University Literacies: French Students at a Disciplinary 'Threshold'?

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Abstract

The study reported here is based on an extensive questionnaire distributed to about 650 students at three French universities and one Belgian university in five disciplines. The main objective of the study was to describe the links between university writing and the disciplines by inventorying the kinds of university writing students do (academic and scientific/research-based writing) and identifying the thresholds they cross. The main result was that the pieces of writing considered as representative varied considerably according to the university discipline. We found both a pronounced disciplinary specificity with regard to the writing cited as being representative of their courses by the students, at degree level, and a clear dichotomy between the pieces of writing required at degree level and at master's level. From these two main results, it can be verified that the disciplines are frameworks for the students' perceptions of university writing practices. Our findings argue for the learning of writing at the university as an ongoing activity at liminal points, as students negotiate in between secondary/post-secondary, in between earlier and later years of the undergraduate cycle, in between that cycle and the master's cycle, in between disciplines, and in between internalized personal norms and norms (perceived) of faculty.

Introduction

Until recently in France, fairly little attention had been paid to studying university students' writing. The research about primary and secondary school writing has been rich and diverse, building from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives, didactic (Barré-De Miniac 2000, Delcambre 1997 and Reuter 1996), cognitive (Fayol 1985 and 1997), and linguistic (David and Plane 1996, Fabre 1990 and Grossmann, Paveau and Petit 2005). At the same time, the research about disciplinary knowledge, writing, and epistemology has included studies of how the same kind of writing done in different disciplines has different features and functions (Barré-De Miniac and Reuter 2006). Attention has also been paid to specific aspects of university writing: analysis of students' discourse about their university learning experiences and the role of writing in these experiences (Delcambre and Reuter 2002), analysis of students' texts (Boch, Laborde-Milaa and Reuter 2004), note-taking (Boch 1999), and source use and integration (Boch and Grossmann 2001) have been well-developed domains of inquiry, for example. Far less attention has been given to students' writing experiences as they enter disciplines.

This gap led to the government-funded project whose results we present here[1]. It aims mainly to inventory the types of writings students have to produce in different humanities disciplines at the five grades of university curriculum[2]. It has ended up pointing us to students' experiences of transition

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[1] ANR-06-APPR-019, *Written texts and writing at the university*, funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR).
[2] These will be detailed later in this paper.

and in-betweenness, thresholds and scaffolding in their writing, as they move from secondary to postsecondary, through post-secondary, and into tertiary education and its writing demands.

The objectives of university studies are, at least in France, to initiate students into the tools and foundations of a field, in other words to construct a disciplinary identity. In line with other researchers (Bazerman 1988 and Thaiss and Zawacki 2006), we start from the assumption that the disciplines are the framework in which writing practices and representations are elaborated and constructed. We also assume that each discipline has some specific requirements in terms of academic writing and research-based writing, and in terms of genres of discourse as well. We have thus focused on describing the discipline-specific dimensions of academic genres, as seen through students' representations. At what point do students encounter thresholds? How do they represent them? If we are to understand the thresholds students encounter and the scaffolding they might need, we must situate their practices and representations within specific disciplinary epistemologies.

The curriculum that interests us is the French public university system, which could be called the last bastion of a democratic vision of mass education. Access to this system is free; there are no entry exams except the Baccalauréat, which is also the last exam of secondary school, at which about 70% of students succeed. Even though public universities are now trying to establish links with the professional world, the studies remain quite general and non-specifically professional. Compared to the '*grandes écoles*' (elite post-secondary institutions), the state's financial investment in universities is lower. The student body is more heterogeneous, in terms of social classes, cultural uses and general formation. Teachers notice every day that many students have difficulties with academic writing skills. Since 2008 in France, there has been a massive political project whose aim is to increase the rate of success at university[3]; in fact – and it is rather shocking – more than 50% of the students fail their exams in the first year. One possible way to improve the situation is to help students to master academic writing.

The main objective of the study we report on here is to describe the links between university writing and the disciplines by inventorying the kinds of university writing students do (academic and scientific/research-based writing) and identifying the thresholds they cross[4]. What we call *academic writing* is all the writing the students do at university to succeed in their curriculum (writing for exams, for example). Thus, the real initiation or threshold into the advanced writing of a field occurs when students begin *research-based writing* at the end of undergraduate studies and the beginning of graduate work. Research-based writing is specifically defined as any academic writing that includes a research question and situates itself in the context of the discourse of others. In fact, to be exact, students are not yet researchers, nor experts in their disciplines; we think that they encounter a sort of research-based writing still influenced by the necessities and constraints accompanying their learner status. Thus, we suggest distinguishing *research-based writing* (writing done by experts in a field) from *doctoral writing*, which is what doctoral students produce during their university formation (Reuter 2004). But, as it is an initiation into scientific writing,[5] it is part of academic writing.

A Questionnaire as a Main Methodological Device

The ANR research project aims to describe the characteristics of academic writing at *different grades* of the university cycle in order to identify aspects that represent continuity and discontinuity between the different text genres required according to the level and/or the discipline. Our methodology is based on a questionnaire and interviews with students, and focus groups with faculty. The place we give to the students' perceptions of writing is due to the assumption that these perceptions are part of writing abilities (Delcambre and Reuter 2010).

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[3] The '*Réussite en Licence*' ('Succeed in Undergraduates') program proposed by Valérie Precresse, the French University and Research Minister.

[4] This was our first hypothesis, but the study led us to point out some non-linear transitions, presented further on.

[5] In French, the term 'scientific writing' refers to research-based writing whatever the disciplines (humanities, social sciences, and so on); it is not limited to hard sciences.

The questionnaire aims to gather the students' discourse on written texts and writing practices from the first year to the fifth year (the second year of a two-year master's), in *five disciplines* of the humanities (linguistics, literature, history, educational sciences and psychology[6]). We have chosen in particular to describe writing practices in disciplines that belong to the same family of disciplines. If we can highlight differences in very similar disciplines, it would sustain even more firmly the disciplinary epistemologies and their links with certain writing practices.

This questionnaire was distributed in three French state funded universities (and one in Belgium), in the five disciplines cited above. About 650 students participated, but in unequal proportions according to the disciplines and the grades, due to several factors, including the difficulties of gathering the responses during two successive periods of trouble in the French universities (due to very long students' strikes in 2007 and 2008, there was no teaching during several weeks, some universities were closed), and due to the reduced number of students at the master's levels. So we decided to make a random choice, in order to equalize the size of the different groups: we actually treated 457 responses (see Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix for the distribution of the students according to disciplines and grades). The questionnaire was administered during the lectures, anonymously completed, with no specific ethical approvals, as this is not required in France for written, anonymous questionnaires. We intended to statistically describe this population, whom we do not consider a sample of the French student population overall. We conducted essentially principal component analysis and factor analysis.[7]

Fifteen main questions[8] were asked, that can be summarized as follows (the precise formulations for the questions we are treating here will be quoted further on). First, students were asked to say what texts they produced at university and more precisely, to make a list of the written texts requested by their program, identifying the representative writing of their studies (at the level where they were when they completed the questionnaire). Our treatment of this data aims to identify links between writing, discipline and education level, establishing the writing most frequently cited or quoted prominently in each group.

We then studied the norms of the writing that are considered as representative of the discipline through different questions: we distinguished between standards that students want to respect and those that they suppose are implemented by teacher-scorers. We provided a list of 13 items (on knowledge content, organization of speech, language, the reformulation of the readings, the practices of citation, style, etc.) among which the students could select the five most important to them.

Third they were asked, as well, about ease (or difficulty): students had to identify the ease or difficulty of the genres of discourse with which they had problems or were comfortable. Then they were asked about the writing in which they encounter new problems (specifying the type of difficulty, ease and newness). As relevant, they had to list the support they felt they needed, support they encountered, and support they lacked.

In this paper, we will focus only on two main dimensions of the questionnaire,[9] the inventory of written texts and the norms, whose results are very significant to the thresholds' perspectives. The results of the three other groups of questions will be presented in forthcoming papers (Daunay and Lahanier-Reuter, forthcoming and Delcambre and Lahanier-Reuter, forthcoming). And we will finish with a particular analysis on the group of students who learn literature, which presents an interesting evolution.

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[6] The disciplines' classification is a very difficult enterprise. Not everyone would agree that psychology belongs to the humanities. But, in France, for example, a new nomenclature has been elaborated by the University and Research Board, where psychology belongs to the field named 'Human spirit, Language and Education' alongside linguistics and educational sciences (Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieure et de la Recherche , "Nomenclature_SHS", 2010).

[7] We want to acknowledge Dominique Lahanier-Reuter, our colleague in the Théodile-CIREL team, who worked with us on this study and made the statistical analysis.

[8] Some key questions gave rise to secondary ones.

[9] The other data (interviews with students and faculty) are still being analysed.

Are the disciplines or the grades the best variable to describe the students' discourse?

In the following text, we intend to expose some results about the students' responses to the first two groups of questions from the questionnaire we elaborated. Each result is presented first in terms of discipline and them in terms of years of study completed.

Do students identify representative writings of their discipline or of their grade?

One of the two first questions was:

> *Among the pieces of writing that you have to produce at university, which is the one that seems to you the most representative of your discipline of study or of the courses you are taking?*[10]

The main result was that the pieces of writing considered as representative varied considerably according to the university discipline. In fact, not only was this link significant, *but there is practically no piece of writing chosen 'in a wholesale manner' which was common to two disciplines*. Each discipline could be more or less reduced to one or two genres (genres as evidenced in the texts), *which are specific to that discipline*. Students in literature cited text commentaries, text analysis and essays (that is the French dissertation) and they were practically the only ones to do so, particularly with regard to the essay and with a very large consensus (see Fig. 1 in the Appendix). History students either cited work carried out in seminars or research work (it was mainly the case of the students in Brussels, see Fig. 2 in the Appendix) or did not reply (students in Lille, see Fig. 3 in the Appendix). Students in educational sciences overwhelmingly cited reading reports, master's theses (French *'mémoires'*) and course project work (see Fig. 4 in the Appendix). Linguistics students were more likely to cite internship reports, other reports, and surveys (see Fig. 5 in the Appendix). Finally, psychology students either did not respond or, when they did so, their responses were not in any significant pattern.

In most cases, each of these texts are new as compared to what students were expected to write in secondary school, and thus represent a kind of threshold, except in literature. But we will look specifically at this case later. The writing judged to be discipline-specific is generally longer, requires personal investment and thought, is linked either to research (even if this research is modest, as in the case of course project work – writing designed to initiate students into research), or to real-world, internship-type experiences. As teachers or researchers, we see the writing as the result of an individual construction, a 'confrontation' with the discipline through its objects, its methods, and its specific body of knowledge. For the students, perhaps, it is seen more as a threshold.

If we are questioning the link between these pieces of writing the students say they have to write and the year of study completed, we can see a clear opposition between undergraduates and graduate students (see Fig. 6):

> - the students at master's level seem more likely to cite projects such as coursework (first year of the master's) and writing dissertations or master's theses (second year of the master's).

> - the students at degree level are either hesitant (no reply) or abundantly cite, without any one being statistically significant, many pieces of disciplinary writing (essays in the first year, surveys in the second year, internship reports and syntheses in the third year).

The higher up in the curriculum, the more types of writing we find in common; early in the curriculum, there are few characteristic shared genres or representative types of writing. Thus, the non-responses (11%) and the responses that fell into no clear groups (23%) are primarily in the first two years of the undergraduate cycle. Early in the curriculum, for a third of the students, we note either vague responses or a great variety of types of writing. No emblematic type of writing surfaces until the master's level, at which point homogeneous emblematic types of writing surface.

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[10] In French universities, majors present many courses among which students have very few choices, and this occurs from the first to the later grades. So, this question refers to the disciplinary courses students encounter the year they are questioned.

We conclude, from this initial finding, both a pronounced disciplinary specificity with regard to the writing cited as being representative of their courses by the students at degree level, and a clear dichotomy between the pieces of writing required at degree level and at master's level: *the disciplinary specificities are more situated at the beginning of university (each discipline being liked to specific genres, in the students' discourse); at the master's level, the writings seem to be all the same, without disciplinary differences (always in the students' discourse). This might however be problematized by further inquiry in the next phase of the study, in particular from the faculty interviews.*

What norms do the students obey when writing this representative writing?

The second group of questions focuses on the standards the students pay attention to when they are producing pieces of writing seen as being representative of their particular discipline. We can highlight four response profiles (elaborated by principal component analysis (PCA):

- those who place the emphasis on knowledge and correctness of the answer in their writing of pieces of representative writing; that is to say those who see it as an opportunity to recite what they have learnt in class, to show what they have learnt.

- those who pay particular attention to bibliographical references and to text reformulation, who base their writing on academic books, authors…; those who show what they have read.

- those who aim to construct a structured, readable text; those who pay attention to the coherence of their writing.

- those who see their writing as a form of personal expression.

If we correlate these four categories of answers with the departments from which the students come (i.e. the discipline), we obtain the following result: the 'give a correct answer' profile is shared equally across the different disciplines. This is not the case for the three other profiles.

- Psychology students and those in educational sciences place much more importance on their reading (bibliographical references and reformulation of authors).

- Students in literature can be characterized by the importance they place, when writing their essays, on the personal expression (style, personal opinion).

- The students in linguistics say they pay attention to the clarity of discourse.

- We cannot say anything special about history students (either in Lille or Brussels); they are interested in giving the correct answer, as the others, but that is all.

We can see in these results a second example of the very strong influence of disciplines on students' representations. These norms can be seen as epistemological perceptions of university writing, or the translation, if one may say, of how the students understand the values and expectations of their teachers.

With respect to correlating with the number of years of study, the results produce the same difference as above, for the first question. The master's students say that they pay attention to their readings while they write their thesis. First year students say they are focusing on personal expression and the search for a correct response, and second/third year students, on the clarity of discourse. Thus, we can say there is a clear threshold between the third and fourth year, probably linked with the new demands of writing and research the students have to face.

From these two main results, we can verify that the disciplines are frameworks for the students' perceptions of university writing practices, as suggested by the main hypothesis for this study. The thresholds are really more marked during the curriculum, when they arrive at the master's levels, and face new text genres and new explicit norms about integration of readings in texts and writing with other authors.

The Case of Literature Students

Finally, we would like to present the case of literature students, an interesting one regarding the question of continuities along the curriculum. Only literature students name types of written texts that they were already producing in secondary school as being representative of their discipline: school essays or literary commentaries. These dissertations ('school essays' in the Anglo-Saxon tradition) and literary commentaries are characteristic of the *'baccalaureat'* exam (the exam that, in France, is equally considered the 'first university grade' and is sufficient for entering the university). Our analysis of writing students describe as 'difficult' or 'easy', as well as the difficulties or ease that students detailed in their responses, shows that, while some students say the school essay is difficult, most proclaim it to be easy. The continuity in type of writing, from secondary to post-secondary, seems to make the transition easier.

In contrast, we may say that all the students in other disciplines discover new kinds of writing related to new disciplines, as they enter the university. This can be linked with the fact that students in undergraduate cycles claim to write very different kinds of texts, depending on their disciplines. The newness of the writing might produce quite a bit of variety and fragmentation in their responses. This newness can be considered a rupture, a source of difficulty or a threshold. If we come back for a moment to the case of students in literature, however, we see a further interesting evolution. School essays are described as easy by students in their second year but much less so in their third year. We can interpret this result as a sign of delayed awareness of new expectations in the production of a kind of writing they thought they knew well and have practiced for years, but that now becomes more complex. Perhaps it takes students three years to figure out this discontinuity in faculty requirements and expectations.

The Students' Pronouncements about Evaluation Criteria

In the same way, when we analyze students' pronouncements about the evaluation criteria and norms they believe faculty use to consider their writing, the analysis of their responses year by year shows an interesting evolution (an issue we will not explore discipline by discipline here): in the second and third years of undergraduate studies, many students appear to have trouble determining these norms (there are many answers left blank; there may be other reasons but one possibility is trouble determing norms); the only statistically significant criteria that emerges is 'the quality of citations'. In the fourth year (first year of a two-year master's), the importance of 'articulations' (that is, the focalization on coherence) and 'clarity' is statistically significant, but mostly a large number of personal criteria appear, other than those proposed in the questionnaire (whose options still need to be hierarchized). In the fifth year, the criteria of 'clarity', 'formulation of a personal stance', 'reformulation of texts read', and 'discussion of the authors in the syllabus or program' appear. Students in this year stand out in their use of quite specific criteria. They are essentially the only ones naming these criteria, some of which are directly linked to certain elements specific to advanced theoretical writing (reformulation and discussion).

From the beginning of undergraduate studies to the end of master's studies, the evaluative criteria attributed by students to faculty are remarkably diverse. We see this essentially in the fifth year: already in the fourth year students name, in a statistically significant number, more numerous and more different criteria; this process is amplified in the fifth year. We can thus see in these results an evolution of the students' conception of university writing, as much in its specific aspects as in the complexity of the operations it demands. The curricular thresholds are thus almost even more significant than the disciplinary differences: it seems that all along the curriculum, students have to learn new ways of writing, closer and closer to research-based writing.

Conclusion

The intersections and divergences of these representations are the illuminating points, leading us to question where the thresholds, the in-betweens, are for students in France who negotiate university literacies, and how a specific discipline might act as both threshold and scaffold. Our findings argue for the learning of writing at the university as an ongoing activity. Returning to the idea of liminality

framing all of the texts in our group, we see several in-between spaces students must negotiate: in between secondary/post-secondary, in between earlier and later years of the undergraduate cycle, in between that cycle and the master's cycle, in between disciplines, and in between internalized personal norms and norms (perceived) of faculty. What the study we report on here supports, is a version of these in-betweens that is clearly not as linear as the general perception of transitions leads us to believe, with its embedded notion that students simply rise through the levels, steadily growing as writers.

From secondary school, we have the case of literature: student work in the French university discipline of literature is so linked to secondary work in its types and forms that students experience ease and familiarity at first. From early-late undergraduate studies: again, in the case of literature, these students come to realize that what appeared to be the same type and form carries, in fact, quite different expectations and levels of engagement and thought. From undergraduate to master's work, we see the case of the first year master's students with fragmentation that then coalesces in the second year. Here, we see that upper-level students are thrown back into newness and work their way towards coherence, scaffolded by the increasing attention to their research and their progress on the master's thesis (*'mémoire'*). In between the norms of students and faculty, the students appear to renegotiate their sense of norms and priorities, maintaining their own priorities even as they recognize what might be the professor's. This complicates the linear model as well. Finally, for the in-between of disciplines, our students must move across these disciplines in their undergraduate studies, and each one represents a point of transition, raising a question of generic or specific understandings of writing relevant to our shared understanding of students' progress.

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Appendix

Table 1: The distribution of the students according to the disciplines

Disciplines	Nb. cit.	Freq.
History (Belgique)	90	19.7%
History (France)	43	9.4%
Literature	79	17.3%
Psychology	80	17.5%
Educational Sciences	77	16.8%
Linguistics	88	19.3%
TOTAL OBS.	457	100%

Table 2: The distribution of the students according to the grades

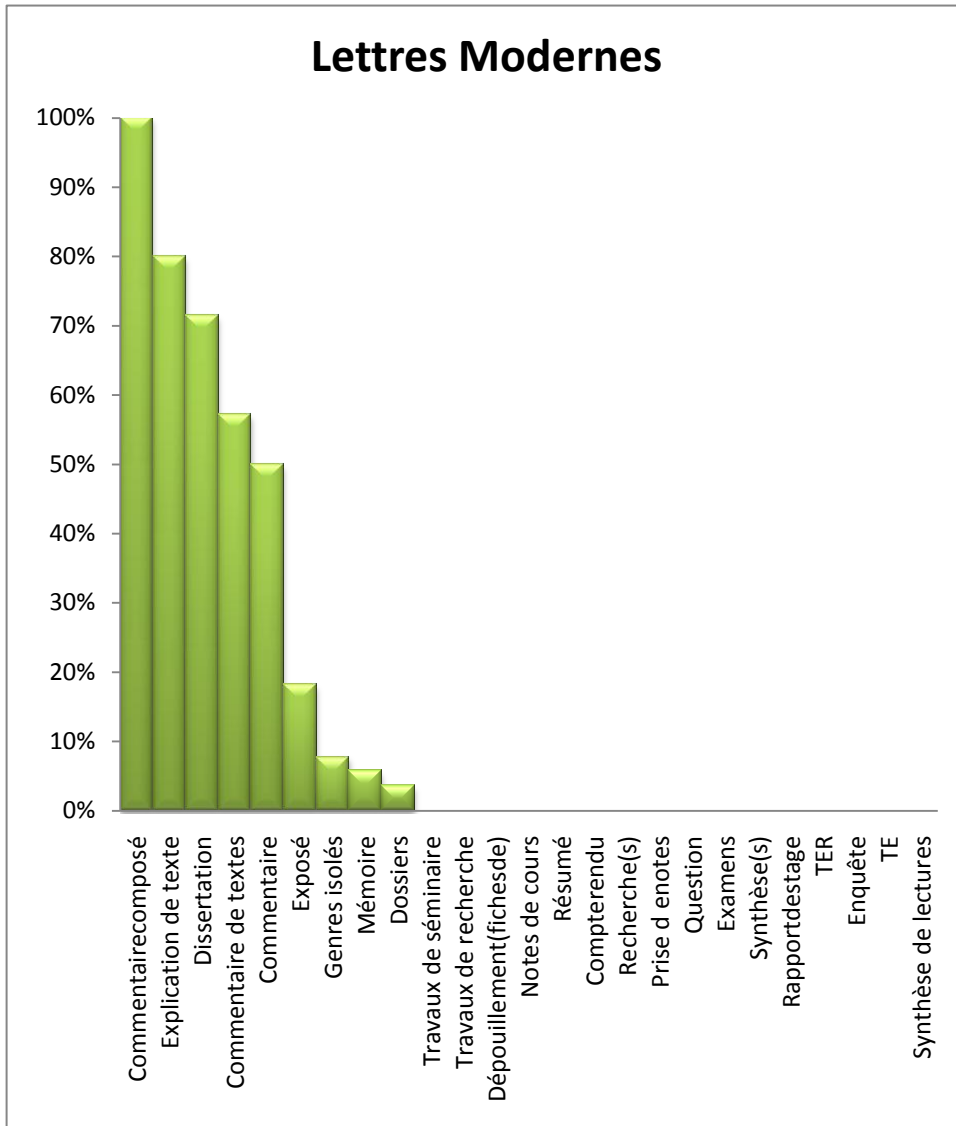| Grades	Nb. cit.	Fréq.
Licence 1	122	26.7%
Licence 2	82	17.9%
Licence 3	162	35.4%
Master 1	51	11.2%
Master 2	40	8.8%
TOTAL OBS.	457	100%

Lettres Modernes

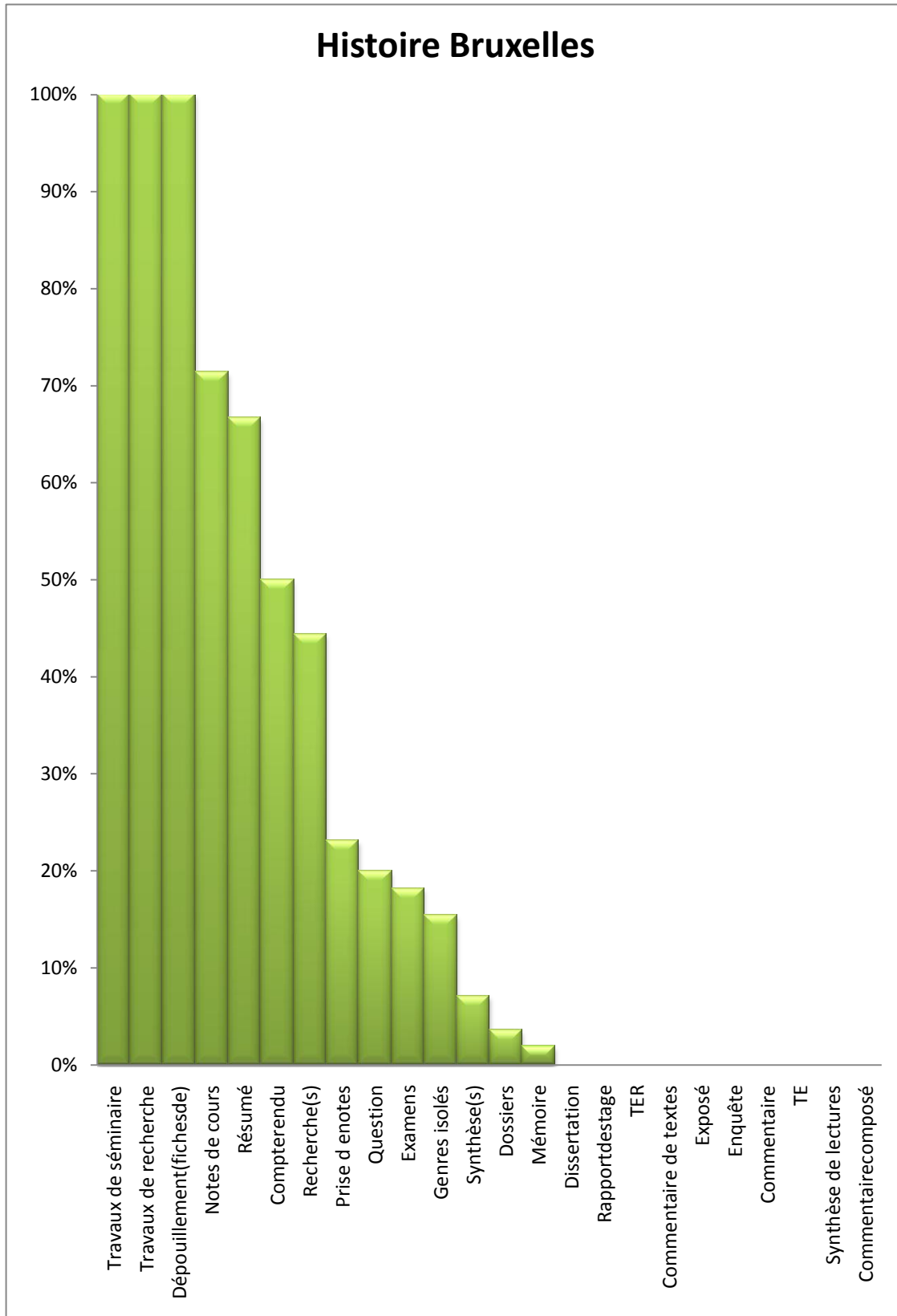Figure 1: The representative written texts for the literature students

Figure 2: The representative written texts for the history students in Brussels
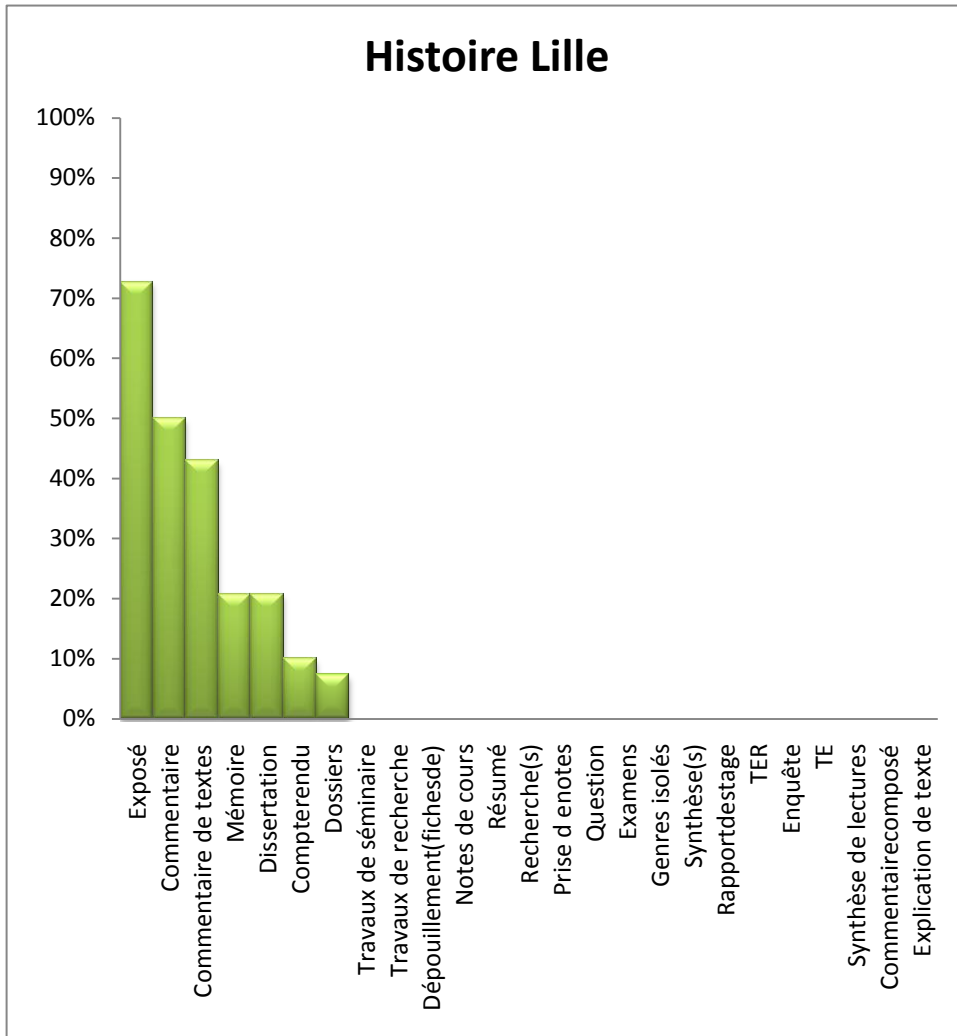
Histoire Lille

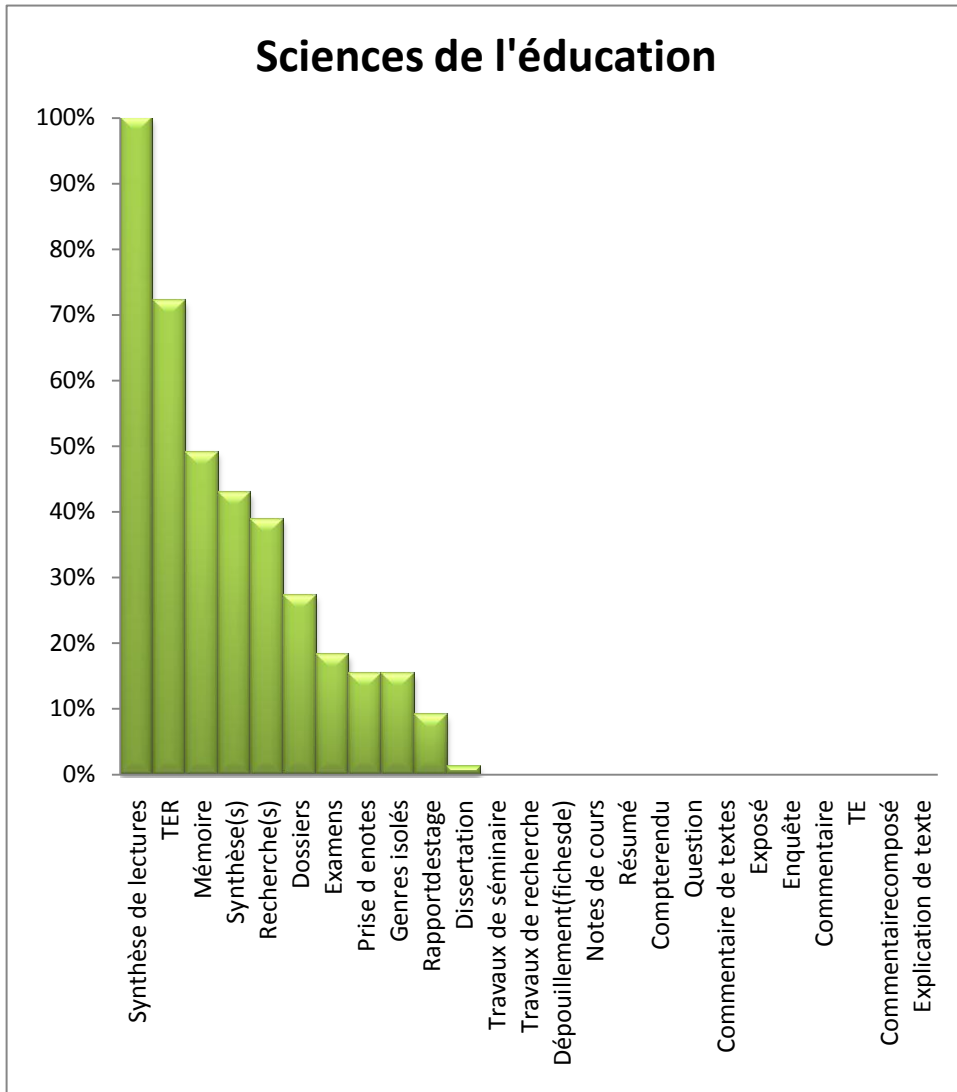Figure 3: The representative written texts for the history students in Lille

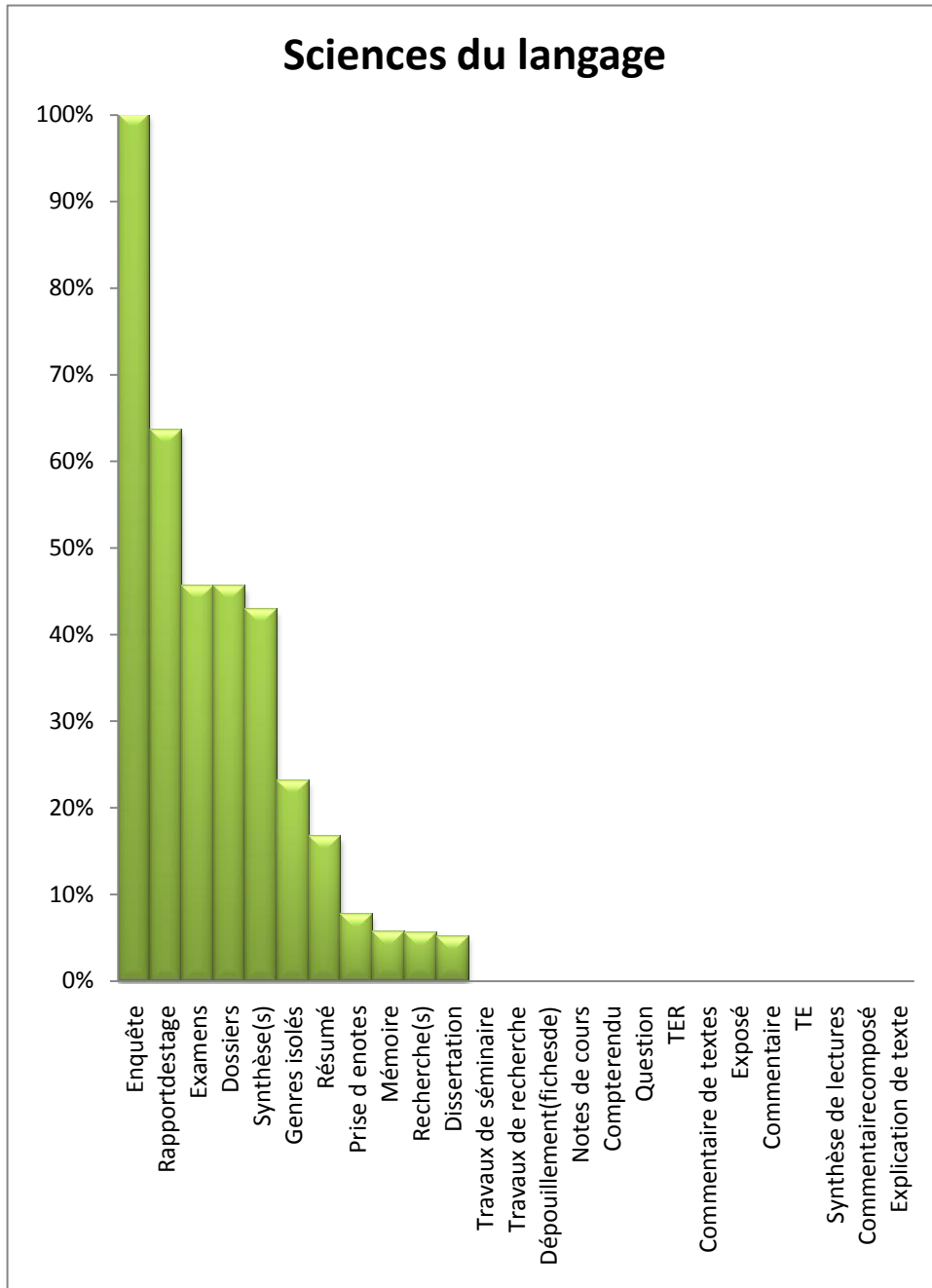Figure 4: The representative written texts for the educational sciences students

Figure 5: The representative written texts for the linguistics students

Axe 2 (18.40%)

Travaux d'études

Question
Synthèse de lectures
Synthèse(s)

L3
Exposé
Rapport de stage

Travaux de séminaire
Commentaire

Commentaire composé
M2
Mémoire

Axe 1 (57.31%)
Dissertation
Dossiers

Commentaire de textes
M1
Travaux d'études et
de recherches

L1
Recherche(s)

Prise de notes

L2

Explication de texte
Notes de cours

Résumé

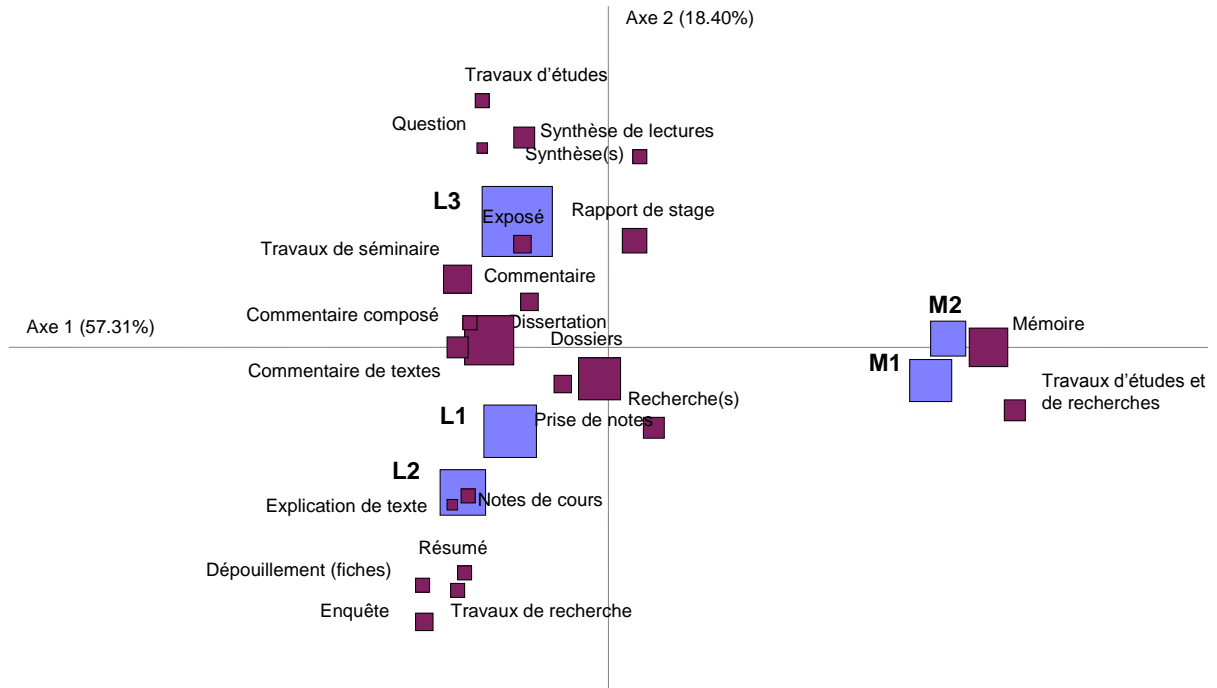Dépouillement (fiches)

Enquête
Travaux de recherche

Figure 6: Undergraduates (L1, L2, L3) and master's students (M1, M2)