ABSTRACT. This paper focuses on grammar teaching with beginning writers. The study aimed to determine whether the grammatical encoding in French should be explicitly taught to improve beginner writers' performances. Third and fifth graders were evaluated on their ability to correctly make a verb agree with its subject before (pre-test), during and after (post-test) training sessions. The training was either explicit or implicit. The explicitly trained group was requested to select the subject and the verb in erroneous sentences and to correct agreement errors. The implicitly trained group corrected only the errors they found. A global analysis showed a significant decrease in agreement errors between pre-test and post-test regardless of the training group, suggesting that agreement rules may be explicitly or implicitly taught. However, a more fine-grained analysis showed that younger writers took extra advantage of the explicit training during the training sessions, they did not do so during the post-test. Finally, explicit training benefited all participants during the post-test with sentences demonstrating syntactic ambiguity.

KEY WORDS: grammar teaching, spelling, subject–verb agreement, writing development

1. Introduction

The French language, a very irregular and complex system, poses many difficulties for children learning this language. The grapheme–phoneme regularities allow 95% of the words to be read, but only 50% of the words to be written. Furthermore, most morphological marks are written but not pronounced. This is particularly true for number inflections: -s for nouns and -nt for verbs. Children thus have to learn the written morphology without referring to the oral pronunciation. For example, in a sentence such as “les petites filles jouent avec des poupées” [The little girls play with dolls], only two number inflections can be audibly detected in discourse – the two determinants “les” and “des”, which indicate several girls and several dolls, whereas six inflections (underlined in the text) appear in writing. This imbalance between the discourses may generate potential agreement errors such as “Le cerceau des danseurs tournent sur la scène” [The hoop of the dancers turn on the stage; see Negro & Chanquoy (1999)]. No difference in pronunciation of singular and plural forms may lead to spelling errors in writing. These agreement errors, labelled “attraction errors” (Zandvoort,
1961), consist of making the verb agree with the immediately preceding noun (i.e., the local noun, dancers) instead of with the subject head noun (hoop). These errors are particularly interesting to study since they reveal how writers manage agreement processing.

Morphology plays a crucial role in writing because it ensures structural relations between lexical items. The subject–verb agreement rule, for instance, establishes relationships between the agent and the action. Learning the French written morphology is particularly difficult since most of the marks are not orally pronounced, as seen in the examples above. The purpose of our study was, first, to better understand the process of subject–verb agreement computation at the 3rd and 5th grade levels. Second, the experiment was designed to determine whether grammatical encoding, such as subject–verb agreement, needs to be explicitly taught, or whether children can benefit from an implicit training of grammatical rules.

2. Learning Morphology in Written French

2.1. Development of Morphological Marking

Previous studies about morphology suggest a fundamental difference between the mastery of noun and verb morphology in both speaking and writing. The plural inflection for nouns is acquired before those for verbs (Gentner, 1981; Keeney & Wolfe, 1972). Berko (1958) carried out an experiment in English about the acquisition of morphology for nouns and verbs. She provided children with oral sentences containing non-words such as “This is a wav” and expected children to consider “wug” to be a noun and to use the correct ending “s” for the plural form (e.g., “There are two wugs”). A comparable paradigm was used for verb inflections. Berko found that children orally produced 74% of inflections correctly if the non-words provided corresponded to a noun function, while only 52% for non-words corresponding to a verb function. Totereau, Thévenin and Fayol (1997) replicated these findings in French writing. They accounted for the slower acquisition of verb morphology (compared to nouns) because number is associated with the meaning of nouns while it is only a syntactic constraint on the verb (see also Fayol, 1998; Totereau, Fayol & Barrouillet, 1998). Likewise, the subject–verb agreement rule is syntactically constrained: that is, the subject and the verb must be identified in the sentence to correctly select morphemes sharing the same number.

Subject–verb agreement errors were experimentally studied from a developmental perspective in written French (see for example: Fayol & Got, 1991; Fayol, Hupet & Largy, 1999; Fayol, Largy & Lemaire, 1994; Negro & Chanquoy, 2000b). Typically, participants were asked to transcribe sen-