referenced by Mortureux are the ones provided by Benveniste (*récit* (narrative) vs. discourse), Weinrich (*récit* (narrative) vs. commentary), and Jacobson (the different functions of discourse). Her perspective focuses on the analysis of objects produced (and in particular not just objects produced by students, but all objects to be read) and of linguistic constraints that come from the type of text and the production situation of the text.

¹³ Cf. on this question the most recent AIRDF conference, ‘L1 French: singular, plural, or transversal discipline?’. Quebec, 2004. Cf. *La lettre de l’AIRDF* n 35, December 2004. See *infra*, 4.1.

The discursive approach combines, in fact, the textual and communicative dimensions of writing in the disciplines, capitalizing on the research question of text typologies (for which we have seen the role in the internal approach to teaching and theorizing L1 French, but which in fact was just as influential in the transdisciplinary approach), and calls into question the different types of texts or discourses to read and to produce, depending on the discipline in question. Consider this example from an article by Darras and Delcambre (1986):

Each discipline is thus invited to question (and to question itself about) the types of discourse it produces. Thus, for each text—narrative, descriptive, argumentative...the question must be asked, what is its specific status as seen in the way it is inscribed as a discursive act in a discipline: a narrative text is not to be read or written with the same orientation in history, in French, in the sciences. (p. 69)

2.4. That same approach is proposed by Astolfi (1986) in this same journal issue. But his article also shows an evolution in research questions about writing in the disciplines by evoking (although without developing it) the postulate of a larger relationship between cognition and language: he writes in his introduction that ‘didactically speaking, these interactions between languages¹⁴ and thought are very important’ (p. 51) and, in his conclusion, that the mastery of written language ‘presents itself in a different way in each conceptual field’ (p. 56). This simple reference highlights the emergent character of research inquiries related to writing in the disciplines. G. Ducancel and J.P. Astolfi (1995), in their historical review of converging research discussion about language and science learning in this period of the 1980s, highlight the fact that research in ‘transversal’ L1 French didactics follows two tendencies:

- One tendency corresponds to the approaches I have just detailed, and brings together the research that ‘takes into account essentially the linguistic stakes of scientific activities, and the communication and verbal representations that occur’ (ibid., p. 8); a good example of this approach is the EVA group’s research centered on the types of writing in various disciplines, seeking to determine criteria for successful writing in the various texts produced in these contexts. However, Ducancel and Astolfi say that ‘in most cases, the ‘rules of writing’ that are thus constituted are mute about the scientific stakes of discourse’ (1995).
- The other tendency is to gather the less voluminous research that ‘takes into account the interaction between scientific stakes and linguistic stakes’ (Ducancel & Astolfi, 1995, p.8); the authors cite Garcia-Debanc’s 1988 article as representative of this tendency. Garcia-Debanc (a member of the EVA group) proposes a ‘model of the language behavior of explication’ that posits the interaction of three operations: managing the interaction, managing the discourse, and managing the discourse object.

¹⁴ *The plural ‘languages’ in this quote (that also appears in his title) is not explained; in the beginning of the article, a few lines before the quote, Astolfi writes: ‘Scientists often conceive of language as a means of communicating the results of their activity; he speaks in conclusion of the ‘mastery of written language’ (p. 56 – emphasis mine).*

Vergnaud develops this approach further by inextricably linking language and knowledge; already in his contribution to issue number 74 of *le Français aujourd'hui* he writes: 'We cannot separate spoken or written utterances of expression or mathematical discourse from the knowledge content they are about' (Vergnaud, 1987, p. 47). He introduces his article with that thought; he concludes it with the question, 'How does language activity accompany and produce mathematical thought?' I cite this article because of the programmatic character of these questions, which we see again in this remark: 'The question of the relationship between language and thought, so often evoked by philosophers, psychologists, and linguists and...difficult to study, is the most delicate question.' This remark is followed by a concluding paragraph that ends with these words, the final words of the whole article: 'Studying this dialectic of thought, action, and formulation is of the greatest theoretical interest. Perhaps here resides the principal key to problems of expression and comprehension in French, for a given conceptual domain.'

The programmatic nature of these propositions dates, essentially, the beginning of this aspect of the evolution of the research field called 'didactics of language practices'.

3. LANGUAGE IN ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH KNOWLEDGE

3.1 It is only later that we see develop, in mathematical didactics, research studies¹⁵ that give full meaning to Vergnaud's questions, inspired in particular by his theory founded on the idea of 'conceptual fields.' He summarizes the theory thus: 'We will call conceptual fields a group of situations for which the treatment implies schemas, concepts, and theorems, all tightly linked, as well as the language and symbolic representations likely to be used to represent them' (Laborde & Vergnaud, 1994). It is important to keep in mind that Vergnaud is quite influenced here by Vygotsky. Indeed, at this same point in time, Vygotsky's work was being exhumed or rediscovered in the perspective of the formulation of a new 'model of language psychology' to which a Genevan research team connected, presenting their approach in the issue number 69 of *le Français aujourd'hui* already mentioned (Schneuwly, Bronckart, Pasquier, Bain, & Davaud 1995), the same year in which the definitive work on the subject was published by Bronckart, Bain, Schneuwly, Davaud & Pasquier (1985), *The workings of discourse: A psycholinguistic model and a method of analysis*.¹⁶

Founded on the epistemological principles of social interactionism, this approach envisions language activity as articulated in extra-linguistic domains (such as knowledge content), inscribed in social institutions (such as school), and creating the possibility of social interaction.

3.2. The theoretical and teaching consequences were important for all disciplines and even provoked an overall redefinition of 'didactics' (theory of teaching practice)

¹⁵ Cf., in issue 12 of *Repères* (1995), the introduction to Ducancel & Astolfi (1995, p. 12) and the articles of Bernard (1995) and of Brissiaud (1995).

¹⁶ cf., Bronckart J.-P. (1996).

(Halté, 1993). The objects of knowledge in and of themselves were no longer at stake, nor the role of language in the construction of these objects of knowledge, but the enmeshed nature of language and knowledge construction. In another epistemological frame, we can see in the 1990s the development of practices that put writing at the heart of learning, in particular through the development of 'writing in process.' A. Verin (1995) writes, for example: 'Writing that accompanies the process of investigation can play a key role in the mobilization of students' thinking and engage a dynamic of conceptual change.' This constructivist approach conceives of sociocognitive conflicts as the springboard for learning: writing, understood as accompanying learning (and not as an end-stage product), enables changes in initial conceptions, through the confrontation both among students' texts and across the successive texts of a single student. It is not just the changes in conceptions that are at stake: it is the very relationship between language and scientific reasoning (Verin, 1995, p. 22). Learning to write happens in the same movement as learning to reason scientifically, in a back and forth process between producing meaning with writing and acquiring specific competencies.

Orange (2003), also without referring to Vygotsky, describes the evolution of the place of language in the theory of science teaching, using the example of the 'scientific debate': if, in the classic¹⁷ epistemological and didactic frame, 'language activities are heavily implicated in science learning,' and play a role (particularly in the case of debates) in changing students' conceptions, 'they are [implicated] for reasons that are not specific to the knowledge in question'; in the new epistemological and didactic frame he supports, however, 'what plays out in this kind of debate situation is not simply a way to help conceptions to change, but [...] a fundamental construction of the scientific knowledge being targeted.'

3.3. Although Orange and Vérin do not refer to Vygotsky, it is the research that is based on this author's work that provides the clearest formalization [in France] of the relationship between language and the construction of school knowledge. To be honest, the didactic dimension of the interactionist approach can be attributed to the fact that it influences research in didactics by centering it on student and teacher activity while marginalizing the question of research objects. That is, the interest in integrating Vygotskian theory into didactics is primarily based in the methodological and epistemological movements it permits: the analysis (already suggested by M. Brossard) of the didactic situation and what it engages in terms of awareness of the context of the subject's (linguistic and cognitive) activity in the co-construction of knowledge.¹⁸

The difference with the 'typological' conception of writing can be seen in this remark by Bernié (1998): 'Producing a given type of text for a given recipient, taking into account the sociofunctional norms in place in a given sphere of exchange, is

¹⁷ *The one best represented by Astolfi or, more generally, the one from the 1980s-1990s.*

¹⁸ *It is important to note here the work of Francis Ruellan, about which a book in his honor has been edited by Reuter (2005), in particular the article in the collection by J.P. Bernié, showing the value (but in his mind also the limits) of the 'theory of the didactic situation' put in place by Ruellan in the frame of the didactique du français (French didactics).*

not reducible to simple know-how concerning the manipulation of pronouns or verb tenses, it is learning how to appropriate others' words, how to speak the language of a community and this language is inextricable from content.'

Let us note in passing the determining influence of Bakhtin in this passage:¹⁹ He is, with Vygotsky, the other Soviet author rediscovered²⁰ by researchers in didactics. The importance of this last remark by Bernié is its emphasis on the inextricable linking of the verbal (expression) and the knowledge content. The rest of the passage is quite telling: 'The communicative nature of writing makes it a tool²¹ for appropriating/constructing knowledge in specific domains. One can no longer be satisfied with 'doing [L1] French' in 'doing biology'; one learns biology because one is 'doing French.' Bernié (but here he is just representative of this approach) posits in fact as inextricably linked the two domains that are ordinarily presented as separate, 'language for communicating' and 'language for learning' (p. 171).

3.3. It is in this context (articulated by Vygotsky and Bakhtin in their theories) that the notion of genre appeared in research into the theory of teaching practice, a notion that, as Bernié said in 1998 'is called to play a major role in the didactics of French' (p. 165). The Genevan team mentioned earlier developed the research of this domain. Their research implicates the full range of writing and teaching of writing theories, particularly because of the potential articulation with the notion of 'social practices of reference' (Martinand 1986, described by Dolz and Schneuwly (1995): 'Genre is used as the means of articulation between social practices and scholastic objects, particularly in the domain of teaching students to produce spoken and written texts' (p. 27).

The didactic echoes of this approach are found in particular in the production, starting in 1993, of 'didactic sequences' focused on the production of written texts.²² But the most evolved form of the didactic sequence is certainly the work of Dolz and Schneuwly (1998) focused on spoken language: it was certainly not by chance, and we should note here that the evolution of the field of theorizing writing instruction towards a field of theorizing language activity as a whole owes its progress to the work in *la didactique de l'oral*²³ and in particular the work of E. Nonnon who organized in 2004 a conference titled 'Is it necessary to speak in order to learn?' (a different perspective from the Genevans, although not incompatible). The Genevan didactic approach to genre became widespread and the notion of genre, whether taken in its initial epistemological 'composting' form or not, remains a fertile way of thinking about didactic objects: this is the current work of the research team

¹⁹ *As much in the general content as in the use of words: 'spheres of exchange', 'appropriating the words of others', 'speaking the language of a community'.*

²⁰ *But a few years earlier, under the influence of literary theory.*

²¹ *In the sense Vygotsky provides: a psychological tool.*

²² *Bronckart (1996, p. 10) offers a preliminary outline of these benefits.*

²³ *It would be interesting to explore the concepts constructed in the didactics of spoken language and recuperated by the didactics of written language – and in what conditions – and the role of didactics of spoken language in the lay renderings of Vygotskian theory in didactics.*

THEODILE at l'Université de Lille III (Théories-Didactiques de la Lecture-Ecriture).

3.4. Again, in the epistemological line of thinking that social interactionism represents, in the past few years J.P. Bernié's research team at the Université de Bordeaux has focused on the concept of 'discourse community.' Jaubert, Rebière and Bernié (2003b), in their introductory remarks at the conference titled 'Construction of Knowledge and Language in Teaching Disciplines,' enumerated the following postulates:

- We need to conceive of school as a discourse community whose construction must be guided through knowledge content and activities;
- We need to conceive of this discourse community as plural because it subdivides into disciplines;
- Concerning each discipline, we should conceive of language practices, like other practices, as constitutive of knowledge;
- We need to conceive of each discipline as generating its own practices that then generate its own discourse;
- We need to conceive of school practices in different subjects as inscribed in a 'continuum' between the discursive practices of a particular [scholarly] community and those of a community of instruction.

For this research team, 'school is something to be constructed in this tension between its function, its workings, including its language workings, and those of the community of origin of the knowledge in question' (ibid.).²⁴ The value of this didactic model can be measured in particular through the extension of its application in different disciplines and different levels of teaching: cf, on this subject, Bucheton et al's article (2004) that questions 'the language practices of teachers' by analyzing didactic situations in several disciplines.

3.5. To finish this review, we need to reference the contributions from other theories which enabled the evolution of conceptions of writing in a didactic perspective, without conflicting with the preceding ones (and sometimes in fact in a very real convergence with the others that is only seen afterwards, sometimes reconstructed precisely by the field of didactics). That is the case with Grize's approach (1990). This theorist of 'natural logic' shows how discourse constitutes or modifies its very self: regarding the value of this approach for didactics, see Delcambre and Reuter (2000). Anthropological approaches (in particular those of Goody 1977/79 and 1994) and psychocognitive approaches (in particular those of Olson, 1994/98), allowed a better understanding of the heuristic dimension of writing, in opposition to the representation of writing as the transcription of an idea already conceived.²⁵ And this conception can have important and immediate didactic echoes, when we posit

²⁴ For a presentation of this theory, cf. in particular Bernié (2002), Jaubert, Rebière & Bernié (2003a), Bernié, Jaubert & Rebière (2004), and Jaubert & Rebière (2005).

²⁵ Cf. Daunay and Reuter (2004), who analyze the representations of students in their third year of university studies in education science.

that ‘writing is not transparent, is not the transcription of already-elaborated thought’ (Delcambre & Reuter, 2000). That is to say, we can consider writing as having not only a transcriptive function, but a constructive function (cf., Ruellan et al. (2000); Daunay & Reuter, 2004).

That is what justifies, based on a different theoretical platform than Vérin’s (cited earlier), the development of ‘intermediary writings’ (cf., Chabanne & Bucheton, 2000). Delcambre, Dolz & Simard (2000), in their introduction to the DFLM²⁶ newsletter titled ‘writing to learn,’ define clearly this type of approach:

Writing is not just an activity that seeks a final product, writing to communicate, to re-constitute, to be evaluated, etc., but an intermediate activity, which frames and accompanies the learning process [...]. We are talking about writing or temporary (draft) traces that help in the construction of knowledge, that can be called upon for any part of learning. It is the general epistemic function of writing that dominates here and becomes a principle of didactic action. ‘Writing to learn’ is thus based on a conception of language [...], not as the translation of pre-elaborated thought, but as the construction-formulation of thought, a construction that at the same time feels its way, reflects, interrogates the knowledge to come.

The authors add that this is where the term ‘reflexive writing’ comes from to designate this writing in courses in which students are learning how to write. The reflexive dimension of writing is actually the object of many scholars’ attention, for school teaching (cf., among others Chabanne & Bucheton, 2002) or university teaching (cf., for example Dufays & Thyron, eds., 2004; Vanhulle in press).²⁷ This taking into account of the reflexive nature of writing is complemented and built from another approach, with sociocognitive and sociolinguistic origins, which explores the subjective aspect of writing and what it says about the relationship between language and the student writer’s world. The ESCOL research team has developed research in this area over several years (which led to, along with a number of articles, two important books, Bautier & Rochex 1998 and Charlot, Bautier & Rochex 1992). They insist on considering the language practices that school presupposes but are not necessarily socially shared; Bautier thus says: ‘As with the whole group of language practices, the use of language for elaborating, thinking, working with knowledge in writing arises from a familiarization with practices, relationships to language, to knowledge, to values not shared by everyone’ (1997). The didactic value of this approach appears in particular in the work of the Montpellier research group, led by Bucheton and Chabanne (cf., in particular their co-authored work in 2002).

Finally, in the work I have cited, we need to note the absence of references to psycholinguistic models of writing. Bereiter and Scardamalia’s approach (1987; cf., Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987)²⁸ does remain the key reference today in cognitive approaches, as Catel (2001) mentions. We are witnessing in this case a real separation between different models of reference in the theorizing of French teaching prac-

²⁶ This publication is the newsletter of what was at the time the Didactics of French as Mother Tongue, since changed to the International Association for Research in L1 French (AIRDF).

²⁷ Included here is the sociological research of Bernard Lahire (1993 in particular), based on J. Goody’s analyses and exploring the reflexive dimension of school writing and its discriminating effects in terms of social practices of language use.

²⁸ Which describes two models of writing production – ‘Knowledge Telling Strategy’ and ‘Knowledge Transforming Strategy.’

tice, with no efforts to integrate them on the horizon. As a striking illustration, Astolfi's articles (2001) titled 'Writing to understand science' divide clearly into two conceptual systems that appear unaware of each other (we need only look at their bibliographies to see this).

4. QUESTIONING SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY DISCIPLINES

4.1. Plane, in 2002, observed that 'in France, at all levels of schooling, institutional changes have come into play and have upset the landmarks that we have had until now, and that inscribed writing activity in a clearly identified frame' (p. 7). It is primarily at the elementary school level that major changes have been seen, in that they affect the very structure of the representation of the disciplines taught at school. In fact, the most recent official curriculum for elementary school (2002), related to the third cycle,²⁹ distinguishes 'disciplinary subjects' from 'transversal subjects.' Certain traditional French subjects are still in the disciplinary category: 'literature (saying it, reading it, writing it)' and 'reflective observation of language use (grammar, conjugation, orthography, vocabulary).' But the first transversal domain is 'mastery of language and of the French language,' including 'learning to speak, read, and write in the specific context of certain knowledge and the types of writing that characterize' each disciplinary field.

In other words, the subject 'French,' as such, has disappeared. Certainly, as we saw earlier (2.2.) an evolution in this direction had begun in the earlier versions of the official curriculum in terms of the relationship between French and other disciplines, but clearly this is a radical, major shaking up (at least officially). We cannot help but see the influence of the research in the didactics of writing (in L1 French as in the other subject areas), about which we have seen the evolution towards taking into account language's role in learning across the disciplines.

This reconfiguration of school subjects at the elementary school level³⁰ calls into question the very status of L1 French didactics and its application. It is no longer in a position to construct its disciplinary matrix based on the school subject itself, as Halté had invited us regularly to do for years (for example, Halté 1992 and 2001). Can it be defined from here on in as a discipline of reference for the other disciplines by building its disciplinary matrix on the production of spoken and written discourse, thus rediscovering from a different angle what Halté proposed?

4.2. At the middle-secondary school level, in their traditional configurations, the disciplines have remained more clearly defined. That has not prevented changes in the nature of the school subject 'French': the most recent state curriculum for secondary school levels (1996 and 2000) seems to have found coherence in the notion of 'discourse mastery' (that structures the curriculum overall), which reinforces an im-

²⁹ *The first cycle is the equivalent of later elementary school – children of about 8-11 years old.*

³⁰ *At least in this third cycle – French does remain its own discipline, named 'mastery of French language,' and a bit later, initiation into reading and writing.*

pression of transversality in the discipline itself.³¹ A similar evolution, at least in principle, to the one we have seen at the elementary level has taken place throughout the levels of schooling: ‘itineraries of discovery’ in early secondary education, supported personal work in secondary school, pluridisciplinary projects of a professional nature in the vocational-technical secondary schools, that can be described (borrowing from Plane 2002) as ‘new locations where the student’s activity of language production finds itself oriented towards a double goal that goes beyond the field of French strictly defined to that of the cognitive construction of the student as epistemic subject, and that of his or her social construction as member of a community.’

This redraws new contours for the theorizing of teaching writing, which no longer concerns just the subject of ‘French’ – and research on the subject can only give theoretical grounding to these evolutions. The teaching and theorizing of French may remain its own subject in secondary schooling, but its relationship to other subjects is being rethought. And it is not impossible to imagine a growth that corresponds to that of elementary school, that keeps it separated out from language and literature,³² leaving to all the other disciplines (including French as a discipline) the field of language activities.

4.3. The conception of a link between learning to write and the disciplines has evolved in higher education as well. M.C. Pollet and F. Boch pleaded in 2002, in their introduction to the conference ‘Writing in Higher Education,’ for a change in the understanding of the approach to writing, which is fairly directly connected to research in this area:

We must avoid certain still-powerful tendencies [...] such as the development of purely linguistic (and often normative) skills or ‘technical’ and methodological competencies. Indeed, the automaticity and decontextualization inherent in these practices have little chance to meet the logic of knowledge and intellectual work into which students must enter. [...] It is a question of constructing a way of teaching no longer based on theoretical requirements regarding mastery of language but on the language needs of students concerning a (or several) specific communication situation(s). (p. X)

Evoking ‘the omnipresence of writing,’ they call on the need to enable, for students, ‘an acculturation to writing as source and means of construction-diffusion of knowledge, in its form as ‘vector of specialized knowledge’³³ and ‘form of exercise of knowing’.³⁴ These propositions draw the history of writing practices in higher education through what is lacking. An implied reference is being made to the ‘tech-

³¹ Cf. *Recherches n° 37 (2002), Français et interdisciplinarité. (French and interdisciplinarity)*

³² *With no doubt a redistribution, or at least a tendency towards one, between middle school and high school, which allows the re-establishment of the traditional categorization between ‘Grammar classes’ and ‘classes of Letters’; the essentially literary dimension of the most recent French high school curricula (which separates from a recent evolution towards non-literary possibilities) seems to give meaning to this assumption...*

³³ *Reference to Dabène (1998).*

³⁴ *Reference to Millet (1999).*

niques of expression' course introduced in the 1960s in technical and professional institutions of higher education and in some undergraduate university programs. These 'techniques' were, at first, primarily those of language and communication 'skills' mastery (cf., the historical overview provided by Renée Simonet, 1994). The evolution of these courses and practices can be seen in the change in their name over time: for example, in the introductory remarks of the Fintz collection (1998), Véronique Costa and Claude Fintz challenge the expression (p. 37) and offer to replace it with 'expression, methodology, communication and culture' (abbreviated as EMC) as is used in several universities in the Alps region of France (Costa & Fintz, 1998, p. 9 ff.). We are thus moving away from the objectives assigned to the higher education 'techniques of expression' efforts by works such as *Structure one's thinking, structure one's sentence* (Niquet, 1978), a well-received and influential work at the time. That said, these higher education writing practices are not, for the most part, thought about in close linkage with university disciplines.

Laborde-Milla, Boch, and Reuter (2004) observe the same thing, but they do so in order to highlight the evolution of the field of research and practice in writing in higher education, open now to all levels, including research writing or writing designed to initiate students into university research. They show above all how much this work borrows from the advances in the didactics of writing, about which I have tried to flesh out a quick history, beginning with the citation by these authors. The purpose of their analysis was to introduce an issue of the journal *Pratiques* titled 'University Writing' (2004), which shows (along with a few other journal issues³⁵) the recent vitality of the research field focused on writing practices in higher education. This field is dominated by writing: we can explain this primarily by the recent development of new institutional practices of written certification, like the 'professional report' (a major written document required of most students at the end of university studies).³⁶ But this is primarily due to the fact that writing dominates in the didactic reflections on language practices in higher education, as recent publications attest, whether they are analyzing ordinary writing practices in higher education³⁷ or more original processes but now dedicated to higher education, including the 'formation journal,'³⁸ the 'récit de vie,' (biographical narrative)³⁹ or other innovative processes of formation.⁴⁰ This work can only foster research in the theorizing of writing and writing instruction practices that does not rely on the didactics of French but concerns the didactics of all disciplines.

³⁵ *Enjeux (Stakes) n° 53 et 54, L'écrit dans l'enseignement supérieur (Teaching Writing at the Post Secondary Level) (2002), le n° 29 de Spirale, Lire-écrire dans le supérieur (Reading and Writing at the Post Secondary Level) (2002).*

³⁶ *On this topic, cf. in particular Cros (1998), Crinon dir. (2003).*

³⁷ *For example, note-taking (Boch 1999), explicative discourse (Pollet, 2001), or reflexive writing (Dufays and Thirion, 2004).*

³⁸ *Cf. for example Quatrevaux (2002).*

³⁹ *Cf. for example Dominicé (1992/2002).*

⁴⁰ *Cf. for example, pedagogical and didactic innovations in the second part of Delamotte et al.'s work (2000).*

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