

Language competences in lower secondary French-as-a-foreign language classrooms

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0 Preface

One autumn day in the late 1990s, during the heyday of the floppy disk, I entered Kjersti's office with a vague idea of a topic for my master's thesis. It was not a coincidence that I knocked on her door and not somebody else's. My vague idea for a topic was 'something to do with the teaching and learning of French'. At the time, the lecturers and researchers in the Department of Romance Studies in Bergen were mostly concerned with linguistics or literature. Upon hearing my idea, which was different from what they usually dealt with, they quickly pointed me in the direction of Kjersti. I was feeling uneasy when I entered and enthusiastic when I left. The idea of writing a master's thesis in French had seemed like a tremendous task to me (which it was, as my French was rather mediocre at the time), but when leaving Kjersti's office I had the feeling it was doable, and I said to myself, *I can do this!*

And I could, with Kjersti's skilful guidance. It took a pile of floppy disks to store the manuscript. It was printed on one-sided paper, and I handed in several copies for the committee members to read. The document marked the beginning of my interest in the fields of second and foreign language acquisition and the teaching and learning of languages. Since then, I have built a career on language classroom research, after first having completed a PhD on intercultural differences in written academic discourse, which Kjersti also supervised. Kjersti fulfilled all the tasks a supervisor ideally should fulfil: she gave advice on theoretical and methodological choices, she commented on the text—structure, language, and content, she introduced me to her large network within Scandinavia and abroad and she gave me opportunities in terms of co-presentations, co-authorship and research jobs, all while being supportive and motivating. These are all qualities I try my best to bring forward in my own work as a supervisor. I have come to realise that it is more demanding and time consuming than I understood back then. This insight has made my gratitude to Kjersti and the role she played in my career building only grow as the years have passed.

1 Introduction

In this article, I will return to the topic on which Kjersti and I started our collaboration in a rainy Bergen autumn around 25 years ago: the teaching of foreign languages, particularly French, in Norwegian schools. Kjersti studied this topic in the 1980s, within a project called 'Fransk og tysk

som fremmedspråk' (*French and German as foreign languages*), which focussed on textbooks as well as classroom instruction in these language subjects in Norwegian secondary schools.

At the time of this project, the idea that students should learn communicative skills in the classroom was relatively new.¹ It may therefore come as no surprise that the team found that morphological substitution and fill-in-the-gap exercises were the dominant exercise types in the textbooks, and the grammar parts of the books focussed far more on form than on use (Prosjektgruppa for NAVF-prosjektet Fransk og tysk som fremmedspråk [*The project group for the NAVF project French and German as foreign languages*], henceforth NAVF, 1987).

Textbooks and classroom instruction have changed considerably since the 1980s. Current foreign language teaching in Norwegian schools—when it is in line with the national curriculum for foreign languages—focusses primarily on language in use and communicative competence. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which influences language teaching throughout Europe and beyond, recommends an *action-oriented approach* to language teaching and learning, meaning that the learners should learn the language by completing real-life, purposeful, often collaborative tasks in meaningful learning situations (Council of Europe 2001). This focus on usage in context and (inter)action is so strong that the companion volume to the CEFR states that in an action-oriented approach to language learning, 'competence exists only in action', thus rejecting the traditional competence/performance dichotomy (Council of Europe 2020, 139). This does not mean that the CEFR does not place any value on *language competences* (i.e. grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation). The CEFR includes ample passages about these competences, with detailed descriptor scales and explanations of how improved knowledge in these areas might contribute to an increasing mastery of language in use. However, the CEFR clearly regards these competences as tools for improving one's language skills and not as something valuable in their own right. The CEFR does not specify how many and what types of linguistic structures and words learners should know at different levels. Instead, it specifies how learners should be able to use, in different situations, the structures and words that are part of their linguistic resources. The current Norwegian curriculum for foreign languages (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training 2020) reproduces these ideas, as did the version that was in force when the data for the current study were collected. All the competence aims related to linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation) were explicitly linked to use: the learner should be able to 'communicate with an understandable pronunciation', 'understand and use a vocabulary that covers everyday situations' and 'use basic linguistic structures and grammar to connect text' (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training 2006).

In such an educational context, where use and context are essential, what is the role of explicit teaching of *language competences* (i.e. grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) in the language classroom? To what extent is there explicit teaching at all of these components, and how is such teaching framed? Is the teaching usage- and context-based and linked to communicative activities, or does the traditional approach, in which language competences are taught as separate components, still prevail, despite the guidelines in official documents? This article delves into these issues by investigating beginner-level French-as-a-foreign-language classroom teaching in

¹ These thoughts had been put forward before (e.g. around 1900 by the Reform movement [see Simensen 2007], but they had not gained prominence in classroom teaching.

9th and 10th grades in six Norwegian lower secondary schools (pupils' aged 14–16). It takes the following two research questions as its point of departure:

- 1) How much classroom time is devoted to the explicit teaching of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation?
- 2) To what extent is the teaching of the language components linked to ongoing or subsequent communicative activities?

2 Theoretical framework and previous research

This article is focussed on the explicit teaching of the three language competences identified by the CEFR: grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (Council of Europe 2020). All these competences can also be taught implicitly, that is, through exposure to large amounts of target language (TL) input, structured or unstructured, so that the learners themselves can acquire vocabulary, grammar and appropriate pronunciation inductively. Implicit teaching is not directly observable and is therefore not investigated further in this study, which uses observation through video recording as its main data source.

The *French and German as foreign languages* project was among the first classroom observation studies of foreign language teaching in Norway. One of the outcomes of the project was an observation scheme developed specifically for the foreign language subject and with the Norwegian context in mind. The scheme was based on one-week long observations of eight French and German foreign language classrooms (four of each) and inspired later observation instruments for foreign language teaching, such as the one used in Heimark's (2013) doctoral thesis. In the observation scheme from 1987, TL activities were subdivided into pre-communicative, quasi-communicative and communicative activities. Since then, much has been written about how to distinguish different task and activity subtypes. In recent research, Littlewood's (2004) categorisation is often used. It includes a continuum of five task types and thus offers a slightly more refined analysis than the one proposed in NAVF (1987). Yet, Littlewood's classification clearly resonates with the one from the NAVF project group. He places the five subtypes along a scale from form-focussed *non-communicative learning* to meaning-focussed *authentic communication*, via *pre-communicative* and *communicative language practice* and *structured communication* (Figure 1). Non-communicative learning refers to exercises that focus on language structures, whereas pre-communicative language practice involves practicing language with some attention to meaning, but without communicating new information to others (e.g. patterns of teacher display questions + students' responses). In communicative language practice, the learners practice pre-taught structures in a context where new information is communicated (e.g. information gap activities), and in structured communication, pre-taught language is elicited, but with some degree of unpredictability (e.g. structured role-playing). In authentic communication, language is used to communicate in situations where meanings are unpredictable (Littlewood 2004, 322).

Littlewood (2004) includes a second dimension of task type, learner involvement, which will not be discussed further in this article. However, it is worth mentioning that the category of non-communicative activities encompasses more than the traditional substitution and fill-in-the-gap exercises, which score low on learner involvement. It also includes discovery activities in which the learners make assumptions about the language system based on structured input. Form-

focussed and meaning-focussed activities may both be characterised by low or high learner involvement.

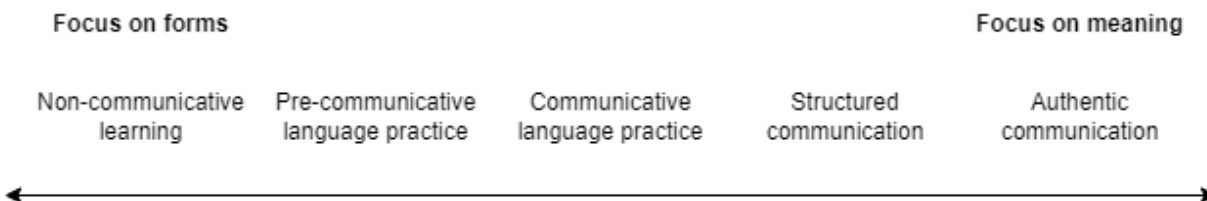


Figure 1: Continuum of task types. Based on Littlewood (2004).

The distinction between non-communicative learning and pre-communicative language practice on the one hand and communicative language practice, structured communication and authentic communication on the other hand is not a distinction between undesirable and desirable activities in a communicative language classroom. On the contrary, non-communicative and pre-communicative activities often constitute necessary steps toward more communicatively oriented task types, which is why they are called ‘enabling tasks’ in Estaire and Zanon’s (1994) terminology. Although communicative activities are central in communicative language teaching and create a bridge between the classroom and the out-of-classroom reality (Littlewood 2004), form-focussed activities have a legitimate place as well. While the importance of this place is an issue of debate, Nation (2007) suggests that form-focussed activities should constitute one-quarter of a language course, while meaning-focussed activities should make up the remaining three-quarters. In any case, since linguistic competence according to the CEFR is intrinsically linked to language use—also at beginner levels—one would expect a balance between the two categories, and one would expect to see explicit teaching sequences of language competences serve as a sort of preparation or consolidation for more communicatively oriented tasks.

Previous classroom research on foreign language teaching in Norwegian schools is scarce, but the studies that exist suggest that this assumption about a balance between form-focussed and communicative activities might not fully correspond with reality. Llovet Vilà (2016) used Littlewood’s continuum of task types to study speaking instruction in seven lower secondary Spanish-as-a-foreign-language classrooms. He found that 74% of the oral activities belonged to the first two categories (non-communicative learning and pre-communicative language practice), while only 26% belonged to the three subtypes of communicative activities, and of these, almost all were classified as communicative language practice, that is, the mid-continuum category (Llovet Vilà 2016, 191). The two subtypes closest to the meaning-oriented end were hardly represented and never in teacher-planned activities. Vold (2022) also found that the foreign language subject in Norwegian schools could be rather form focussed. The study, which was partly based on the same data material as the current article, investigated how 10 English-as-a-second and French-as-a-foreign language teachers in lower secondary schools responded to their students’ TL output in class. The analysis showed that while meaning and communication were prominent in the English classrooms, a focus on form dominated in the French classrooms. In addition, previous studies have shown that students in foreign language classrooms in Norway in general are offered few opportunities to communicate in the TL (Askland 2018; Vold and Brkan 2020).

Comparing this situation with a neighbouring country, Sweden, the findings are rather similar. In a report on modern languages, the Swedish schools inspectorate found that the TL was only used to a small extent (Skolinspektionen 2010, cited in Bardel, Erickson, and Österberg 2019). Further, in a survey study conducted among upper secondary school students, many students pointed to the need for a more functional and authentic approach in modern language classroom instruction (Thorson, Molander-Beyer, and Dentler 2003, cited in Bardel, Erickson, and Österberg 2019).

These findings indicate that the implementation of communicative language principles, such as extensive TL use and spontaneous classroom communication, is challenging at beginner level in a foreign language setting (i.e. a setting with limited out-of-school TL exposure; Storch and Sato 2020). Nevertheless, form-focussed teaching can be more or less integrated with, or combined with, a focus on language use (Nation 2007). The current study investigates the extent to which the participating classrooms combined form-focussed language instruction with communicative activities.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection and participants

The data material that this article builds on is taken from the LISE project: a large-scale video classroom research project based at the University of Oslo, which aimed to observe and describe instruction in several school subjects (including French) in Norwegian lower secondary schools over a period of two school years (9th and 10th grade). The LISE project team collected material from schools during 2015–2017, using a synchronised set-up with two palm-sized cameras mounted to the classroom walls and one teacher as well as one classroom microphone.

Six of the participating schools offered French and are included in the present study. Participants included six French-as-a-foreign-language teachers and 85 students in six classes. The classes varied in size, from small ones (less than 10 students) to large ones (more than 20). Four subsequent French lessons (of varying length, depending on school policy) were recorded for each class, first in 9th grade, and then again the following year in 10th grade.

Since the LISE project investigated several subjects, French teachers were not approached directly by the project team. Instead, a varied selection of schools were invited to join the project, and those that accepted the invitation participated in all the relevant subjects. The participating schools varied in terms of geographical area, demographics and socio-economic status. Because of this spread and the nature of the recruitment process, there is no reason to believe that the participating teachers belonged to any specific group (e.g. particularly well-qualified ones). The teacher profiles varied with regard to educational background, professional experience, residence in TL area etc. None of the filmed classes changed teachers during the data collection period, but inevitably there were some changes in the student body. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants' backgrounds and the data material.

Table 1: Overview of school and teacher backgrounds and lessons recorded

Schools	Teachers	Class size ^a	Lessons (n x min)
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<i>Code</i>	<i>Demography</i>	<i>ECTS French</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>YTE^b</i>	<i>Residence in TL area</i>		9 th grade	10 th grade
A	Suburban	120		10–20	11 years	Medium	4 x 60	-
B	Suburban	61–90		20–30	1 year	Medium	4 x 70	4 x 70
C	Urban	≥ 300 (Master)		10–20	7 years	Medium	5 x 45	4 x 40
D	Urban	31–60		10–20	None	Medium	4 x 60	4 x 60
E	Rural	31–60		20–30	None	Small	4 x 45	4 x 60
F	Suburban	≥ 300 (Master)		< 3	French L1	Large	4 x 45	4 x 45

^a Small = less than 10 students, medium = 10–20 students, large = more than 20 students.
^b YTE = years of teacher experience

3.2 Data analysis

In order to answer RQ1, *activity coding* of the filmed lessons was performed using Interact software (Mangold 2018). This coding procedure included registering and time-stamping the different types of activities that occurred in the classroom. The coding started and ended when the teacher opened and closed the class. Relevant activity codes were established inductively based on what happened in the videos.

As explained in Vold and Brkan (2020), activities were divided into two main categories: those related to *subject matter content* and those linked to *classroom management* and organisational aspects, mirroring Ellis' (1994) distinction between *medium-oriented* and *framework goals*. The current article focusses on the subject matter content codes, but an overview of all codes can be found in Appendix 1. Two coders working together initially coded 15% of the videos, and then one coder coded the rest of the material (see Vold and Brkan 2020). Subsequently (in 2022), the second coder reliability-coded the remaining videos, resulting in some minor adjustments to the first codes.

A sequence could (but did not have to) receive codes from both main categories. For example, a sequence that was assigned the code 'tutoring' from the classroom management category could be combined with the code 'grammar teaching' from the subject content codes. In such a sequence, the teacher would typically provide individual or group guidance while students were working with grammar exercises. Conversely, codes from the same main category were mutually exclusive. On the one hand, this might seem like a bad choice since a class can focus on two skills or competences (e.g. grammar and vocabulary) simultaneously.² On the other hand, an advantage of the time-stamping in Interact is that it allows for frequent shifts between codes. A training session on oral dialogues might, for instance, include parts devoted to pronunciation and vocabulary. Such a sequence would be coded 'speaking exercises' but be interrupted by shorter sequences of 'pronunciation' and 'vocabulary'. We always prioritised the part of the subject content that was dominant at the specific moment. For example, when students practised dialogues in pairs and the teacher only listened, the sequence would be coded as 'speaking exercises'. The moment the teacher commented on or provided guidance in pronunciation or word choice, the coding shifted to the relevant category.

² However, at each point in time, one of the categories will be dominant. Even what is called 'lexicogrammar' is defined as grammar teaching (and not vocabulary), although it concerns 'grammar with a certain amount of attention to lexical patterns' (Sinclair 2004).

The learning objectives presented by the teacher were helpful in determining which code was the most appropriate. For example, a sequence with a dictation was assigned the subject content code ‘vocabulary’ and not, e.g., ‘writing’, as the teacher said at the beginning of class that they would practice learned vocabulary through a range of activities, including dictation. It was clear to the students that the point of the dictation was to rehearse items from a word list they had been studying. The dictation consisted of isolated phrases, each including one of the target items. Prior to the dictation, the teacher provided the students with other words they would need for the exercise. These were written on the board and were available to the students during the exercise.

In order to answer RQ2, I zoomed in on the sequences coded with grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation to analyse how teaching in these areas was conducted with the aim of determining the extent to which they were linked to communicative activities. The episodes themselves mostly focussed on form since they had been selected because they focussed on language competences (and not, e.g. communicative skills). *Linked to* in this context refers to whether they pointed toward communicative use, that is, to task types in the mid- and right-end part of Littlewood’s (2004) continuum. It could be that the learning objectives included communicative use of the structures/words, that the activities served as a preparation for communicative use (either later in the same lesson, in a subsequent one or as homework) or that the teacher explained how the taught structures could be used communicatively and why learning about them was useful. Accordingly, RQ2 required a holistic analysis that considered all four lessons from the same class.

4 Findings

4.1 RQ1: How much classroom time is devoted to the explicit teaching of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation?

Figure 2 provides an overview of the distribution of subject content activities that occurred in the classrooms. In addition to subject content matter, each class spent time on organisational activities, such as task instructions and the organisation of group work.³ In the following, I present data for time spent on subject content only.

The schools varied in how much time they spent on the different content areas in general, and on the different language competences in particular. School C spent half of the subject content time on grammar, while the other schools devoted from around 5% (school D) to slightly above 15% (school B) to grammar. In school F, there was almost no focus on vocabulary, whereas schools E and A spent 40% and 30% of the subject content time on explicit vocabulary teaching, respectively. The remaining schools devoted slightly above 10% (school D) to 20% (school B and C) of the subject content time to explicit vocabulary teaching. Very little time was devoted to teaching pronunciation. In five of the schools, explicit teaching of pronunciation was practically absent in

³ Note that organisational activities are not necessarily devoid of subject content. An example is teacher A’s presentation of learning objectives and task instructions. She often performed these activities in French, meaning that the organisational activity also required listening comprehension, although this was not necessarily introduced as an objective of the activity. An overview of language use in the six classrooms (TL vs L1) can be found in Vold and Brkan (2020).

the four recorded lessons, whereas school E spent about 10% of the subject content time on pronunciation issues.

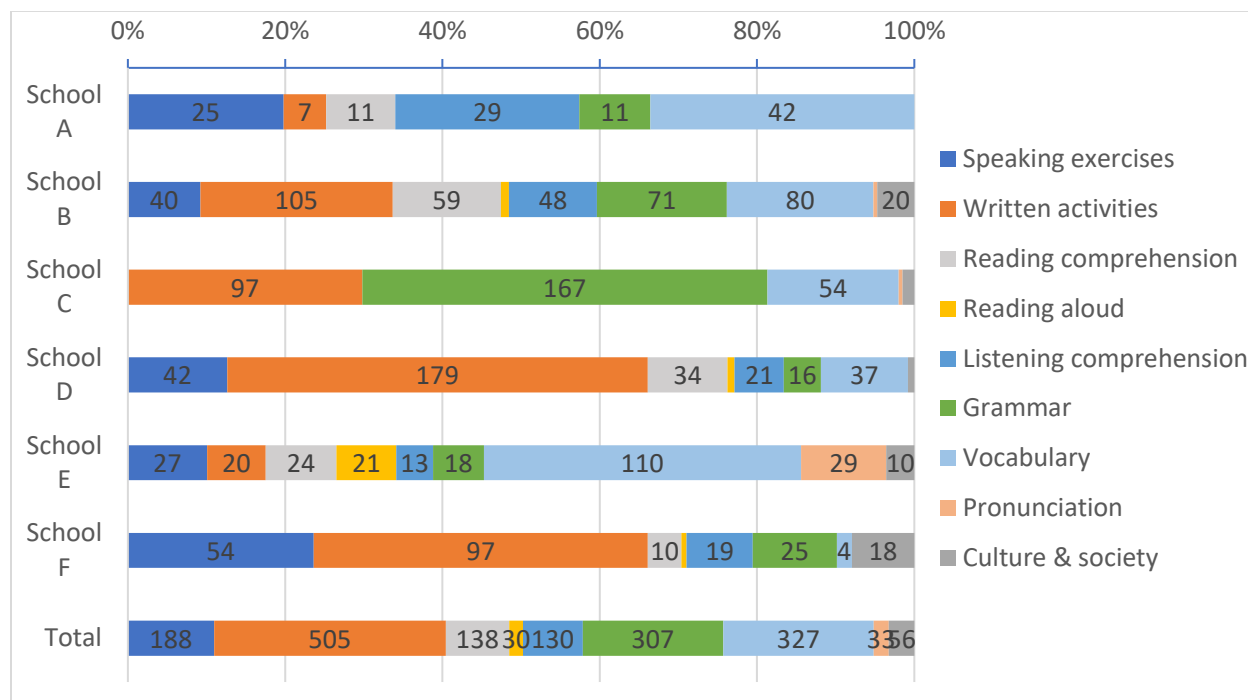


Figure 2: Overall distribution of subject content activities in grades 9 and 10 (for school A, data from grade 9 only). Bars indicate the number of minutes.

In sum, there were important between-school differences for all three language competences, but overall, pronunciation received very little attention.

4.2 RQ2: To what extent is the teaching of the language components linked to ongoing or subsequent communicative activities?

In this section, I delve into the teaching sequences of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, whether they are planned or incidental, to see how they are framed and how they are linked to communicative language use. There is no room in this article to give a detailed account of all the sequences, but I will summarise the observations for each school for each language competence and give an overall summary of the findings. A more detailed account of the grammar teaching episodes can be found in Vold (2020), and a more detailed account of the teaching of pronunciation will be available in Brkan and Vold (in preparation).

4.2.1 Grammar

In school A, there was explicit grammar teaching in two of the four lessons. The topics included prepositions and locative expressions. The teacher asked the students for examples of prepositions, and she handed out a sheet with exercises and explained different prepositions and their meanings. She illustrated the meanings by positioning herself differently in relation to objects in the classroom. She offered help during the students’ work with the exercises before she summed up in a plenary session. The work on grammar was clearly linked to communicative language practice, as it was a preparation for a later activity in which students would describe rooms and residences

to each other, and in order to give an adequate description, they needed prepositions and locative expressions. This objective was clear to the students.

In school B, there was explicit grammar teaching in five of eight lessons. In 9th grade, the topics included the partitive article, the ‘futur proche’, prepositions and the verbs ‘aller’ and ‘venir’. In 10th grade, the topics included the use of ‘de’, relative pronouns, word order and linking words. The students listened to the teacher’s presentation, asked questions and completed exercises in the book, mostly translations of isolated sentences and fill-in-the-gap exercises, for example, where they had to choose between *qui* or *que*, but also a more input-oriented task in which they were required to put sentences together in the right order. There was no explicit mention of what use the grammar they were learning might have, and the students did not put the recently acquired grammar into communicative practice during the observed lessons. The learning objectives targeted the acquisition of grammatical phenomena per se and did not focus on mastering any communicative situations or functional use. However, in a sequence on the partitive article, the students made a shopping list for the grocery store, which can be seen as an attempt to make the grammar relevant for real-life language use.

In school C, there was explicit grammar teaching in all but one lesson. In 9th grade, the topics included prepositions and the verb ‘faire’. In 10th grade, the class worked with pronouns, imperatives and interrogative clauses. As in school B, the learning objectives targeted the grammatical phenomena themselves (e.g. ‘today we will continue working on personal pronouns’), and there was no indication of how this grammar could be used in communicative situations. While there were no examples of communicative language practice involving the recently acquired grammar, there was pre-communicative use of the learned structures. For example, students practiced the learned structures in short, written exercises. Moreover, the teacher drew several comparisons with a large range of other languages and contrasted Norwegian and French grammar. Making similarities and differences explicit can help the students remember the correct usages and thus help them in their future communicative practice.

In school D, explicit grammar teaching only occurred in 9th grade, but then it was part of three out of four lessons. The topics were the ‘futur proche’ and the ‘passé composé’. The sequences were quite short and linked to homework that the students had done. The teacher went through the homework, which consisted of exercises in the textbook that required students to insert the correct forms of verb tenses (non-communicative learning). The teacher provided everyday examples (i.e. the examples seemed natural and not artificial), but there was no explicit link to usage in communicative situations. The students listened to the teacher’s presentation, asked questions and answered the teacher’s questions, but they did not use the acquired structures in real or simulated communicative contexts.

In school E, most of the explicit grammar teaching also took place in 9th grade. Topics included verb conjugation (irregular and regular verbs) and amalgams. In 10th grade, grammar teaching occurred only as brief comments during vocabulary sessions. The session on amalgams included a link to communicative practice. The learning objective of the overarching activity was to acquire vocabulary about body parts, and this was done through an exercise in which the students described (to a doctor) where they felt pain: *j’ai mal aux orteils*, etc. The exercise in itself was not communicative. The class did not simulate a doctor’s visit, but the teacher told the students to translate and pronounce sentences such as ‘My eyes/head/fingers hurt’. A mixture of natural and unrealistic examples was provided. The need to learn about amalgams arose from this exercise —

through this pre-communicative language practice, the students experienced a need for grammar knowledge. Although there were no examples of communicative practice, the students got an impression of situations in which they might need to use the learned linguistic structures.

In school F, there was not much focus on grammar, but the class worked with the *passé composé* in one of the lessons in 9th grade. The teacher provided explanation and examples, and the students completed fill-in-the-gap exercises in their textbooks. There was no mention of how to use this verb tense or the situations in which one might need it. We observed no communicative language practice in which the students were expected to use this tense. The students were assigned a communicative task as group homework – specifically, the students were instructed to make a film in which they presented a topic of choice –, but the teacher did not link the use of the *passé composé* to this task.

In sum, the grammar teaching sequences were rarely linked to communicative use. When students practiced the learned phenomena, it was through non-communicative or pre-communicative activities, with the exception of in school A. School A was the only school where a grammatical phenomenon was introduced because the students would need it in a communicative task they were supposed to perform later. In the other schools, acquiring grammatical phenomena appeared to be a learning objective in itself.

4.2.2 Vocabulary

In school A, there was explicit teaching of vocabulary in all four lessons. The teaching of vocabulary was usually framed in one of two ways: 1) as preparation for solving tasks, such as describing a room or a residence, or presenting one's family; 2) as a means to understand the teacher's instructions. In the first context, the learning of vocabulary was a means to achieve a communicative goal. The acquired vocabulary was subsequently used by the students in these activities, which could be classified as communicative language practice in Littlewood's terms. In the second context, the learning of vocabulary was linked to authentic communication that took place within the classroom. Since teacher A regularly gave instructions in the TL, the students needed relevant vocabulary in order to understand. The teacher explained necessary vocabulary during and after the instructions to ensure understanding. The acquisition of words was facilitated by considerable repetition across lessons and teacher comments on semantics, such as synonyms and polysemy. The teacher also regularly commented on word grammar, such as words that take the plural ending –x instead of –s, and on pronunciation.

In school B, there was explicit vocabulary teaching in all but one lesson. The vocabulary teaching was framed as preparation for communicative language practice. In 9th grade, it prepared the students for a role-play in which they pretended to be guests and waiters at a French café, and in 10th grade, the vocabulary sessions prepared them for the task of describing persons. The class learned vocabulary related to food and drinks as well as expressions used when ordering and paying and words needed to describe people's appearance and personality. They learned these words and expressions through different types of activities, some traditional (translation of isolated sentences from the textbook) and some more playful (board game). The teacher regularly commented on orthography, pronunciation and noun gender.

In school C, there was only explicit vocabulary teaching in 9th grade, where it was part of four out of five lessons. The instruction was not directly linked to any communicative language activity but rather to parts of speech, in this case numbers. The class worked with numbers from different

perspectives, all relevant to future language use: how to name floors in a building, how to express regent numbers, time, school grades, prices and amounts, fractions etc. The teacher consistently made comparisons to Norwegian, English and other languages and explained how words were built and altered using prefixes, suffixes and derivations. The students performed written exercises, which mostly consisted of translating isolated sentences and expressions from Norwegian to French. One exercise on the worksheet asked the students to make and read aloud calculations to each other. This could be considered communicative language practice, as the student who was supposed to solve the calculation did not know what to say beforehand. In the observed lessons, however, we did not see this activity being performed.

In school D, explicit vocabulary teaching occurred in all lessons in 9th grade but hardly at all in the recorded 10th grade lessons. The teaching was framed in one of two ways: 1) as a means to understand texts in the textbook, but also an authentic video clip, either before, during or after text reading/listening; 2) as preparation for dialogues, in this case about food habits, in order to provide students with the necessary tools to conduct a dialogue on this subject. The dialogue was performed in class, and the students used the words they had learned. The students learned the relevant vocabulary through game-like activities, informal vocabulary tests, brainstorming and listening to the teacher, who facilitated students' memory by offering synonyms and telling personal anecdotes. There was considerable repetition of words within and across lessons, and the teacher often commented on noun gender and articles.

In school E, vocabulary teaching was the most salient subject content activity. It was most often framed as a means to understand texts in the textbook, but it was also used for preparation for structured oral exercises in which the students were expected to use the learned vocabulary. These exercises included the use of pictures, photos and post-it notes, and the students were asked to describe what they saw in the pictures or translate sentences given by the teacher. Hence, they belonged to the categories of non-communicative learning and pre-communicative language practice, but their objective was to prepare the students for real-world communication. For example, the teacher mentioned that students would learn and practice *expressions that are useful when you feel ill*. The progress was slow, and the teacher was often unsure about the words herself. She used the textbook and online resources to check and verify pronunciation, gender etc., and thus, she learned with the students while demonstrating useful strategies for language learning. She consistently commented on how the words are pronounced, and she often made comparisons with similar words in English.

In school F, there was almost no focus on explicit vocabulary teaching in the recorded lessons. There was one four-minute episode in 10th grade in which the class went through words for different literary genres. The activity was intended to enable the students to talk about what type of literature they liked to read, but it was not performed in practice during the observed lessons. The teacher wrote the words on the blackboard for the students to copy and/or memorise.

In sum, there was little or no use of traditional word lists with isolated items to be memorised. Instead, words were grouped according to specific topics, functions or parts of speech. Such systematisation helps students remember the target words. Explicit vocabulary teaching was followed by communicative language practice in at least three of the six schools (A, B and D). In these schools, the students used the words taught in communicative tasks. In some of the other schools, the usefulness of the words in specific situations was pointed out, although these situations were not carried out in practice during the recorded lessons. Some observations run across most or

all the schools: There was considerable repetition and overlap between the words learned in each lesson, and when introducing nouns, the teachers regularly commented on gender. Nouns were learned with the accompanying article by default. In addition, Teacher E regularly made explicit comments about pronunciation and pronunciation rules (although she sometimes stumbled in these rules herself). Several of the teachers, especially teacher C, also commented on the origins and compositions of words and phrases.

4.2.3 Pronunciation

School E was the only school that put an emphasis on pronunciation other than through brief, sporadic teacher comments. In one sequence, the students learnt how to pronounce the letters in the alphabet and they practiced spelling their own names (a pre-communicative activity). In addition, the teacher consistently commented on pronunciation during sequences on vocabulary and read-aloud activities. It thus seems that for this class, pronunciation was an integrated part of word acquisition. This might have also been true for some of the other classes, although more implicitly, as the teachers rarely made explicit comments about pronunciation. Moreover, students' pronunciation errors often remained uncorrected, especially in school F, where many students struggled with pronunciation during their oral presentations but did not receive any guidance on this from the teacher. The teacher in school C, however, shared with us the assessment criteria for a future oral presentation. Among the criteria were a range of pronunciation features, such as intonation, nasals, 'liaison' and voiced and unvoiced consonants. This is an indication that this class had worked with these features, although not during the recorded lessons.

5 Discussion

This study investigated the teaching of language competences (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) in six French-as-a-foreign-language classrooms in Norwegian lower secondary schools. First, it examined how much time each classroom spent on explicit teaching of these components, and second it considered the extent to which the teaching of these components was linked to communicative language use.

The findings concerning the amount of time spent on these components indicated that grammar and vocabulary were explicitly taught in all six classrooms, although to various extents. Some classrooms focussed more on grammar than on vocabulary and vice versa. Pronunciation, on the other hand, had a minor place in these French language classrooms. It was not taught in specific sequences but occurred as incidental comments or corrections during other activity sequences, such as speaking exercises or read-aloud sequences. These comments and corrections were surprisingly few, considering students' difficulties with pronunciation. The analysis also showed that listening comprehension played a minor role in several of the classrooms, and previous research has shown that TL use is limited in many foreign language classrooms (Askland 2018; Vold and Brkan 2020). Against this backdrop, it is reasonable to assume that implicit teaching of pronunciation is also limited. The limited focus on pronunciation is somewhat worrying, given that pronunciation is a difficult area for Norwegian learners of French.

A well-known phenomenon in language teaching and assessment is the washback effect (Green 2023), which refers to how the way in which students' competence is assessed exerts a strong influence on the choice of teaching methods and content. In our data, however, there are no signs

of such an effect. In lower secondary schools in Norway, students can be selected for an oral exam in the foreign language subject but not for a written one. In light of this, it is somewhat surprising that there is such a limited focus on pronunciation. There is some emphasis on speaking exercises but less than on written activities. However, a considerable amount of the time that students spent writing involved writing manuscripts to prepare for oral presentations. These oral presentations were not captured in our data collection, possibly by coincidence and possibly because teachers decided to wait with oral presentations until after the video recordings. Video researchers should consider that teachers might (consciously or not) select specific activity types that they find suitable for video recording.

This study was only able to capture what could be observed in each school during the four lessons. For teachers who organise their teaching block-wise and focus on different subject content areas at different points in time, we can get an impression of the teaching style but not necessarily of which topics are covered. The assessment criteria for the oral presentations that teacher C shared with us, for example, was a clear sign that this class had received instruction in a series of pronunciation features, either earlier that year or in 8th grade. This observation underscores the value of combining video data with teacher interviews to obtain supplementary information and a fuller picture of the situation.

The findings concerning links between communicative language activities and the teaching of linguistic competence revealed that teachers rarely connected grammar sequences with language use and communicative activities, with the exception of teacher A. Meanwhile, during vocabulary instruction, the connection between *knowing* and *using* words was both clear and put into actual practice. The vocabulary teaching sequences usually served as preparation for some kind of communicative activity, although the activity was often a simulation and/or a highly structured one and not genuinely communicative. In one school, vocabulary acquisition was linked to genuine authentic communication, as the students needed to learn words in order to understand the teacher's instructions.

In addition to having the students use the learned vocabulary, the teachers regularly used other strategies to facilitate students' vocabulary acquisition. Their frequent repetition of words is in line with the idea that learners need to encounter a word many times before it is acquired (Nation 2007). The systematic introduction of nouns with their accompanying article is an example of teachers implementing lexicogrammatical aspects in their teaching (Sinclair 2004). When words are learned with the correct article form and pronunciation, they are ready to be used, both orally and in writing. The teachers' small but frequent remarks on word compositions, word origins and similarities and differences with other languages promote in-depth learning. The more learners know about etymology and morphology, the better able they are to detect connections across languages and deduce meanings from texts in unfamiliar languages.

The vocabulary teaching thus seems to successfully integrate form and use, as students learn about word grammar and word forms as well as how to use these words in communicative situations. However, nearly all the communicative activities that were performed belonged to the middle category on Littlewood's (2004) continuum: *communicative language practice*. One might ask whether the lack of structured and authentic communication is a problem (cf. Llovet Vilà 2016). What is the right balance between enabling tasks and proper communicative tasks in a beginner communicative language classroom? Nation (2007) admits that his suggestion of one-quarter vs three-quarters is arbitrary and that a different balance, with more room for form-focussed teaching,

is appropriate at beginner levels. Thus, the teachers' focus on communicative language practice rather than structured and authentic communication appears in many respects as a reasonable choice.

One of the main principles in TBLT (the right end of Littlewood's scale, see Figure 1) is that the tasks have a purpose other than language learning, a 'real-world' purpose. Students perform the tasks in order to attain something (e.g., make a quiche Lorraine from a French recipe) or solve a real-world problem (e.g., find out what dishes on a menu are suitable for peers with food allergies). However, it is not evident why this principle is so important. Is language learning not in itself a legitimate objective? While it is surely fun and interesting for students to occasionally participate in real-world tasks, genuine authentic communication can be hard to organise at beginner levels in a school setting, and it is not feasible to only perform authentic tasks in a language classroom. As long as the students see the usefulness of the activities (i.e. they understand why they learn something), they tend to accept that the language classroom is a place for simulations and pretending. What is probably more important than authenticity is that students see the value of the teaching content. Our data show that there is a risk that the value of learning grammar will be unclear to the students, as grammatical content was rarely linked to actual language use, and the teachers did not specify the communicative situations in which the students would need the grammatical knowledge they were working on. To a much larger extent, the teaching of vocabulary was linked to communicative needs and language in use. The learned vocabulary was often put into actual use by the students through communicative language practice, and if it was not, the teachers gave concrete examples of situations in which the vocabulary in question would be useful. This tight connection between linguistic competence and language practice could be transferred to the field of grammar to make the value and usefulness of grammar teaching clearer to the students.

A few limitations of this study should be mentioned before concluding. First, the small number of classrooms included prevents us from drawing any generalised conclusions about foreign language teaching in Norway. Second, the use of video recordings might have affected the teachers' choice of activities for the filmed lessons, although they were encouraged to conduct their classes as 'normal' and ignore the researchers' presence. Third, the four lessons do not necessarily provide a full picture of what subject topics are usually prioritised in class. Other data sources, such as student and teacher interviews or questionnaires, or longer periods of observation with and without video recordings could be used in future research to obtain a more detailed picture of what is occurring in Norwegian lower secondary foreign language classrooms.

6 Conclusion

The French and German as foreign languages project focussed primarily on textbook analysis, as the observation part of the project was a very time-consuming process (NAVF 1987, 137). Today, classroom researchers have access to technical equipment that makes data collection and analysis easier to perform. However, classroom observation research using video and sound recordings requires considerable resources in terms of advanced equipment, time and software for analytical procedures as well as reflection on ethical considerations. This may explain why few classroom observation studies on the foreign language subject have been conducted in Norway. This is unfortunate because such studies—especially in combination with teacher and student surveys and interviews—could yield valuable information about what goes on in language classrooms and why, thus helping to improve pre- and in-service teacher training on campus as well as in the practice field. I hope that this article inspires others in the field to conduct similar research, not only in

French but also in German and Spanish classrooms, thereby continuing the tradition that the NAVF project group started nearly 40 years ago.

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Appendix 1: Overview of activity codes

Code	Description
<i>Subject matter content</i>	
speaking exercises	Pupils engage in oral French exercises, dialogues, small-group conversations or prepared monologues.
written activities	Pupils write sentences or texts. Pupils writing single words (e.g. on the board) does not count as written activities.
reading comprehension	Pupils read silently, or the class discusses the content of a text.
reading aloud	Pupils or teacher read aloud.
listening comprehension	Pupils listen to a sound file/video clip, or the class discusses the content they have heard.
grammar	Teacher introduces/explains a grammar concept, or the class works with grammar exercises.
vocabulary	The class works explicitly with vocabulary.
pronunciation	Teacher explains/corrects pronunciation.
culture & society	The class works explicitly with the culture part of the subject (e.g. Francophonie).
<i>Classroom management</i>	
tutoring	Teacher helps pupils individually or in small groups as they work on a task.
transitions	Class moves from one task to another.
instructions	Teacher gives task instructions prior to or during a task.
greetings	Teacher and pupils greet each other.
home work	Teacher introduces new homework or goes through homework already done.
behavioural management	Teacher manages class behaviour (e.g. asks pupils to be silent or put away mobile phones).
group organisation	Teacher organises pupils in groups or allows pupils to do so.
metatalk	Teacher and pupils discuss what they have learned, what was difficult etc.
learning objectives	Teacher introduces/explains learning objectives.
closure	Teacher ends class.