Temporal organization in narrative texts of 8-11-year olds

Organización temporal en textos narrativos de niños de 8 a 11 años

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ABSTRACT

The present work focuses on the temporal organization of narratives written by pupils aged 8-11. In this paper, we analyze 180 texts produced by elementary school children (60 texts from pupils aged 8-9, 60 texts from pupils aged 9-10, 60 texts from pupils aged 10-11) in response to a common writing instruction prompt in which the beginning and end of the text are given. The different temporal movements (chronological succession, backward and forward movements) are cataloged, categorized, and analyzed. The study reveals, on the one hand, that all pupils, regardless of their grade level, integrate temporal movements in their texts. On the other hand, it shows that differences appear according to class level: as class level increases the different movements tend to develop with their own specificity conveying more thickness and coherence to the text.

RESUMEN

El artículo se centra en la organización temporal de las narraciones escritas por niños de 8 a 11 años. En este trabajo se analizan 180 textos producidos por alumnos de primaria (60 textos de alumnos de 8-9 años, 60 textos de alumnos de 9-10 años, 60 textos de alumnos de 10-11 años) que responden a un enunciado de expresión escrita común en el que se indica el principio y el final del texto. El estudio revela, por un lado, que todos los alumnos, regardless of their grade level, integrate temporal movements in their texts. On the other hand, it shows that differences appear according to class level: as class level increases the different movements tend to develop with their own specificity conveying more thickness and coherence to the text.

Keywords:
- elementary school
- narratives
- student texts
- temporal movements
- temporal organization

Palabras clave:
- escuela primaria
- movimientos temporales
- organización temporal
- textos de alumnos, textos narrativos

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independientemente del grado, integran los movimientos temporales en sus textos. Por otro lado, muestra que hay diferencias en función del nivel de la clase. A medida que este aumenta, estos movimientos son más específicos, haciendo el texto más denso y proporcionándole coherencia.
Introduction

By the end of primary school, pupils are expected to be able to write an organized and coherent text. However, the notion of coherence is a complex one. In this article, we will focus on temporal coherence because, as Battistelli (2009) points out, “a text bases a large part of its coherence on the perception of a certain temporal coherence” (p. 23).

Studies of texts produced by primary and secondary school pupils show that writers have difficulty managing time while writing narratives (Cappeau, 2002; Cappeau & Roubaud, 2018; Dolz-Mester et al., 1989; Halté, 1994; Romain, 2007). Chartrand and Blaser (2008) indicate that there is indeed a correlation between writing proficiency and academic success. The issue of temporality is a complex linguistic problem and teachers are often at a loss to identify and remedy difficulties with their pupils’ time management while writing.

We sought to identify textual skills related to the management of temporal coherence and cohesion in 180 narrative texts of pupils aged 8 to 11, corresponding to the last three years of schooling in French primary school (CE2, CM1 and CM2). In this article, we will focus on the analysis of the temporal organization of the narrative. To allow pupils to produce a variety of temporal movements, we have developed a specific writing instruction sequence.

We will first present the main research carried out on temporal coherence in pupils’ texts. Then we will describe the methodology used: writing instructions, corpus, treatment of the texts produced by the pupils. Finally, we will present the results of the analysis of the pupils’ texts about temporal organization, while considering the differences according to age.

From a didactic point of view, this research has a double objective: to offer teachers a method for reading the temporal coherence of the texts produced by their pupils, and to identify entry points for didactic interventions.

1 In the source text: “un texte fonde une grande partie de sa cohérence sur la perception d’une certaine cohérence temporelle”.
The issue of temporal coherence

The notion of coherence has long been a part of textual linguistics. Consequently, work on textual linguistics first appeared with the increase in research carried out using the framework of textual linguistics in the 1970s. The period from 1975 to 1985 is thus marked “by the tremendous development of work of various obediences of linguistics, particularly textual linguistics” (Karabétian, 2000, p. 250). It was during this same period that text grammar made its appearance in the field of French didactics (Combettes & Charolles, 1999).

But textual linguistics is struggling to find its place in the French primary school curriculum. We can identify several reasons for this. First, there is a time lag between the development of research, especially in textual linguistics, and its inclusion in the primary school curriculum. Secondly, textual grammar faces much reticence in a French context where grammatical teaching is very conservative. It was only in 1995 that it made its entry into the official curricula alongside sentence grammar, and more particularly through the publication of a document accompanying the curricula and intended for teachers, published in 1992 (Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique [CNDP], 1992) which aimed to review the contributions of research, particularly in textual linguistics. In this document, temporal and aspectual marks of verbal tenses as well as connectors are clearly identified as elements of cohesion contributing to the temporal coherence of the text. However, in 2006, a mission report on teaching (Bentolila, 2006) put a stop to this progress by refocusing the teaching of grammar on the sentence on the grounds that “too early on, so-called ‘textual’ grammar perverts the natural relationship with the text and makes the study of the grammatical system chaotic” (p. 9). The curricula published in the wake of this report thus put the teaching of sentence grammar back at the center. Gourdet (2009) writes that one can perceive in this turning back “a form of condemnation of text grammar and a disapproval of the pedagogical and didactic movement initiated by the 1995 instructions and confirmed in 2002 by the analysis of the text, its enunciation,

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2 In the source text: “par le formidable développement des travaux de diverses obédiences de linguistique notamment textuelle”.

3 In the source text: “trop tôt imposée, la grammaire dite ‘textuelle’ pervertit la relation naturelle au texte et rend chaotique l’étude du système grammatical”.
its organization and its functioning” (p. 160). This refocusing is not, in fact, based on the current state of research, contrary to the orientation of the 1995 and 2002 curricula (Elalouf et al., 2011). Although notions of textual linguistics are gradually being reintroduced in the 2015 school curricula (Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale, 1995), they are mainly mentioned in reading and writing but are absent from the teaching content of grammar, which remains focused on identifying the nature and function of words. While the latest curricula published in 2020 (Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale de l’Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2020) stipulate that pupils in cycle 2 (CP to CE2, 6 to 9 years old) and cycle 3 (CM1 to 6ème, 9 to 12 years old) should write a coherent text, the notions of coherence show real ambiguity, approximation and confusion.

The notion of temporal coherence is a complex one, involving various linguistic elements carrying aspectual and temporal information that interact with one another. In our study, we will focus on tenses. These were first considered in the phrasal framework. The research carried out mainly concerns the acquisition of tenses in French (Bronckart, 1973; Bronckart & Sinclair, 1973; Ferreiro, 1971) as well as the factors influencing their use (Bonnotte & Fayol, 2001; Fayol et al., 1988). With the rise of textual linguistics, “many linguists (Benveniste, 1959; Co Vet, 1980; Simonin-Grumbach, 1975; Weinrich, 1973) showed that other textual factors were involved in the use of tenses” (Tisset 1995, p. 314). The researchers then extended their research to the textual framework and, among other things, to the enunciative anchoring of the texts produced, i.e., the way in which a person situates himself in relation to what she or he is saying. The tenses used have been examined with regard to the type of texts in both linguistics and didactics (Adam, 2011; Bulea, 2013; Chartrand & Émery-Bruneau, 2013; Denizot, 2010; Roubaud & Romain, 2018) based on their belonging to a specific enunciative anchoring.

4 In the source text: “une forme de condamnation de la grammaire de texte et une désapprobation du mouvement pédagogique et didactique initié par les instructions de 1995 et confirmé en 2002 par l’analyse du texte, de son énonciation, de son organisation et de son fonctionnement”.
5 In the source text: “de nombreux linguistes (Benveniste, 1959; Co Vet, 1980; Simonin-Grumbach, 1975; Weinrich, 1957) ont montré que d’autres facteurs de type textuels intervenaient dans l’emploi des temps”.

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The work of Bronckart (1985) and Bronckart and Bourdin (1993) has shown, in texts produced by pupils aged 10 to 14, “a massive effect of the ‘text type’ factor on the distribution of tenses” (Bronckart & Bourdin, 1993, p. 113). For younger pupils (from CP to CM2), studies mainly focus on narrative texts and more particularly on accounts of personal experience. Pupils were asked to produce a narrative of an event in which they had participated (Fayol, 1981; 1984). The results of these studies show that there is a shift in enunciative anchoring as a function of age: productions closely linked to the moment of enunciation in the youngest pupils become increasingly detached from the moment of enunciation as their age increases, indicating an “increasing decen tration of the narrator in relation to the story and the narrative” (Fayol, 1984, p. 5). On the other hand, no study, to our knowledge, has looked at the temporal organization of narratives, which consists of comparing the order in which events are arranged in the narrative with the order of succession of these same events in the story (Genette, 2007).

Methodology

Writing instruction and task analysis

We wondered how pupils organized the texts they produced temporally. To enable them to produce writing that is varied from the point of view of temporal organization, we proposed a writing task that could lead them to produce varied temporal movements.

This writing task consists of inventing the middle of a story with a given beginning and end, leaving a space in between (20 lines) for the pupils to insert their text.

The assignment was based on the children’s book *Siam* (Conrod & Place, 2002). The first part of the assignment corresponds to the beginning of the original story, while the end was rewritten.

The instruction is as follows:

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6 In the source text: “un effet massif du facteur ‘type de texte’ sur la distribution des temps verbaux”.

7 The instruction was: “Tell a story that happened to you”.

8 In the source text: “décentration croissante du narrateur par rapport à l’histoire et la narration”.

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Figure 1
Writing instruction

Lis le début et la fin de l’histoire puis invente le milieu.
Lorsque je l’ai vu allongé par terre dans sa loge au zoo, j’ai compris. Siam mon éléphant était mort.
...

Read the beginning and end of the story and then invent the middle.
When I saw him lying on the floor in his box at the zoo, I understood. Siam my elephant was dead.
...
Today, Siam has been stuffed. I often come to see him at the Natural History Museum. I talk to him secretly, I sing softly, “Siaaam!”.

From the point of view of enunciative anchoring, the given text presents two distinct temporal reference frames: the narrative reference frame and the enunciative reference frame (Desclés, 1995; Desclés & Guentchéva, 2010). The beginning of the given text is part of the narrative reference frame. The tenses used are the passé composé (ai vu, ai compris) and the imparfait (était), which are characteristic of first-person narratives. The end of the text is part of the enunciative reference frame, with the narration joining the present of enunciation (je viens, je parle, je chante).

It is also a first-person pronoun narrative. While in the original text this ‘I’ corresponds to the animal’s caretaker, in our text there is no indication of the link between the narrator and the elephant. The presence of the possessive pronoun “my” in Siam my elephant, however, makes it clear that there is a strong bond between the two characters.

From the point of view of temporal organization, the writing instruction breaks with the traditional structure of the narrative: initial situation, complication, action, resolution, final situation, moral (Adam, 1984). The beginning of the text in medias res projects the reader into a story that has already begun, and at a moment of tension since it is the moment of the discovery of Siam’s death. There is therefore an ellipse of the initial situation. This beginning invites the pupil to go back...
in time. The end of the text encourages anticipation since the reader knows in advance what will happen. Finally, between the beginning of the text, i.e., the moment when the ‘I’ discovers Siam’s body lying on the ground, and the moment when he/she visits him regularly at the Museum once Siam has been stuffed, there is a temporal ellipsis that the pupil can decide to fill.

Although the text offers the possibility of backward or forward movement, it does not make it compulsory. It is quite possible to produce a temporally coherent text without making anachronisms. However, pupils must necessarily consider the beginning and end of the given text to produce a coherent text.

In addition, from a thematic point of view, the writers must integrate the following elements: the presence of an elephant named Siam, his death, his stuffing and the link between him and the narrator. They must also respect the spatial indications: zoo, box, Natural History Museum.

Study corpus
Our corpus consists of texts produced by pupils in CE2, CM1 and CM2 (pupils aged 8 to 11). The choice of these three levels corresponded, in 2012 (the year in which our data collection was carried out), to classes belonging to the same primary school cycle, namely cycle 3. Today, CE2 belongs to cycle 2 and the class of 6ème has joined cycle 3.

The texts were collected in several schools in the south-east of France in different settings (urban, urban REP⁹ and rural). They were anonymized. The corpus under study is composed of 180 texts distributed as follows: 60 texts by CE2 pupils, 60 texts by CM1 pupils, 60 texts by CM2 pupils. We felt it was necessary to have the same number of texts for each level to make comparisons.

These texts are all first drafts; the texts collected have not been corrected or rewritten. The pupils had approximately one hour to read the

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⁹ REP schools are part of the Priority Education Network, which includes primary and secondary schools where social difficulties are more significant than in primary and secondary schools outside the Priority Education Network.
instructions and write their text. The pupils didn’t know this children’s book.

The examples cited in the article are numbered and referenced. The reference indicates whether it was an extract or the whole text, gave the pupil’s first name and class level, and specified the school number, as found in the basic corpus (indeed, if a class has two levels —for example CE2 and CM1— the school number is identical). To situate the extract in the pupil’s text, we have indicated the cuts by [...].

Data processing

The texts produced by the pupils were first scanned and then double transcribed. The first transcription is a “linearized semi-diplomatic” transcription (Doquet et al., 2017; Peres Bonnemaison, 2018; Testennoire, 2017). The aim is to keep a version as close as possible to the pupil’s text. The second transcription is an orthographic transcription: “By erasing the spellings that disturb reading habits, [this transcription] allows a focus on textuality” (Boré & Elalouf, 2017, p. 5). In this article, we present only the orthographic versions. Despite its apparent simplicity, orthographic transcription requires making choices when faced with pupil texts that deviate, sometimes strongly, from the norm, as Roubaud (2017, p. 5) states: the texts are already written and contain numerous “faults” that are not all to be treated in the same way. For our study, we chose to keep the punctuation and tenses of the pupil.

In order to study the temporal organization of texts, we developed an analysis grid, based on the work of Charaudeau (1992), Bronckart (1996), Gosselin (1996), Genette (2007), which allowed us to identify the temporal movements of the text. This grid highlights three temporal movements: chronological succession, backward movement and forward movement. In the chronological succession movement (noted SUCC), the order of events in the narrative corresponds to the order of

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10 The semi-diplomatic linearized transcription shows the different writing operations, i.e. deletion, addition and replacement, as well as illegible segments or letters, while respecting line breaks.
11 In the source text: “En effaçant les graphies qui perturbent les habitudes de lecture, [cette transcription] permet une centration sur la textualité”.
12 In the source text: “les textes sont déjà écrits et comportent de nombreuses “fautes” qui ne sont pas toutes à traiter de la même façon”.

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events in the story. The backward movement (noted RA) corresponds to the evocation of a previous event or state: the information is then reported. As for the forward movement (noted ANT), it is the evocation of a later event or state: the information is, in this case, anticipated.

To visualize the different movements present in the texts produced, we have borrowed from Gosselin (1996) the “chronograms” which constitute a mode of representation. In the chronogram, “each process is represented by an interval [...] arranged on the temporal axis. This axis is duplicated each time a new predicate appears on the linear chain” (Gosselin, 1996, p. 108). The elaboration of the chronogram thus gives an account of the temporal structure of the narratives produced by showing the different temporal movements that make it up. This representation has been particularly useful for showing complex configurations such as pivotal texts (cf. “Example of a combination of temporal movements: the pivot text”). We give below an example of a chronogram corresponding to a text extract showing a single movement; the sentences in italics belong to the instruction (cf. Figure 2, example 1):


(1) When I saw him lying on the floor in his box at the zoo, I knew. Siam my elephant was dead. I called my parents. I cried, a little later the vet came to get him (Extract, Anaïs, CM2, E7).

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13 In the source text: “chaque procès est représenté par un intervalle [...] disposé sur l’axe temporel. Cet axe est dupliqué à chaque fois que se présente sur la chaîne linéaire un nouveau prédicat”. 
The analysis of the temporal organization of the narratives produced thus leads us to first look at the structure of the text (see “Quantitative analysis: towards a typology of texts”). Then, we will examine the different temporal movements separately (see “Towards a qualitative analysis: study of the different temporal movements”). Finally, we will give an example of the combination of these different movements within the same text through the pivotal text (see “Example of a combination of temporal movements: the pivot text”). Throughout this study, we will use a longitudinal analysis in order to see if there are differences according to age.

Analysis of the temporal organization of narrative texts (pupils aged 8 to 11)

Quantitative analysis: towards a typology of texts

The study of the structure of the 180 student texts, using the analysis grid, shows that the different temporal movements which appear are: chronological succession (SUCC), backward movement (RA) and forward movement (ANT). We were thus able to identify different forms of temporal organization according to the number of temporal movements (TM) and their combination, as shown in the figure below:
From this table we can make two general remarks. The first concerns the structure: the texts produced all have at least one temporal movement, which means that the pupils did not produce a static text (corresponding, for example, to a chronologically linear description). The second concerns the temporal organization: the texts produced can be composed of a single movement or a combination of several temporal movements.\(^{14}\)

From a quantitative point of view, most pupils, whatever their level, produced texts which combined several temporal movements. There were 2 temporal movements in 46% of the texts produced. There were 3 temporal movements in 28% of the texts produced. Lastly, 26% of the texts produced contained only one temporal movement. A significant proportion (21%) of the texts which contained only one temporal movement used a chronological succession movement.

The analysis of the temporal organization of the texts indicated that the main temporal movement is the chronological succession movement present in 93% of the texts produced. Although it appears alone

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\(^{14}\) As the study is still in progress, it is possible that the percentages will change somewhat, but the analysis of movements remains unchanged (see “Towards a qualitative analysis: study of the different temporal movements” and “Example of a combination of temporal movements: the pivot text”).
in 21% of cases, it is also the main movement around which the other two movements (RA and ANT) can be articulated (in 72% of texts).

If we consider the class levels (see Figure 3), the analysis of the temporal organization of the texts produced does not reveal any significant difference. At most, we can see that CM1 pupils produce more texts with the two movements SUCC / ANT than CE2 and CM2 pupils (13 texts in CM1 against 9 and 10 in CE2 and CM2). On the other hand, they write fewer texts combining the three movements RA / SUCC / ANT (14 texts in CM1 against 18 and 19 in CE2 and CM2).

This last observation invites us to carry out a more detailed analysis of the various movements produced.

Towards a qualitative analysis: study of the different temporal movements

The qualitative analysis that we propose to carry out consists of considering each of the three temporal movements separately.

**Chronological succession movement**

Chronological succession is the characteristic movement of the narrative. It corresponds to the succession of processes\(^\text{15}\) situated between the beginning and end of the given text. We consider a text to contain a chronological movement of succession if it contains at least one process in chronological succession.

**Chronological succession.** The chronological succession relates to the events between the discovery of Siam’s body lying on the floor in his box and the narrator’s visits to the Natural History Museum once Siam has been stuffed. We present two examples from our corpus showing a chronological sequence below:

\(\text{(2) Les personnes ont pris l’éléphant puis ils l’ont amené chez le taxidermiste. Il a dépeuillé Siam, et il lui a mis de la paille. Et les}\)

\(^{15}\) Following Meillet (1912), we use the term process, which “covers both states [...] and events [...] i.e. all representations expressed by verbal groups or deverbal-headed nominal groups”. In the source text: “recouvre à la fois les états [...] et les événements [...] c’est-à-dire toutes les représentations exprimées par des groupes verbaux ou des groupes nominaux à tête déverbale” (Gosselin, 2021, p. 17).
personnes du zoo l’ont emmené au Muséum d’histoire naturelle [...] (Extrait, Mattéo, CM1, E2).

(2) The people took the elephant and brought it to the taxidermist. He skinned Siam, and he put straw in him. And the people from the zoo took him to the Natural History Museum (Extract, Mattéo, CM1, E2).

In the first example, Mattéo relates the events that follow the discovery of Siam lying on the ground. The processes ont pris / ont amené / a dépouillé / a mis / ont emmené (took / brought / skinned / put / took) are in chronological succession and relate to the different steps leading to the presence of the stuffed Siam in the Natural History Museum mentioned at the end of the given text.

(3) J’étais tellement triste que je suis tombée par terre et j’ai pleuré sur son corps tout raide […] (Extrait, Flora, CM2, E3).

(3) I was so sad that I fell on the floor and cried over his stiff body (Extract, Flora, CM2, E3).

In the second example, these are events that immediately follow the discovery of Siam’s body lying on the ground. The processes suis tombé / ai pleuré (fell / cried) are also in chronological succession but, unlike the previous example, the events mentioned concern the physical and emotional reactions to this tragic discovery.

The two examples reproduced above are typical of the two main themes that appear in chronological succession in the texts produced by pupils at all levels: stuffing and the different stages of grief, such as shock, anger, depression, acceptance and reconstruction.

**Chronological succession and verbs of speech and thought.** The distinction made by Genette (1972) between “event narratives” and “speech narratives” led to a distinction between processes dealing with events and those dealing with speech and thought verbs. We consider as a speech verb any verb reporting the words of a speaking subject and as a thought verb any verb expressing mental states as well as verbs of belief and propositional attitude (Rosier 2008). We will give some examples:

(4) les gardiens ont accouru et l’un d’entre eux m’a dit: “Il est surement endormi”. il écouta ses battements de cœur. Il reprit: “mais hélàs non, il est bel et bien mort” […] (Extrait, Iris, CM1, E1).
(4) the guards came running and one of them said to me: “He is probably asleep”. He said: “but alas no, he is well and truly dead” (Extract, Iris, CM1, E1).

In example 4, the speech verbs a dit and reprit (said and said) as well as the verb ont accouru (came running) which refers to an event, are an immediate chronological succession in the continuation of the initial scene (Gosselin, 1996) at the beginning of the text. The same applies to the thought verb ai pensé (thought) in the example below:

(5) [...] ensuite j’ai pensé à ce que je faisais avec lui quand je montais sur son dos et qu’on se promenait dans la forêt [...] (Extrait, Rayane, CE2, E11).

(5) [...] then I thought about what I was doing with him when I was riding on his back and we were walking in the forest (Extract, Rayane, CE2, E11).

But if the speech and thought verbs can be placed in chronological succession as we have just seen (e.g., 4-5), they nevertheless play a dual role from the point of view of temporal organization. In example 5, the thought verb ai pensé (thought) introduces information prior to the beginning of the story à ce que je faisais avec lui quand je montais sur son dos et qu’on se promenait dans la forêt (about what I was doing with him when I was riding on his back and we were walking in the forest). Hence a backward movement. In example 6 below, the speech verb a répondu (told), while also in chronological succession, introduces information from later in the story Siam irait voir un taxidermiste et allait lui enlever tout et puis le nettoyer et allait le remplir de paille, et, après il allait être exposé au Muséum d’histoire naturelle (Siam would go to a taxidermist and remove everything from him and then clean him and fill him with straw, and then he would be exhibited at the Natural History Museum). Hence a forward movement:

(6) [...] Il m’a répondu que Siam irait voir un taxidermiste et allait lui enlever tout et puis le nettoyer et allait le remplir de paille, et, après il allait être exposé au Muséum d’histoire naturelle (Extrait, Justine, CE2, E2).

(6) [...] He told me that Siam would go to a taxidermist and remove everything from it and then clean it and fill it with straw, and afterwards it would be exhibited at the Natural History Museum (Extract, Justine, CE2, E2).
The introduction of verbs of speech and thought into the narrative, while contributing to the chronological succession, also makes it possible to manage the contribution of previous (backward) or subsequent (forward) information.

**Synthesis.** The chronological succession movement did not seem to differ significantly according to class level. However, the production of this movement was sometimes difficult to manage for many pupils.

Indeed, to produce their text, the pupils had to take into account the beginning and end of the given text. While the connection with the beginning of the text did not pose any major difficulties, the connection with the end of the given text did pose more difficulties because the pupils had to consider the events mentioned at the end (the visits to the Museum) and consequently interrupt the chronological succession movement to ensure temporal coherence.

It was the CE2 and CM1 pupils who had the most difficulty in managing this junction with the end of the text, the CM2 pupils doing it better. This difficulty could be explained from a developmental point of view by the age of the pupils. This hypothesis seems to be supported, as we shall see later, by the results obtained concerning the analysis of the forward movement (cf. “Forward movement”).

**Backward movement**

The backward movement is the second movement to appear in the pupils’ texts after the chronological succession movement (see Figure 3). We identify two distinct types: internal backward movement and external backward movement.

**Internal backward movement.** The internal flashbacks relate to events between the beginning and the end of the given text, i.e., between the moment when the character discovers Siam dead in his box and the moment when he regularly visits Siam at the Natural History Museum, as in the example below:

(7) [...] Quand je suis revenu après l’école au zoo il avait disparu alors j’ai demandé au gardien pourquoi il avait disparu il m’a dit que le taxidermiste l’avait pris (Extrait, Dina, CM1, E2).
(7) [...] When I came back after school to the zoo it had disappeared, so I asked the keeper why it had disappeared he told me that the taxidermist had taken it (Excerpt, Dina, CM1, E2).

In this excerpt, the segment le taxidermiste l’avait pris (the taxidermist had taken it) comes after the character is surprised that Siam’s body is missing. This flashback segment thus explains the cause of his absence. It can only be situated temporally between the beginning and end of the text. This is also the case in example (8) where the flashback concerns the oblivion of Siam’s death:

(8) Elle a pleuré. [...] Elle s’en est remise. Le lendemain elle a tout oublié. Du coup elle est allée s’occuper de Siam au zoo. Elle ne le trouve pas, elle l’appelle partout, Siam!! Siam!! Et elle se rencontre qu’elle avait oublié qu’il était mort [...] (Extrait, Mathilde, CE2, E5).

(8) She cried. [...] She got over it. The next day she forgot everything. So she went to the zoo to look after Siam. She can’t find him, she calls him everywhere, Siam! Siam!!! And she realizes that she had forgotten that he was dead (Extract, Mathilde, CE2, E5).

External feedback. External flashbacks, on the other hand, relate to events prior to the beginning of the text, i.e., events that take place before the character discovers Siam lying in his box. They have three different narrative functions.

a) Explanatory flashback

(9) Il avait été tué par une personne qui était rentrée dans le zoo [...] (Extrait, Christian, CM1, E3).

(9) He had been killed by someone who had entered the zoo (Extract, Christian, CM1, E3).

(10) car il était trop vieux et avait un problème de cœur et de respiration [...] (Extrait, Brune, CM1, E3).

(10) because he was too old and had a heart and breathing problem (Extract, Brune, CM1, E3).

The flashback segment presented in examples (9-10) deals with an event that precedes the main story. It helps to shed light on the causes of Siam’s death. In (9), it is of criminal origin, whereas in (10) it
is of medical origin (advanced age, heart and breathing problems). In both cases, the flashback explains the death of the animal, as is clearly shown by the use of the connector because in (10), which extends the beginning of the given text.

b) Descriptive flashback

The descriptive flashback is mainly involved in the construction of Siam’s character as in the examples below:

(11) [...] sa trompe était très longue [...] (Extrait, Deva, CE2, E5).

(11) [...] his trunk was very long [...] (Extract, Deva, CE2, E5).

(12) [...] Siam était gentil, attentionné, Dressé et surtout gros mangeur [...] (Extrait, Sofia, CM1, E10).

(12) [...] Siam was kind, attentive, trained and above all a big eater [...] (Extract, Sofia, CM1, E10).

(13) [...] il était beau en plus il avait une peau grise et lisse, ses cornes qu’on appelle “les défenses” étaient blanches car je lui lavais deux fois par semaine il avait un regard doux il avait des yeux noirs et surtout il était très gros très lourd il pesait environ une tonne [...] (Extrait, Lino, CM2, E4).

(13) [...] he was beautiful and he had a smooth grey skin, his horns, which we call “the tusks”, were white because I washed him twice a week he had a gentle look he had black eyes and above all he was very big very heavy he weighed about a ton [...] (Extract, Lino, CM2, E4).

The descriptive flashback is linked to the character of Siam: to his physique, his temperament, his tastes and thus contribute to showing, in filigree, the attachment of the writer to this elephant.

c) Narrative flashback

(14) [...] Hier quand je suis venu le voir il était en pleine forme! (Extrait, Barbara, CE2, E5).

(14) [...] Yesterday when I came to see him he was in great shape! (Extract, Barbara, CE2, E5).

(15) Je repensais à lui, on s’amusait bien, on faisait plein de jeux on faisait des cachecaches quand il prenait de l’eau il la recrache
par sa trompe je repensais à lui quand il était vivant j’allais sur une branche et il mettait sa trompe sur la branche et on faisait des numéros d’acrobatie (Texte entier, Raphaël, CE2, E6).

(15) I thought about him, we had a lot of fun, we played a lot of games, we did hide-and-seek, when he took water he spat it out through his trunk, I thought about him when he was alive, I would go up on a branch and he would put his trunk on the branch and we would do some acrobatic acts (Full text, Raphaël, CE2, E6).

Example (14) is a narrative flashback to a time immediately before (the day before). In (15), the narrator recalls in thought what the two characters used to do together.

Narrative flashback allows either a piece of the near past (14) of the event presented to be reconstructed or a piece of the more distant past (15).

Synthesis. The analysis of the backward movement in the pupils’ texts shows that this movement is present in 61% of the texts in the corpus.

Most of the flashback produced is external flashback, accounting for 75% of the texts with at least one flashback. There are few internal flashbacks. This can be explained by the short period between Siam’s death and the visits to the Museum.

External flashbacks allow to retrieve the story’s antecedents and add depth to the narrative by explaining Siam’s death (explanatory RA), by helping to build Siam’s character (descriptive RA) or by restoring a piece of the more or less recent past (narrative RA).

The most common type of external flashback produced is explanatory flashback at all grade levels, which is easily explained. Indeed, the beginning of the given text starts with the discovery of Siam lying on the ground. This moment of tension, which could be seen as a denouement, has undoubtedly prompted the writer to shed light on the causes of Siam’s death. In some cases, the texts produced resemble real investigations, with the ‘I’ character taking on the role of a detective.

Although we can see that pupils use this writing strategy from a very early age, differences appear as the school level increases, particularly in the length of the segments produced. Indeed, the explanatory and
descriptive segments are longer in CM1 and CM2 than in younger children (CE2) as shown in examples 11 to 13.

**Forward movement**

Concerning the forward movement, we also identify two distinct types: internal and external flashforward.

**Internal flashforward.** Internal flashforwards concern the events between the beginning and end of the given text. They relate either to the text produced by the pupil or to the end of the given text.

(16) Comment tout ça avait pu arriver? [...] en tout cas je vais le découvrir [...] (Extrait, Paul, CE2, E5).

(16) How could all this have happened? [...] in any case I’m going to find out (Extract, Paul, CE2, E5).

The bolded segment in (16) is an internal flashforward belonging to the text produced by the pupil. In this extract, the character refers to the investigation he is going to carry out to find out the reasons for Siam’s death.

(17) […] “si vous êtes d’accord nous ferons empailler cet animal (Siam l’éléphant), puis il sera exposé au public au muséum d’histoire naturelle” (Extrait, Nour, CE2, E10).

(17) […] “if you agree we will have this animal (Siam the elephant) stuffed, then it will be exhibited to the public at the Natural History Museum” (Extract, Nour, CE2, E10).

Unlike the previous example, the bolded segment refers to the end of the given text. The flashforwards at the end of the text are internal flashforwards which therefore deal with the theme of Siam’s stuffing, of his presence in the Museum or of the character’s arrival at the Museum.

**External flashforward.** External flashforwards concern events beyond the end of the text; they relate to events after the end of the text.

(18) […] Mais elle restera toujours dans ma tête et dans mon cœur […] (Extrait, Swan, CM2, E9).

(18) […] But she will always remain in my head and in my heart [...] (Extract, Swan, CM2, E9).
(19) [...] Je suis quand même triste, quand je pense à lui je me dis que ce sera toujours mon ami [...] (Extrait, Ilyes, CE2, E5).

(19) [...] I am still sad, when I think of him I tell myself that he will always be my friend (Extract, Ilyes, CE2, E5).

As the two examples above illustrate, most external flashforwards concern the fact that the character will never forget Siam. The writing task, which deals with the death of an animal with which the character has a strong bond, and the “I” narration are conducive to a strong emotional involvement that was very present in the texts produced.

**Synthesis.** The analysis of this movement in the pupils’ texts shows that internal flashforwards, which participate in the weaving of the text, are more numerous than external ones, whatever the class level.

The internal flashforwards of the CE2 pupils mainly concern their own text, whereas in CM1 and CM2 they mainly concern the end of the given text. Even if some third-grade pupils produce internal flashforwards of the end of the text, we note a great disparity between the different class levels. Indeed, older pupils (CM1 and CM2) use this movement more as it is a very effective strategy for making the connection with the end of the given text. It is used more and more as the level increases.

If we look more specifically at the management of the end of the text (visit to the Museum), we see that CE2 and CM1 have more difficulty than CM2 in producing a text in chronological succession which does not encroach on the end (cf. “Synthesis”). On the other hand, CM1s and CM2s use the internal flashforward strategy more in order to integrate it. Developmentally, CM1 pupils (aged 9-10) are at a turning point in writing a text with a given ending.

**Example of a combination of temporal movements: the pivot text**

Some texts have a temporal structure that corresponds to a particular distribution of backward (see “Backward movement”) and forward (see “Forward movement”) movements. This structure has been made visible through chronograms. These productions articulate a backward movement followed by a forward movement around a central axis. We have called these productions “pivotal texts”.
This axis can be that of chronological succession (e.g., 20) or that of a return to the initial situation (21):

(20) Le propriétaire du zoo m’a dit qu’on n’avait rien pu faire pour lui, cependant le propriétaire du zoo lui fit un cadeau: “Si vous êtes d’accord nous ferons empailler cet animal (Siam l’éléphant), puis il sera exposé au public au Muséum d’histoire naturelle” (Texte entier, Nour, CE2, E10).

(20) The owner of the zoo told me that nothing could be done for him, however, the owner of the zoo gave him a present: “If you agree we will have this animal (Siam the elephant) stuffed, and then it will be exhibited to the public at the Natural History Museum” (Full text, Nour, CE2, E10).

In text (20), we identify a backward movement and a forward movement articulated around a chronological succession. Let us detail this structure:

- a chronological succession: *Le propriétaire du zoo m’a dit (the owner of the zoo told me)*

- a backward movement: *on n’avait rien pu faire pour lui (nothing could be done for him)*

- a resumption of the chronological succession: *cependant le propriétaire du zoo lui fit un cadeau (however, the owner of the zoo gave him a gift)*

- a forward movement: “*Si vous êtes d’accord nous ferons empailler cet animal (Siam l’éléphant), puis il sera exposé au public au Muséum d’histoire naturelle*” (“If you agree, we will have this animal (Siam the elephant) stuffed, and then it will be exhibited to the public in the Natural History Museum”).

In (20), Nour writes her text as a continuation of the initial scene using a chronological succession movement. Then an external backward movement, introduced by a verb *a dit (told)*, underlines the fatality of the event. This is followed by a resumption of the narration which ends with a forward movement, allowing Nour to link up with the end of the given text.

triste... Mais il faut que je me remette de ça. Ça sera très dur. Mais au fond je ne me fais pas de souci pour lui il est au paradis (Texte entier, Loris, CM2, E7).

(21) I was so sad. I knew him since he was little! He was 2 years old when I knew him. Then he was 30 years old. I was so sad... But I have to get over this. It will be very hard. But deep down I’m not worried about him, he’s in heaven (Full text, Loris, CM2, E7).

In (21), we identify two movements (RA and ANT) articulated around a return to the initial situation. Let us detail this structure:

- continuation of the initial situation: J’étais tellement triste (I was so sad).

- backward movement: Je le connaissais depuis qu’il était petit! Il avait 2 ans quand je l’ai connu. (I knew him since he was little! He was 2 years old when I met him. Then he was 30 years old).

- back to the original situation: J’étais si triste... (I was so sad...)

- forward movement: Mais il faut que je me remette de ça. Ça sera très dur. (But I have to get over it. It will be very hard).

In (21), Loris inserts his text in the continuation of the initial scene without there being any real chronological succession since J’étais tellement triste (I was so sad) corresponds to the description of the state in which the character finds himself when he discovers his dead friend. This is followed by an external narrative backward movement: Je le connaissais depuis qu’il était petit! Il avait 2 ans quand je l’ai connu (I knew him since he was little! He was 2 years old when I knew him. He was then 30 years old), which builds the relationship between the two characters. This external flashback is followed by a return to the initial situation J’étais si triste... (I was so sad...) which opens, this time, on an external forward movement Mais il faut que je me remette de ça. Ça sera très dur. (But I have to get over this. It will be very hard.) The text ends with a comment from the narrator: Mais au fond je ne me fais pas de souci pour lui il est au paradis. (But deep down I’m not worried about him, he’s in heaven.)

Beyond the pivotal texts presented, there is a great heterogeneity of possible structures. Backward and forward movements, as diverse as they are, can also occur at any point in the text or even several times.
There is a real diversity of texts produced from the point of view of temporal organization.

Conclusion
The analysis of the temporal organization of the texts produced by pupils aged 8 to 11 reveals that all of them present at least one temporal movement. Chronological succession is the most frequently used movement, which is consistent with the fact that the text proposed to the pupils is a narrative.

If the writing instruction represents a constraint, however it allows for flashbacks and flashforwards. Indeed, more than three quarters of the texts present at least one other temporal movement (backward, forward, or both). The pupils inserted backward or forward movements in their texts, whatever the grade level concerned, with backward movements being more frequent than forward movements. The structure of the proposed text justifies a greater number of backward movements since the text begins at a moment of tension, whereas flashforward is certainly possible but not indispensable.

Our study also reveals an apparent uniformity in the composition of pupils’ texts from CE2 to CM2: the different temporal movements are already in the pipeline from CE2, even if they are in their infancy. But some differences appear according to the class level. In fact, in CM1 and CM2 the movements will develop each with their own specificity, giving the texts more thickness and coherence.

From a developmental point of view, we note a greater skill in taking into account the end of the given text as the level increases, with CM1 occupying a pivotal place in this mastery: they encounter the same difficulties as the CE2 in ensuring temporal coherence with the end of the text, but on the other hand they make more movements of anticipation of the end of the text than the CE2, approaching the strategies used by the CM2.

The analysis grid that we have developed seems to us to be a tool not for evaluating texts but for reading them better. Indeed, the grid allows us to identify, list and compare the different temporal movements produced by the pupils. The detailed study shows the diversity of strategies used by the pupils, more or less efficient, to insert these movements in
their text. We believe that teachers could use these writing tests to show pupils the variety of movements that can be inserted into a narrative, their relevance, and the different ways in which they are inserted. This research therefore constitutes a “contribution of knowledge to teach and not to be taught16” (Rondelli, 2010, p. 79).

References

16 In the source text: “[...] apport d’un savoir pour enseigner et non pas à enseigner.”


Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale de l’Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche (2020). *Programmes d’enseignement pour les cycles 2, 3 et 4.* [Curriculum for cycles 2, 3 and 4].


