ACADEMIC LITERACIES, PARENTS' LEVEL OF EDUCATION, GENDER, AND MULTILINGUALISM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS REGISTERED IN GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, PHYSICS, AND FRENCH

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Abstract

Our study focuses on four academic training programs intended to support students in their development of academic writing and analyzes them with regard to students' evaluations. We also investigated two factors identified as influencing primary literacies (parents' level of education and multilingualism) and a factor pointed out as more relevant for success at university (gender) to establish whether the latter has a role in the development of academic discourse. Our results show that entering academic discourse is a gradual process including various elements beyond the simple mastery of academic writing. The factors of Parents' level of education, Gender, and Multilingualism do not appear to be significant when entering university discourse.

Keywords: *Academic literacy, parents' level of education, gender, multilingualism, first-year students, typology of academic discourse*

1. INTRODUCTION

In France, the field of academic literacy has focused on four poles: Linguistics, French teaching, University pedagogy, and Subject teaching [1]. The contribution of Linguistics has made it possible to identify prototypical discourses that students or researchers repeatedly call upon to validate their studies or to transmit knowledge [2]. There are many teaching programs designed to facilitate entry into this new discursive world, such as specific courses in Composition Studies (in France, Méthodologie du Travail Universitaire) provided by subject teachers [3], writing centers [4,5] or innovative local initiatives [6].

However, there are few formal evaluations of the different programs and their focus on academic discourse [7]. Our study proposes to present four academic training courses intended to support students in their acculturation to university discourse and to analyze them with regard to the evaluations of the latter to understand the possible discrepancies between students' expectations and the educational proposals. To do this, we will rely on a model of support that places academic discourse, not at the center of the training system, but at the end of a more complex acculturation process [3]. Moreover, although researchers have identified many obstacles when entering university [8, 9, 10, 11, 12], few studies point more specifically to the challenges of successful acculturation concerning university discourse. This is even more surprising since a considerable amount of research deals with the difficulties linked to the acquisition of first literacies: reading and writing [13, 14]. Our study will look at two factors identified as having an impact on primary literacies (the level of education of the parents and multilingualism) and a factor pointed out as more relevant for success at university (gender) to establish whether the latter has a role in acculturation to academic discourse.

2. ACADEMIC LITERACIES, DEVELOPMENT, AND TEACHING PROGRAMS

2.1. Academic discourses

As Delcambre and Lahanier-Reuter [2] noted, university discourses remain dependent on disciplines and levels of study. On one hand, linguistics has made it possible to highlight certain specificities of university discourse that cross disciplines such as, for example, management of the various voices of

the author (erasure of the enunciator, importance of referencing previous authors), the interaction between reasoning and writing processes, presence of a strong contextual anchoring shown by the use of an intense disciplinary notional network [15] … On the other hand, the study of disciplinary corpora [16] has displayed significant editorial differences between disciplines [17], especially since the researchers themselves identify to their subject of study [18].

As far as the level of study is concerned, two entry points seem sensitive: the first year of university which involves becoming a 'professional' student [10], and the graduate level (Master) with an in-depth initiation to the work of researchers. The second step has been the subject of much research in Linguistics [19, 20] but first contacts with academic discourse seem to be more complex because it involves focusing not only on academic research papers but also on student transitional writings [21]. Similarly, social factors appear to be important. As Coulon [22] points out, entering university involves a process of student affiliation that goes beyond simply learning new writing rules:

> 'New students first experience a time of strangeness, during which they feel separated from their familiar past that they must forget: in their new universe, everything seems strange to them: the rhythm of the lessons is no longer the same, the rules have changed, the requirements of the teachers also, to the point that some students wonder what real work they have to do;
>
> Then it is time for learning, often painfully felt, made up of doubts, uncertainties, and anxiety. Students no longer have the familiarity of their school but do not yet have an academic or professional future: they are in between. Complex learning must take place quickly because it conditions the pursuit of their studies;
>
> Finally, comes the moment of affiliation: students have discovered and learned the use of the many codes, institutional and intellectual, which are essential to their profession as students. They begin to recognize and assimilate the routines of intellectual work becoming more and more obvious. An 'affiliated' student knows how to hear what is not said and see what is not designated. He knows how to transform the innumerable instructions of intellectual work into practical actions: he has discovered the practicality of rules and begins to become a competent member, a native endowed with the required culture: he attributes the same meaning to the same words, to the same behaviors. This new skill, in the making, is manifested by various markers of affiliation: written and oral expression, practical intelligence, seriousness, spelling, existence of theoretical and bibliographical references in written works, and spontaneous use of specific tenses, showing that he is developing a new angle of analysis. He begins to categorize the intellectual world he entered a few months earlier in the same way as his peers, and especially as expected by his teachers.' pp.1247-1248 [my translation from French]

University professors specializing in their field and intervening in first-year Bachelor's degrees do not always perceive that entering academic discourse entails social elements. Indeed, as noted by Pollet [23], most teachers oscillate between two representations of academic discourse: a superficial construal (spelling, code, standard) and a technical one (method of summarizing, taking notes, etc.). Deschepper [15] (p. 4) adds that, from a linguistic point of view, the approach to academic discourse should be pragmatic, centered on communication contexts, encompassing actors and products. As such, the student himself needs to also be considered a writing actor with all his psycho-affective, social, cognitive, and linguistic specificities [15] (p. 3). As far as the products are concerned, variations according to geographical, historical, cultural, and institutional situations need to be accounted for [24] (p. 6). The field of Academic literacies encompasses many variables and it seems that multi-elements programs should accompany freshmen entering academic discourse.

2.2. A developmental model for the acculturation to academic discourses

Developmental approaches to first or second language development (oral and written) have formalized products at the end of a continuum involving socio-affective and cognitive processes [25,26]. Such a representation involves placing the actor (the student) at the center of a cultural transformation that is only possible if certain steps are secured: typically, socio-affective factors precede cognitive processes [27]. Research on writing routines also includes various levels of cognitive processes (low and high). For example, Bereiter & Scardamalia [28] differentiate between "knowledge telling strategy" (children

9 to 16 years old) and "knowledge transforming strategy" (adults); Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl [29] separate low and high-level cognitive processes involved in learning (remember, understand, apply; analyze-evaluate-create); Delcambre and Lahanier-Reuter [2] classify written and oral university discourses according to the levels of studies (from experimental summaries to essays to theses…) which are becoming more and more cognitively complex; Mangiante and Parpette [30] identify in French for Academic Purposes different types of academic discourse requiring various levels of cognitive processes (from summarizing to analyzing and evaluating).

Our acculturation model for academic discourses (Figure 1) is based on a four-step developmental process that rests on four elements: a socio-affective base, a low-level organizational and cognitive processes (memorizing knowledge) phase, a high-level cognitive component specific to academic culture (library research, critical thinking, the search for scientific proof) and a block dedicated to the writing of high-level academic discourses structured around the process of high-level reasoning and supported more particularly by writings centered on argumentation (research papers, thesis). As a developmental model, acculturation is seen as a process entailing that students need to acquire the skills or posture of each level before moving to the next step.

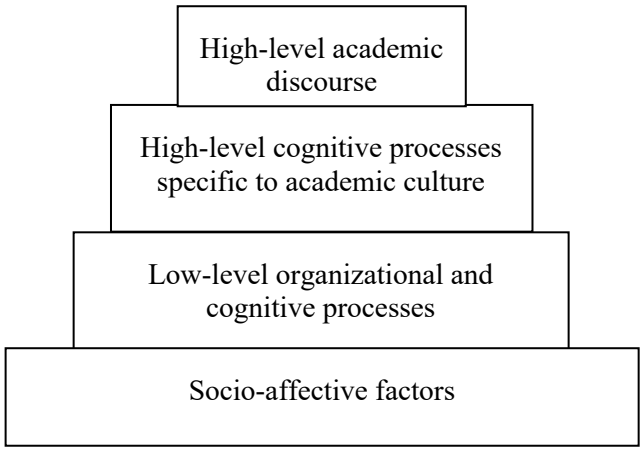


Fig. 1. A developmental model for the acculturation to academic discourses

2.3. Parents' level of education

International surveys repeatedly demonstrate the impact of socio-economic background on reading and writing performance in primary education [31], particularly in France, where the educational system is designed for the elite. However, scientific studies have been able to show that the variable *Socioeconomic background* encompasses several factors, such as the level of education of the parents, family literacy, or parental expectations [32]. More specifically, Dionne [33] studied a population of disadvantaged parents and established a significant positive link between the level of education (< 7 years of schooling) and performance in reading and writing of their children. Billard, Fluss, Ducot, Warszawski, Ecalle, Magnan, Richard & Ziegler [13] also confirmed that the low level of education of the mother (no high school diploma) was very strongly linked to poor reading skills for 7/8-year-old children from priority education zones. As far as higher education is concerned, the latest French INSEE statistics [34] indicate that children from disadvantaged social categories have more difficulty in writing in secondary school (35%), plan less easily for future higher education (69%) than the children from a higher-class background (89%) who also had better mastery of the written code (93%). Few studies, however, focus on the level of education of the parents and its influence on higher education success, except for Lafontaine, Dupriez, Campenhoudt, and Vermandele [35] who, in a study crossing level of education and sex, show that the more their mother is qualified, the more girls succeed in higher education in Belgium. However, no link was established between parental level of education and acculturation to university literacies.

2.4. Gender

Studies on the difficulties of boys and girls in reading and writing confirm that entry into primary literacies is more complicated for boys [36]. In developed countries, the reading performance of girls is systematically higher than that of boys whose level can be as much as one year behind [37]. However, the gap seems to close after the age of 25 [38]. Several factors could explain these initial difficulties: longer brain maturation for boys, which affects letter-sound recognition, crucial for the development of reading [39] a more pronounced taste for reading among girls [40]; a cognitive dissonance between gender and reading that boys associate with femininity [41]. Concerning higher education, surveys also show that young women have a success rate 6% higher than that of young men [4]. No studies exist concerning a possible link between gender and acculturation to academic writings.

2.5. Multilingualism

Studies linking multilingualism and literacy are numerous; however, the results are not always easy to interpret given the various definitions of what a multilingual individual is. Indeed, as noted by Akinci [42], from early bilingual to simultaneous, partial, school, additive, subtractive… all the nuances of multilingualism are called upon in research papers and lead to different conclusions. Concerning primary literacies, it would seem that if we compare early functional bilingual children who use two languages simultaneously at home with monolingual children, the acquisition of reading in both languages is facilitated, if the oral-graphics systems of the two languages are close: indeed, bilingualism heightens the phonological awareness necessary for learning to read [43]. However, a deficit in vocabulary in one or the other language negatively affects the acquisition of reading [43]. This last research result makes it possible to understand why children or students who do not speak the language of schooling in their family environment need specific support to enter primary or academic literacies [44, 45, 46, 47].

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1. Academic Training Programs

To bring out possible gaps between students' expectations and the proposed educational programs offered in academic literacies, we distributed questionnaires to four groups of first-year students at the end of their first semester. They were enrolled in Geography (n=50), History (n=66), Physics and Engineering Sciences (n=31) and French (n=28).

The objective of the academic training program in the Geography department was "to introduce students to the types of academic work that may be requested by professors during their Bachelor years as well as to provide methodological tools to help with general planning". Students had to follow a 2-hour lecture and 18 hours of tutorials on writing, bibliography, and documentary research. They had to organize themselves in groups of two or three around a chosen theme to produce a bibliography, a reading report, and a 10-page long essay.

The academic training program for History students was taking place over 24 hours and focused on the organization of weekly and semester work, note-taking, reading reports, text summaries, access to documentary resources, and bibliography standards. Students' evaluations were writing a bibliography in a limited amount of time at the library, summarizing a text, and participating in the Voltaire project (spelling).

The department of Physics and Engineering Sciences offered 12 hours of tutorials on academic writing/training: "resources for getting organized (digital work environment, agenda, to-do list, file sharing, collaborative work), communication (emails, clarity in communication), debriefings after the first exams, and techniques to promote motivation". Students were asked to work in groups and produce a 30-page written report on a chosen theme and present it to their peers.

Finally, the academic program in French offered practical exercises over 18 hours to master the canonical writings of literary studies: essay, commentary (oral and written), and text explanation. Two written exams took place during the semester and focused on writing an essay and text explanation.

3.2. Instruments and measurements

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In the first section, we analyzed the academic training programs according to qualitative descriptive elements such as the students' initial representations of their academic training classes, their overall evaluation of the courses, advantages, disadvantages, and possible modifications they would like to make to the classes as well as their usefulness. To assess the possible discrepancies between student expectations and their evaluations of the training systems, we relied on two tools: the list of skills that can be targeted in academic training programs [48] and the developmental model that we presented above (p.3) with academic literacies theorized as a complex acculturation process. The various steps were coded as follows:

- socio-affective component = 1 (anxiety, stress, motivation, concentration, group support, etc.);
- organizational and low-level cognitive processes = 2 (understanding how the university works, becoming autonomous, getting organized, taking notes, revising, memorizing, etc.);
- high-level cognitive processes specific to academic culture = 3 (documentary research, critical thinking, scientific reasoning, etc.);
- high-level academic discourse = 4 (academic writing, synthesizing, writing process, etc.).

The second part of the questionnaire focused on factors that could influence students entering academic literacies such as gender, level of education of the mother, level of education of the father, and languages spoken at home. We established a comprehensive list of types of writings identified in academic programs based on Blaser and Erpelding-Dupuis [49] and we asked students to indicate from this list the disciplinary genres that they came across during their first semester of study. We chose this dependent variable as identifying text types is part of the academic literacy construct underlying the *Test of Academic Literacy Levels* [50, 51]. Furthermore, Cliff [52] suggests that it is the most difficult skill to acquire according to Bachman and Palmer's language knowledge scale [53] as it needs an understanding of sociocultural clues underlying academic discourses. We hypothesized that the more types of writing a student were able to identify in his/her program, the more acculturated, s/he would be to academic discourse. We carried out statistical tests such as ANOVA or t-test for each factor.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Discrepancies between students' expectations and program training on academic literacies

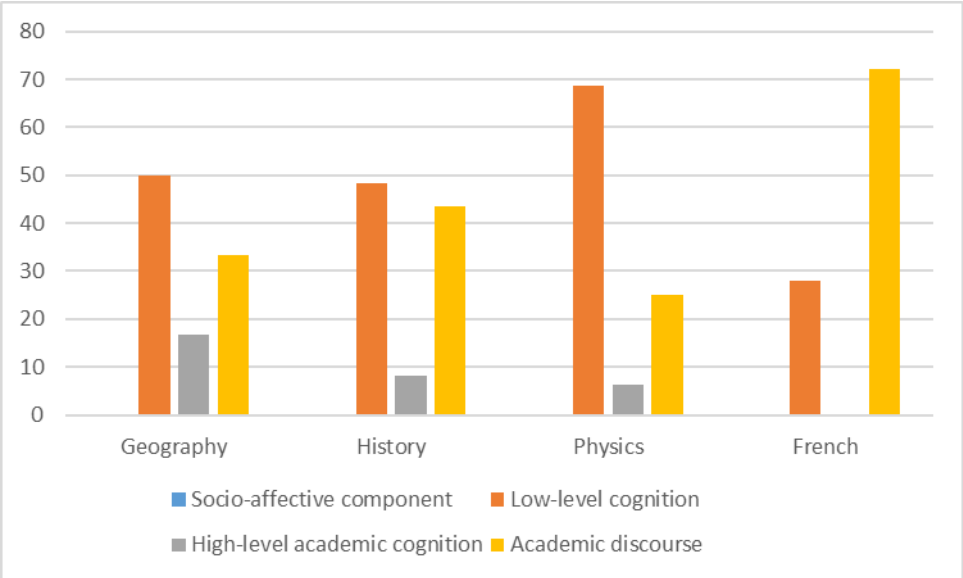


Fig. 2. What were your expectations for this class at the beginning of the semester? (%)

As we observe, none of the students mentioned socio-affective components in their course expectations to eventually deal with anxiety, stress, motivation, concentration, or seek group support... In French, academic culture (category 3) is absent. Students in Physics-Engineering Sciences are more in demand for organizational advice and are not concerned with academic discourse. In History and Geography, the expectations are rather balanced between organization and academic discourse.

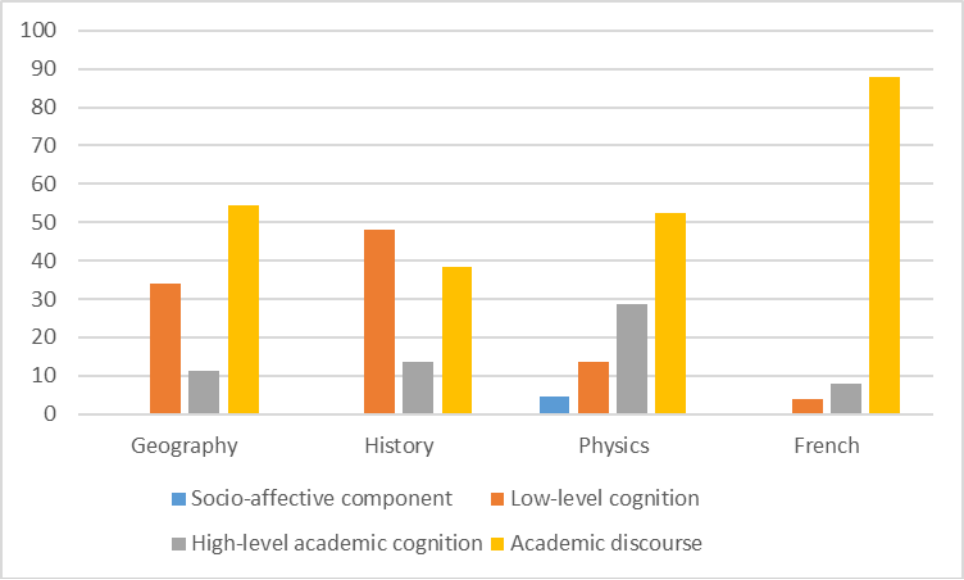


Fig. 3. Did your teacher present the class objectives? If so, what were they? (%)

Geography students understood that the course would focus on academic discourse more than they had anticipated. In History and Literature, the match between expectations and objectives is rather close. Physics students had to reassess their course expectations significantly as the class focused on academic writing and culture more than organization.

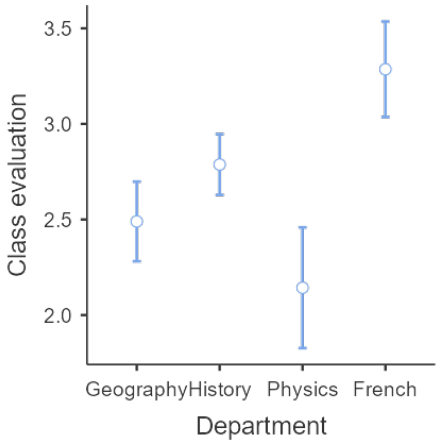


Fig. 4. *On a scale from 1 (min) to 4 (max), how do you evaluate this class?*

The One-Way ANOVA test indicates that students' ratings of their class are statistically different according to their department of belonging (Fisher test, $F=14.6$; $p<0.001$). The graph shows that Physics students are the most disappointed while French students are very satisfied.

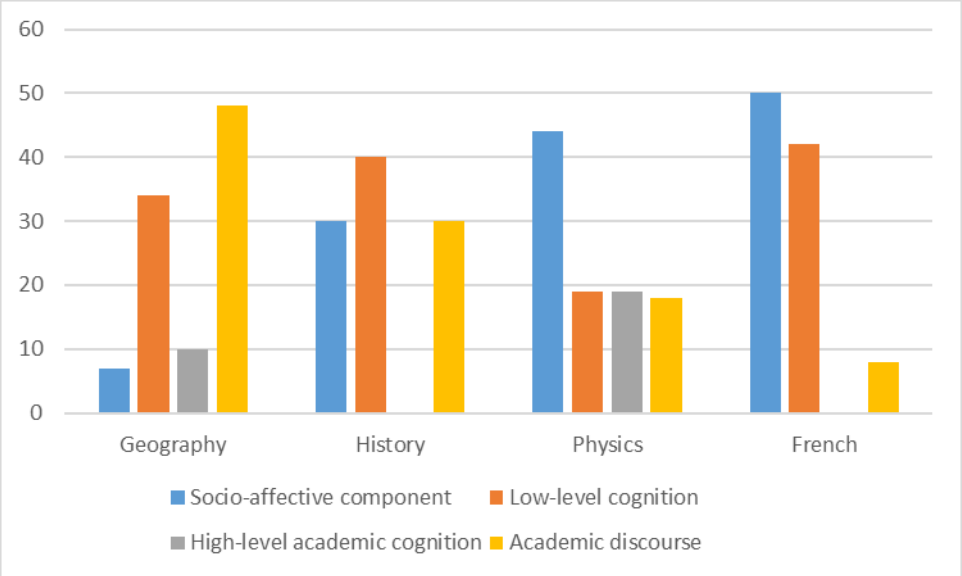


Fig. 5. What are the benefits of this class? (% of the total comments)

Geographers appreciated the work on academic writing even if it was not their first expectation. Historians evaluated favorably the content around low-level cognition but also the good atmosphere of the course (category 1). Physicists valued group work. Finally, the atmosphere of the course as well as the attentiveness and availability of their teacher delighted literature students.

What were the disadvantages of the class?

For geographers, classes were boring with too many hours on types of writing that did not correspond to what they had to do during the year. Historians complained of repetitive classes during lunch hours (12 p.m.-2 p.m.). Physicists were particularly severe indicating that they did not have enough support for writing an essay that was very long. They reported that they were constantly put under a lot of pressure. Some literature students felt that they already had mastered the proposed academic exercises and that the course was a waste of time for them.

What would you like to modify in this class to better match your expectations?

Geography students proposed that the exercises in class be more diversified and that they should get more help. They also wanted more advice so they did not get overwhelmed during the semester. Historians would have enjoyed more concrete exercises directly linked to other teaching classes. Physicists would like to be better monitoring, choice of their subject of study, and more encouragement from their teachers. Finally, literature students would like to work on oral preparation in a small committee.

4.2. Parents' level of education

The ANOVA tests are not significant for any of the disciplines, whether concerning the father's level of education or that of the mother. A few trends emerge, namely, a certain resilience for students with parents without a Baccalaureate who report more types of writing than those whose parents have a Baccalaureate (French and Geography). For students registered in the French department, these students outperform all other categories even the students whose parents have Master's degrees.

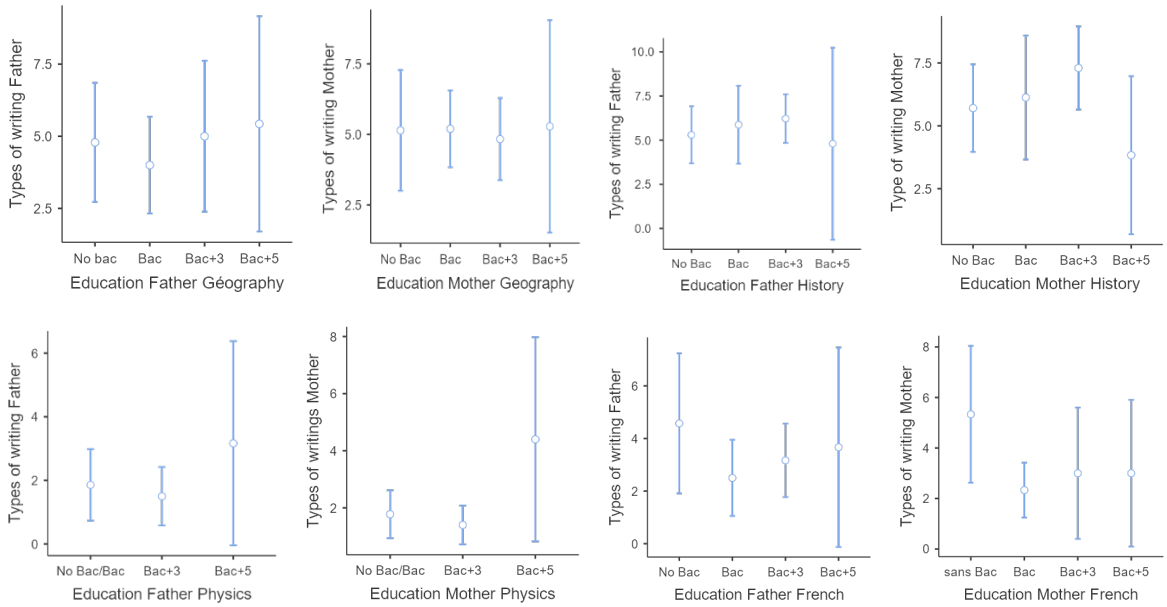


Fig. 6. Plots of *Parents' level of education* with *Types of writing* detected

4.3. Gender

None of the t-test statistical analyzes are significant.

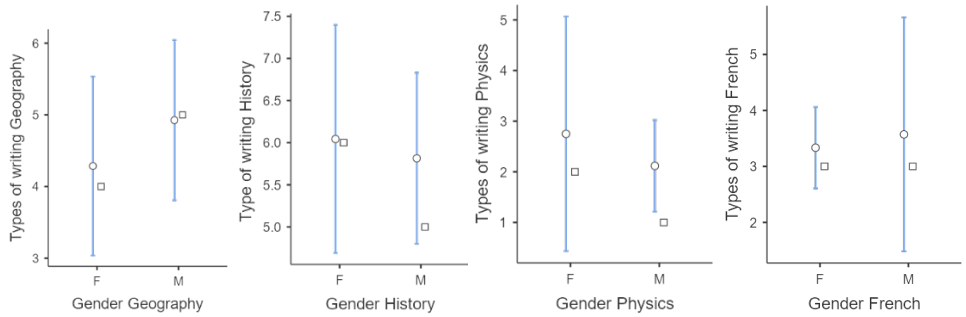


Fig. 7. Plots of *Gender* and *Types of writing* detected

4.4. Multilingualism

No t-test is significant, but we can note the important span for multilingual students indicating that they can be both advantaged and disadvantaged compared to monolinguals in terms of acculturation to university discourse.

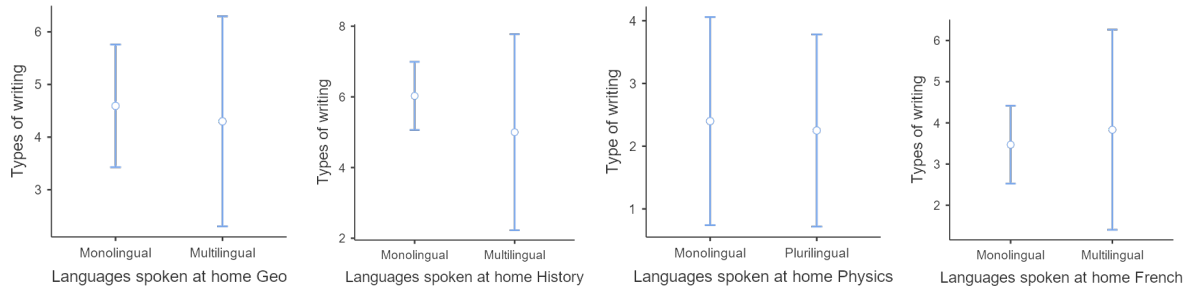


Fig. 8. Plots of *Languages spoken at home* and *Types of writing* detected

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

For subject teachers, academic literacy courses should concentrate on writing [3]. However, students' expectations in their first semester at university do not seem to match this concern. Indeed, as they are leaving the world of high school behind them, they are seeking support in their new academic culture through empathy, socializing with peers, and the organization of their weekly work. This is true for all subjects: physicists, who are the most disappointed, value group work and are looking for better follow-up from their teachers; geographers would like better coordination with the rest of the subject classes; historians appreciate the regular feedback from teachers on their work and students of French do not hesitate to highlight the pedagogical skill of their teacher who found a way to bring difficult exercises to a manageable level. We, therefore, see that entry into university discourse cannot focus solely on the typology of writings but requires step-by-step acculturation, as we were able to anticipate in our model. We can note also the quasi-absence in the comments of the students of library research, a keystone component of scientific culture but also essential for the development of academic writing. As Coulon already noted in 1997 [10], entering university requires a repositioning on the part of the entry students which encompasses, according to the results of our questionnaire, all of his specificities (affective, social, cognitive, subject, and language-based) in agreement with Deschepper [15].

The factors *Parental level of education*, *Gender*, and *Plurilingualism* do not appear to be significant for entry into university discourse. Two conclusions can be drawn from these results: academic literacies develop independently of these factors or, from a methodological point of view, the *Types of writing* variable is not sensitive enough to these factors. It would imply developing a questionnaire that could encompass various dimensions of the academic literacy construct [51] while remaining transversal to the various subjects.

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