



The written French proficiency of Education Reform students

This report presents the most recent results of the analyses conducted for the ERES Project. The goal here is to compare the written French proficiency of Secondary V students exposed to Education Reform (ER) to that of pre-ER Secondary V students. Results indicate a very high success rate all around on the department's writing test as a whole, with a comparable success rate between the two groups. Analyses of the success rates for each specific marking criterion show that slightly more ER students than non-ER students received a high score on the *vocabulary* criterion. However, fewer ER students than non-ER students received a high score on the *coherent argumentation* criterion. Secondary analyses involving various moderating factors suggest that ER has allowed weaker students and students believing themselves to be less competent to perform better on certain criteria related to quality of language.

The impact of the school curriculum and Education Reform on the French program

Since the implementation of Education Reform, the school curriculum for all years of secondary school went from including 30 units of French, language of instruction, to 36. The six additional units were divided into two additional units per year between Secondary I and III. The units increase the time, which can be up to 150 hours, devoted to French, language of instruction, courses.

The French program was revised in 1995, and an approach focusing on competencies was introduced. Education Reform stayed in line with those

changes. The three competencies of *Reading and appreciating varied texts*, *Writing varied texts and Speaking in different contexts* were carried on from the elementary school and Secondary Cycle One curricula into Secondary Cycle Two. The Cycle Two program also focuses largely on literature. A sanctioned test is administered to all students at the end of Secondary V to assess their level of writing proficiency.

Methodology

For the ERES Project, French proficiency was assessed using the department's writing test, administered either in June 2009, to students who were not exposed to ER (control group), or in June 2011, to students who were exposed to ER (reform group). Several aspects of the 2011 test had not changed since 2009¹.

The Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) deemed the pre- and post-ER tests comparable. Students' test results and scores on each marking criterion were obtained with permission from the department². Remember that the control group contained 1,180 students and the ER group 1,315. The students who completed the department's writing test represent 73.3% of the initial control group sample and 71.6% of the ER group³. The results in this report were achieved by analyzing the marking criteria presented in Table 1.

Table 1
DESCRIPTION OF MARKING CRITERIA

Criterion	Criterion description
Coherent argumentation	This criterion assessed students' ability to present a strong argument and to organize their essays coherently. When we processed the data, students received a score from 1 to 5—5 indicating strong argumentation skills, and 1 indicating poorly developed skills.
Vocabulary	This criterion assessed the appropriateness of the words and expressions used. A score of A was given to students who used words and expressions according to standard usage, and an E was given to students who used many words or expressions incorrectly.
Sentence construction and punctuation	This criterion assessed how sentences were constructed and punctuated. The number of errors determined the score given, which ranged from A (0 to 4 errors) to E (18 errors or more).
Spelling	This criterion assessed whether students used proper lexical and grammatical spellings. The number of errors determined the score given, which ranged from A (0 to 4 errors) to E (19 errors or more).

Results

We first examined two dimensions: the overall success rate for the test—i.e., the proportion of students who passed the test—and the overall success rates for each of the criteria presented in Table 1; a passing mark was 60% or over. In the reform group, 90.3% of the students passed⁴ the test; in the control group, 89.6% of the students passed. This difference, as seen in Table 2, was not statistically significant. Table 2 also shows no significant difference between the groups on three of the four criteria. The results of the groups differed significantly only on the *sentence construction and punctuation* criterion: the reform group had a higher success rate (89.3%) than the control group (86.7%).

Table 2
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN EACH GROUP WHO PASSED THE TEST AND EACH CRITERION

	Success rate Reform group	Success rate Control group	Statistically significant difference
The test as a whole	90.3 %	89.6 %	
Coherent argumentation	99.5 %	99.8 %	
Vocabulary	95.5 %	95.1 %	
Sentence construction and punctuation	89.3 %	86.7 %	*
Spelling	60.3 %	61.7 %	

¹ The preparation time (seven days), time for the test (3 h 15 min) and documents authorized were the same. The pre-ER test involved writing a 500-word argumentative essay. The post-ER test required students to compose a 500-word open letter in which they had to justify and argue their position. Once completed, the tests were corrected centrally.

² The number of criteria used to mark the writing test went from six in 2009 (pre-ER) to five in 2011 (post-ER). Before Education Reform, three criteria were used to assess coherent argumentation: 1) *Relevance, clarity and precision* (20%); 2) *Strategic organization* (20%); 3) *Continuity and progression* (10%). After Education Reform was implemented, those three criteria were regrouped into two. The first is called *Adaptation to the communication situation* (30%), which covers the Relevance, clarity and precision criterion and includes certain elements of the *Strategic organization* criterion. The second is called *Text coherence* (20%) and includes elements from the *Strategic organization* and *Continuity and progression* criteria. Both the pre- and post-ER tests used three criteria to assess whether the linguistic code was respected. While the names of the criteria differ between the tests, they are otherwise the same: they measure the same dimensions and are weighted equally.

³ Anglophone students, students who had fallen behind in their schooling and students who were absent when the test was administered in June were not counted in these percentages.

⁴ The standardized test success rates reported by the MELS and taken from population data was 85.4% in 2009 and 83.5% in 2011. [<http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/sections/res2011/index.asp?page=resultats2>] (in French only)



Results for the test as a whole indicate that a high proportion of students received a passing grade; however, those results do not tell us to what degree students were competent on each criterion. To measure students' proficiency on each criterion, we calculated the percentage of students who received each of the scores given (ex.: percentage of As, Bs, etc.). The first criterion analyzed was *coherent argumentation*. Remember that when we processed the data, students were assigned scores between 1 and 5, where 5 indicated strong argumentation skills and 1 indicated less developed skills. Students were divided into three categories based on their scores: those who scored a 4 or higher, those who scored above 3 but under 4, and those who scored 3 or lower.

As Figure 1 shows, the two groups differ in each of the score categories for the *coherent argumentation* criterion. Fewer students from the reform group than from the control group received a grade equal to or higher than 4 (29.5% vs. 42.7%). Also, a greater proportion of students in the reform group than the control group scored between 3 and 4 (57.5% vs. 52%) or lower than 3 (12.9% vs. 5.3%).

Similarly, there was a statistically significant difference between the groups for the *vocabulary* criterion, on which the students were given a score from A to E. Figure 2 shows that a larger proportion of students from the reform group (37.5%) than the control group (33.3%) received an A on this criterion. A score of B was given to the same proportion of students in both groups, within a few tenths of a per cent (45.9% vs. 46.3%). A smaller proportion of reform group than control group students were given a C (12.1% vs. 15.5%) or an E (1.6% vs. 2.8%). A score of D was given to a slightly higher proportion of reform group than control group students (2.9% vs. 2.1%). Analyses of the *sentence construction and punctuation* and *spelling* criteria showed that exposure to ER had no direct impact on those criteria.

Secondary analyses that brought in various moderating factors were also performed. These analyses suggest that the results presented earlier were not influenced by the type of student or the student's level of behavioural risk, by whether the student went to public or

private school or by the school's poverty index⁵ or administrative region. However, differences were seen between certain subgroups of students. For example, students in the reform group who said they felt their French proficiency was low⁶ made fewer spelling errors on the department's writing test and obtained higher scores on the vocabulary criterion than a similar subgroup of students in the control group. Likewise, reform group students who said their secondary school French grades were under 75% made fewer errors on the sentence construction and punctuation criterion than a similar subgroup in the control group.

Conclusion

In summary, the results show that the students, whether or not exposed to ER, obtained very high overall scores on the written French test and each of the criteria aside from *spelling*, for which the success rate was markedly lower than the other criteria analyzed. An analysis of the scores obtained on each of the marking criteria shows that ER is likely associated with a modest improvement in students' ability to use vocabulary appropriately; however, ER may also be associated with a slight decline in the percentage of students who received a high score on the *coherent argumentation* criterion. For students who were weaker in French, exposure to ER seems to have improved their sentence construction and punctuation. Similarly, reform group students who felt less competent in this area were better at spelling and more frequently used vocabulary appropriately.

These results may be attributed to certain actions regarding respect of the linguistic code, specifically among at-risk students. Such actions are in line with the Education Reform objectives of having more students succeed. However, proficiency in coherent argumentation may have been neglected in favour of respect of the linguistic code, influencing students' success on this criterion. Looking at a third group of students within the ERES Project (students who started their secondary school studies in September 2007) will show whether these differences persist through time.

Figure 1
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS BY GROUP AND BY SCORES OBTAINED ON THE COHERENT ARGUMENTATION CRITERION

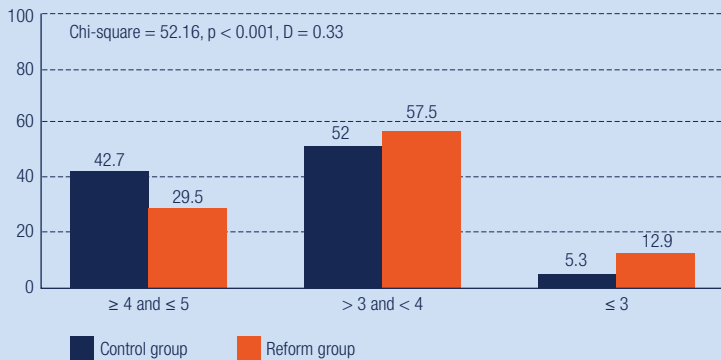
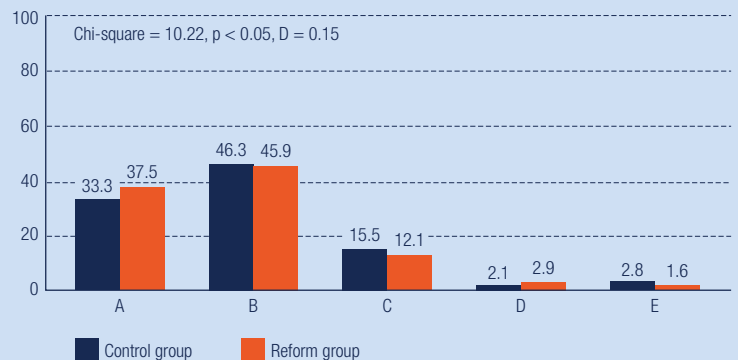


Figure 2
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS BY GROUP AND BY SCORES OBTAINED ON THE VOCABULARY CRITERION



⁵ The socio-economic environment indicator (SEE) is made up of the proportion of families with children whose mothers do not have a degree, certificate or diploma (which represents two thirds of the index's weighting) and the proportion of households in which the parents were unemployed during the census reference week (which represents a third of the index's weighting). (<http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/sections/publications/index.asp?page=fiche&id=956>) (in French only)

⁶ The sense of proficiency was measured using a scale from 1 to 7 on which students would indicate, for example, whether they were good students in French class or whether they developed very strong skills in the class. Four items were used to measure the sense of proficiency. For the purposes of the analyses, students above the 5.2 median were labelled as having a "strong sense of proficiency," and students below the median were labelled as having a "weak sense of proficiency."