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Expressing Irrealis in L2 French: A Preliminary Study of the Conditional and Tense-Concordancing in L2 Acquisition

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Author

Howard, Martin

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- (2) *S'il fait beau, je te rendrai visite*
 If it make-PRES nice, I you render-FUT visit

la semaine prochaine

the week next

'If the weather is nice, I'll visit you next week'

- (3) *Si je pouvais faire des économies, j'irais en vacances en Australie*
 If I could-IMP make some savings, I go-COND on holidays in Australia
 'if I could save some money, I would go on holiday to Australia'

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While an extensive study of the expression of modality is beyond the scope of this paper, our focus specifically lies in the use of the conditional and tense-concordancing in irrealis contexts. The study presented here therefore attempts to illuminate the variation underlying the acquisition and use of the conditional, while also exploring the related issue of tense-concordancing in complex clauses. Specific research questions concern:

- To what extent does the L2 learner use the conditional, and when this form is not used, what other morphological forms are used in its place?
- What are the lexical characteristics underlying use of the conditional? For example, is this form used with a wide range of lexical verbs, or is its use lexically-constrained to formulaic utterances?
- Apart from considering use of the conditional from formal and lexical perspectives, its functional characteristics are also of interest. For example, as we will outline below, apart from its use in conditional clauses, the conditional form can also be used independently to express various semantic values such as a wish, an opinion, a possibility, or the imaginary. To what extent does the L2 learner use this form in the expression of such meanings?
- In the case of the expression of conditionality in complex clauses, how does the L2 learner cope with the varying tense-concordancing difficulties that such clauses pose? For example, are certain types of clauses easier than others as a function of the degree of modality expressed? That is to say, some conditions are more hypothetical than others, requiring different morphological markers across the main and embedded clauses which constitute the complex clause. How does the L2 learner use verb morphology to distinguish between such conditions?
- Apart from the simple conditional, a further question regarding the use of this form and how it relates to the conditional anterior form surfaces. This leads to the issue of how the L2 learner deals with tense

concordancing in such past conditional clauses. For example, such clauses require use of two complex morphological forms, namely the conditional anterior and the *plus-que-parfait*, such that a further question arises as to the characteristics of use of the latter form compared to its use as an aspectuo-temporal marker of anteriority.

Underlying these specific research questions are two general issues relating to the morphological development of the L2 learner. The first concerns the impact of prescriptive norms on such development. For example, in the case of the expression of conditionality in L2 French, prescriptive norms vary across complex clauses depending on the type of condition expressed. Given that our learners have been extensively exposed to such norms through their classroom instruction, an underlying question in our study is concerned with the extent to which such norms for the expression of conditionality manifest themselves in our learners' speech production in real time.

As opposed to such prescriptive norms which our learners have been exposed to in the foreign language classroom, a second general issue concerns the impact of naturalistic exposure in the target language community on our instructed learners' acquisition of the conditional. In particular, our study aims to illuminate how naturalistic exposure may be more or less a facilitative factor compared to regular classroom instruction in the foreign language classroom.

Taken together, we examine such issues in the case of the 'advanced L2 learner,' reflecting previous findings in the literature that demonstrate that the conditional is acquired late (see below). While the issue of the role of prescriptive norms has not been widely investigated in relation to the advanced learner, the role of naturalistic exposure has received a lot of attention in the literature on Study Abroad. Generally, findings point to the minimal impact of such exposure on the learner's grammatical development compared to regular classroom instruction, in contrast with more increased gains in areas such as the learner's lexical and socio-linguistic competence. For discussion, see, for example, Freed (1995).

We focus on learners situated at various stages within the 'advanced learner variety' in the sense of Bartning (1997; 2009). That is to say, our learners demonstrated the characteristics of adaptive grammaticalisation whereby their learning was characterised less by the emergence of new morpho-syntactic forms in their learner variety than by their discovery and subsequent fine-tuning of further functional values which could be expressed in the target language, French. In contrast, given that the target language morphology had emerged in their language variety, the learners had already surpassed the stage of creative grammaticalisation. This refers to the gradual emergence of the target language morpho-syntax in less advanced learner varieties—for discussion of such issues, see Giacalone Ramat (1992), Housen (1998), Noyau (1997).

Before reviewing previous L2 studies on the topic, we will first present in the following a short overview of the conditional in target language French.

**THE EXPRESSION OF CONDITIONALITY IN TARGET LANGUAGE
FRENCH**

Prescriptively, tense-concordancing in conditional contexts reflects the following rules for verb inflection across the protasis and apodosis in target language French:

- Si* + Present + Present
- Si* + Present + Inflected Future
- Si* + *Imparfait* + Conditional

Differences in such morphological usage are seen to reflect differences in the degree to which the hypothesis invoked in the apodosis holds true, with the present being used to mark the protasis when a general truth is believed to be expressed, as in (4).

- (4) *Si vous échouez à l'examen* *une deuxième fois,*
If you fail-PRES at the exam a second time,
- vous n'avez pas le droit* *de le repasser* *une troisième fois*
you NEG have-PRES NEG the right to it resit a third time
'If you fail the exam a second time, you don't have the right to sit it a third time'

In contrast, the inflected future is prescribed when the hypothesis is held to be more likely to be enacted, as in (5), than in the case of a hypothesis which is less likely to be realised when the conditional is prescribed, as in (6).

- (5) *Si vous m'appellez* *à l'avance,* *je viendrai*
If you me call-PRES at the advance, I come-INFL FUT
- vous rencontrer* *à la gare SNCF*
you meet at the station SNCF
'If you call me in advance, I will come to meet you at the railway station'
- (6) *Si vous achetiez une voiture,* *je ne devrais pas*
If you buy-IMP a car, I NEG have to-COND NEG
- vous rencontrer* *à la gare SNCF* *chaque fois*
you meet at the station SNCF each time
'If you bought a car, I wouldn't have to meet you at the railway station every time'

Such use of the future and conditional forms contrasts with their past forms, namely the future and conditional anterior which are also subject to similar tense-concordancing rules, as exemplified in (7) and (8):

- (7) *Si tu reviens dans une heure, j'aurai fini mon travail*
 If you return-PRES in one hour, I AUX finish-CA my work
 'If you come back in an hour, I will have finished my work'
 'si' + present + future anterior

- (8) *Si j'étais allé en Australie pour les vacances,*
 If I AUX go-PQP to Australia for the holidays,

je ne serais pas revenu
 I NEG AUX NEG return-CA
 'If I had gone to Australia for the holidays, I wouldn't have come back'
 'si' + pluperfect + conditional anterior

Apart from its usage to mark hypotheticality in such complex clauses, the conditional is also observed in simple clauses, where the condition is in some way implicitly understood in context. Riegel, Pellat, and Rioul (1999) note such uses in the case of the expression of a request (9) or an opinion (10), a possibility (11) or an imaginary thought (12).

- (9) *Je voudrais du pain*
 I want-COND some bread
 'I would like some bread'

- (10) *Je dirais 'aucune chance'*
 I say-COND no chance
 'I would think there's no chance'

- (11) *Je cherche un mari qui serait riche*
 I look a husband who be-COND rich
 'I'm looking for a husband who would be rich'

- (12) *Je voyagerais partout dans le monde*
 I travel-COND everywhere in the world
 'I would travel all over the world'

Apart from these modal uses, prescriptive grammar also points out that the conditional can also assume a temporal value in order to situate an event in the future in relation to the past, as exemplified in (13).

- (13) *Jean espérait que sa voiture marcherait le lendemain matin*
 Jean hope-IMP that his car work-COND the tomorrow morning
 ‘Jean was hoping that his car would work the following morning’

In contrast to such prescriptive norms, real language usage has been observed to give rise to considerable variation, whereby the morphological forms are seen to alternate with each other. For example, Robert, cited by Riegel *et al.* (1999) indicates that the conditional co-occurs with ‘si’ in popular and familiar usage, giving rise to such examples like (14):

- (14) *Si j’aurais su, j’aurais pas venu*
 If I AUX know-COND ANTER, I AUX NEG come-COND ANTER
 ‘If I had known, I wouldn’t have come’
 (Y. Robert, cited in Riegel *et al.*, 1999, p. 321)

Similarly, in her study of spoken French in Canada’s Ottawa-Hull region, Poplack (2001) reports frequent use of the conditional and other forms in both dependent and independent clauses where neat tense-concordancing is not in evidence to the extent that prescriptive norms would have us believe. This gives rise to prescriptively erroneous forms as in (15) which is reproduced with the original emphasis.

- (15) Si mon petit *allait* (IMP) à l’école là, s’il *serait* (COND) à l’école puis qu’il *reviendrait* (COND) puis qu’il *dirait* (COND) “un professeur m’a tapé dans face là”, il *aurait* affaire à moi.
 ‘If my kid *went* to school, if he *would be* at school, and he *would come back*, and he *would say*, “a teacher slapped me across the face,” he’d *have* to deal with me.’
 (Poplack, 2001, p. 410)

Indeed, Poplack reports that it is only in ‘si’-clauses expressing a counterfactual statement that the imperfect is found to be preferred, whereas the conditional tends to occur in ‘si’-clauses where the action has a greater likelihood of occurrence. While Poplack’s study clearly demonstrates the discrepancy between prescriptive norms and the variation at the heart of their usage in descriptive studies, it is regrettable that other descriptive studies, in particular of metropolitan French, are less available.

In the case of the L2 learner, Poplack’s study points to the challenge that tense-concordancing poses in precisely the terms of the discrepancy outlined: the instructed L2 learner in particular is exposed to prescriptive norms that may not readily manifest themselves in real language usage. Regrettably, studies of such an issue are not available. Consequently, this current study aims to redress the issue by presenting quantitative findings on how the L2 learner deals with

tense-concordancing in the irrealis domain. Before presenting our study, we will however first present previous findings on the acquisition of the conditional form by the L2 learner.

THE CONDITIONAL AND THE L2 LEARNER

In general, previous studies have suggested that the conditional is acquired late, such that quantitative studies may require quite advanced learners to produce the morphological marking conditions in the apodosis, as well as to contrast such markings with that occurring in the protasis. For example, in their study of Canadian immersion learners, Swain and Lapkin (1990) indicate that the conditional is avoided as a pragmatic marker in expressions of politeness due to its structural complexity. Similarly, Bartning (1997) suggests the form constitutes a ‘fragile zone’ where development remains to be made within the advanced learner variety. In her later overview of the advanced learner variety, Bartning (2009, p. 17), based on Bartning and Schlyter (2004), suggests that the conditional develops from a form that emerges during the initial ‘advanced low stage’ of the advanced learner variety to a form that “becomes more productive” during the ‘advanced middle stage’ which is characterised by “the development of inflectional morphology that becomes functional.” Such an observation is borne out in other quantitative studies such as Kihlstedt (1998) and Labeau (2005). Studies of other L2s such as Italian have also noted the late acquisition of the equivalent target language form—for example, in her longitudinal study of the acquisition of tense-modality-aspect, Giacalone Ramat (1992) situates it as the quasi-penultimate marker to emerge in the acquisition order she presents for her naturalistic learners in the Pavia Project.

With regard to the related morphological forms used for the marking of modality, namely the future and the subjunctive, studies are likewise few. For example, a similar remark can be made about the subjunctive which has been observed by the same researchers to be minimally used (see Bartning, 1997; Kihlstedt, 1998; Labeau, 2005), such that the specificity of its acquisition and use remains unclear (but see Howard, 2008). In the case of its use in other L2s, Giacalone Ramat (1992) similarly places it last in her acquisition order for L2 Italian, while the equivalent form in L2 Spanish has also been found to be an area of considerable difficulty for the L2 learner (see Collentine, 1995; Terrell *et al.*, 1987). In the case of the future, although this form has been the subject of investigation in relation to the expression of futurity from an otherwise different perspective, it has not been investigated in relation to the expression of irrealis. In other words, its variable use to mark futurity in alternation with other future forms, such as the simple present and the periphrastic form ‘aller’ + infinitive, has been investigated by Nadasdi, Mougeon and Rehner (2003) as a feature of Canadian immersion learners’ sociolinguistic competence. However, these findings suggest that the learners approach but do not yet approximate native speaker variation patterns. Bardovi-Harlig (2002; 2004a; 2004b) and Wiberg (2002) offer alternative accounts from the perspective

of the learner's grammatical development in the case of L2 English and L2 Italian respectively.

While such forms are, by all accounts, acquired late, with otherwise few studies of the expression of modality in advanced learners in general, this more general area of modality has, however, given rise to a number of studies of less advanced learners. For example, much as in the case of the acquisition of tense and aspect in the early stages, studies have found much reliance on pragmatic and lexical devices such as the use of discursive indicators, situational context, and reliance on the interlocutor's strategies of inference. In terms of more explicit markers of modality, Giacalone Ramat (1992) shows that verbs of belief such as 'think' and 'know' along with modal adverbs are also used in less advanced L2 Italian. More advanced learner varieties demonstrate greater use of actual modal verbs, as well as "a wider range of use of modal adverbials, [...]. In addition to *pensare* and *credere*, an array of lexical means to express the speaker's assessment develop" (p. 315).¹ In a study of L2 German, Dittmar and Terborg (1991) offer findings along the same lines. This echoes Giacalone Ramat's conclusion: "as for the earlier emergence of means for encoding deontic modality with respect to epistemic modality, our data agree with the data of Dittmar and Terborg" (p. 313). Giacalone Ramat further explains that "*epistemic modality*, which describes matters of knowledge, belief, or opinion rather than fact" (original emphasis) contrasts with the deontic modality underlying volition expressing "a kind of deontic necessity where the source of modality is the subject itself" (p. 308).

Although the latter studies of L2 Italian and German offer a range of insights into the expression of modality in general, and the former studies in particular illuminate the irrealis domain and futurity in the temporal domain, there remains much work to be done in the case of L2 French and the advanced learner. In this regard, we present in the following a study we undertook in relation to the acquisition and use of the conditional which constitutes one morphological means of marking irrealis in target language French. As we outlined above, we are particularly concerned with issues of the formal, lexical and functional characteristics underlying the marking of conditionality in the advanced learner variety, while also focusing on the problem of tense-concordancing in conditional clauses.

PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY

Participants

The study is based on an analysis of spoken data elicited from 18 Irish Anglophone learners of French, aged between 20-22 years. At the time of the study, they had been learning French for 7-8 years, including 5 years during their secondary schooling and 2-3 years at university, where they were specialising in French and one other subject as part of their degree programme. Their classroom instruction at secondary school had been based on a communicative approach, as prescribed in the Irish Modern Languages Curriculum. That instruction involved

3-4 weekly classes, giving a weekly total of 2-3 hours' formal contact with the language from September to May. While the approach was prescriptively communicative in nature, the learners reported that not all activities had been conducted in French. These activities involved reading or writing activities which constituted a large component of the final exam towards which the students had been working. However, their spoken activities were aimed at their oral exams where they were expected to speak about a range of personal topics such as their family, pastimes, holidays, as well as some more topical issues such as employment, politics and the environment.

In the case of their university studies in French, the learners were similarly exposed to a highly communicative method, whereby all their classes were taught through French. These included two weekly lectures on French literature and culture for which they were required to read extensively in French. The learners were, however, also exposed to explicit grammar instruction through formal written classes involving grammar, translation and other writing activities, and also had considerable exposure to the written language through wide-ranging journalistic and literary texts. Such written classes were complemented by a weekly oral class conducted by a native speaker on topics relating to France and the francophone world.

Apart from their many years of classroom instruction, some of the learners had also spent an academic year at a university in France as part of an inter-university exchange programme where they had a choice of a range of host universities in France. During that time, they lived in the university halls of residence, and followed an agreed programme of study which involved the same literary and cultural courses as their native speaker counterparts. They did not receive any formal language instruction while in France. The study therefore allows a comparison between our purely instructed learners and our study abroad learners. For the purpose of discussion, these two groups will be labelled Group 1 and Group 2 respectively. A further comparison is also possible with a third group of learners, henceforth known as Group 3, who had completed a further year of study compared to those in group 1 who had completed just two. In making such a comparison, as we alluded to earlier, we specifically aim to illuminate an underlying issue in our study as a whole, namely that of the relative impact of naturalistic exposure as opposed to classroom instruction on the advanced learner's development in the expression of conditionality.

Method

Data for the study were elicited following traditional variationist sociolinguistic methods proposed by Labov (1984), namely, the sociolinguistic interview which aims to ensure the elicitation of natural, spontaneous language. The interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, were conducted by the researcher who demonstrated near-native competence in French. The conversational modules proposed for the sociolinguistic interview were suitably adapted to match the

interests of the learner-informants, and covered both formal and informal topics such as university studies, career, society issues, and pastimes and holidays, as well as Labov's famous 'Danger of death' and 'Premonitions' modules. For example, following Labov, we asked the informants to recount incidents when they had felt that their lives were in danger. Following their elicitation, the data were transcribed into standard orthography following the transcription conventions proposed for French by Blanche-Benveniste and Jeanjean (1987).

The extensive nature of the data allows for the study of a wide range of linguistic features. For example, the data have previously been the subject of a wide range of studies on the acquisition of temporality, number and person, as well as on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation.² Thus, although they were not collected with the aim of eliciting a specific speech feature, the range of conversational topics in the sociolinguistic interview makes the data extremely robust for the study of multiple speech features, including the expression of conditionality. For example, such conditional contexts arose specifically in the case of subject matter dealing with hypothetical situations, while also occurring spontaneously in other cases, giving rise to a significant number of tokens which were used in the study. A further noteworthy point concerns the fact that the tokens occurred within spontaneous spoken discourse, when the learners' attention was in no way directed to the nature of the study, giving a very 'untainted' picture of the characteristics of their expression of conditionality. In contrast, although more direct elicitation tests might make it easier to elicit certain complex structures which are not frequent in spontaneous discourse, the purpose of this study was very much to capture their usage in such spontaneous L2 discourse.

For the purposes of the study, all tokens of conditional clauses involving '*si*' were extracted from the data. We did not find any other markers of conditional clauses, such as '*au cas où*' (in the case that), in the data. We also extracted those tokens which constituted a reply to a conditional question posed by the interviewer. Since the conditional was variably used by the learners in alternation with other morphological forms, we also consider those other forms which occur in its place as a means of providing a fuller picture of the learners' expression of conditionality. For example, we may find that a particular marker tends to occur in its place, and that this is true of all our learner-participants, pointing to a certain systematicity underlying their L2 usage. Since the conditional is not used categorically by the learners, we could not solely rely on the presence of the conditional as a reliable indicator of the expression of conditionality but also took into account various contextual clues. Moreover, given that the morphological form of the conditional is often homophonous with the inflected future form, with the exception of first and second person plural contexts, we also had to ensure that the tokens were unambiguously not used for future time reference.³

To address the research questions which we outlined earlier concerning the learners' formal, lexical, and functional development, as well as on tense-concordancing issues in the expression of conditionality, the 215 tokens which

formed the focus of the study were subsequently coded for morphological form in both the dependent and independent clause, as well as the actual lexical verb concerned and its morphological (ir)regularity.

RESULTS

Level of Use of the Conditional

Notwithstanding the frequent use of the conditional, we found considerable variation across the learners in terms of its level of use, as indicated in Table 1 which presents the level of use of the conditional as a percentage in relation to all other forms produced in conditional contexts in the data for each learner.

Table 1. Realisation of the Conditional

Group 1			Group 2			Group 3		
Learner	n	%	Learner	n	%	Learner	n	%
1	12	92	7	1	20	13	10	91
2	11	61	8	18	90	14	5	83
3	3	60	9	1	50	15	13	65
4	2	50	10	6	56	16	23	77
5	0	0	11	9	82	17	23	76
6	4	66	12	3	100	18	7	54
Total	32	55	Total	38	66	Total	81	74

A first point to emerge from this table concerns the higher use on average of the conditional by the study abroad learners in Group 2 compared to Group 1, albeit not to the same extent as in the case of the instructed learners in Group 3 who, in turn, demonstrate higher average levels of use. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the variation that arises both within and across the groups, use of the conditional emerges as highly frequent across the learners, irrespective of their level of proficiency. For example, even in the case of the learners in group 1, we find considerable realisation of this form, with the exception of one single learner who did not realise the form at all.

Lexical Characteristics Underlying Use of the Conditional

While differences between the groups are less obvious from a formal perspective, the more productive use of the conditional by Groups 2 and 3 is nonetheless further observed insofar that the learners in these groups extended this form to a greater range of lexical verbs than their counterparts in Group 1, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Lexical Verbs Used in the Conditional*

Group 1		Group 2		Group 3	
Regular	Irregular	Regular	Irregular	Regular	Irregular
acheter (x2) 'to buy'	avoir (x2) 'to have'	acheter (x3) 'to buy'	Aller 'to go'	acheter 'to buy'	avoir (x5) 'to have'
aimer 'to like'	être (x2) 'to be'	aimer (x7) 'to like'	avoir (x5) 'to have'	aimer (x8) 'to like'	dire (x3) 'to say'
donner 'to give'	vouloir (x15) 'to want'	améliorer 'to improve'	devoir 'to have to'	changer 'to change'	être (x16) 'to be'
gagner 'to win'		donner 'to give'	dire (x2) 'to say'	continuer 'to continue'	faire (x6) 'to do/make'
investir 'to invest'		préférer 'to prefer'	être (x3) 'to be'	employer 'to employ'	pouvoir (x8) 'to be able'
rester 'to stay'		remarquer 'to remark'	Faire 'to do/make'	enseigner 'to teach'	vouloir (x13) 'to want'
travailler 'to work'			mettre 'to put'	essayer 'to try'	
			pouvoir (x2) 'to be able'	étudier 'to study'	
			vouloir (x6) 'to want'	fermer 'to close'	
				gagner 'to win'	
				marcher 'to walk'	
				préférer 'to prefer'	
				trouver 'to find'	
				voyager 'to travel'	

* Unless otherwise indicated, each verb is used just once.

In all, Group 2 applied the conditional to 15 different lexical verbs, while Group 3 did so with 20 lexical verbs, compared to just 10 in group 1.⁴ In particular, the learners in the latter group applied the conditional to a smaller range of verbs, notably 'être' (to be), 'vouloir' (to want), and 'avoir' (to have), although other regular verbs were in evidence among one learner in particular. In the case of Groups 2 and 3, we do not find any differences between the marking of regular and irregular verbs which might have suggested that such regular or irregular morphology poses differential levels of difficulty. In considering whether the learners' use of the conditional was formulaic with a limited number of lexical verbs, as opposed to reflecting more productive usage with a wide range of verbs, Figure 1 also indicates the frequency of the lexical verbs at which the learners applied conditional morphology. In this regard, we note that 'vouloir' is highly frequent across the groups, although use of the conditional with 'être' surpasses 'vouloir' in Group 3. Such a finding might suggest that the learners' use of the conditional is highly formulaic, dependent on a lexicalised chunk such as 'je voudrais' (I would like). Although this is in some regard true of the learners in Group 1, it is much

less the case, however, of the other groups who applied the conditional to a wide range of lexical verbs other than ‘vouloir’, suggesting more productive use of this form with both regular and irregular verb stems. Indeed, although some of these are frequent verbs in the target language, French, others are not. Given such a finding, we cannot therefore in any way suggest that a failure to apply the conditional reflects an effect for the verb to be marked insofar that the verbs marked do not appear to be used as prefabricated lexical chunks.

Use of Other Morphological Forms in Place of the Conditional

Apart from its lexical characteristics, we also considered use of the conditional in terms of the variation underlying its usage with other verb forms. In terms of other verb forms produced in place of the conditional, we find that the present is prevalent, occurring at an average of 76% in group 1, 52% in Group 2, and 75% in Group 3. In contrast, only three and four tokens of the *imparfait* occurred in place of the conditional in Groups 1 and 3 respectively, while two and seven tokens of the future occurred in Groups 2 and 3 respectively, reflecting to some extent the similarity between the future and conditional forms in terms of their structural composition in the target language, French. Other forms include just one token of the *passé simple* and of the conditional anterior as well as one non-target-like form in group 3.

Functional Characteristics of Use of the Conditional

Apart from the actual formal use of the conditional, it is also interesting to consider its functional characteristics in the learners’ speech. From this point of view, it is important to note that, when not used in ‘si’-clauses, the conditional is predominantly applied to verbs expressing a wish or to express the imaginary, as (16) and (17) exemplify respectively. In contrast, we did not find evidence of its use to express an opinion or a possibility as in (10) and (11) above.

(16) *Je voudrais travailler dans le domaine du commerce*
 I want-COND work in the domain of commerce
 ‘I would like to work in the field of commerce’

(17) *Je m’acheterais un bateau*
 I me buy-COND a boat
 ‘I would buy myself a boat’

Tense-concordancing in Conditional Contexts

Beyond use of the conditional, we also considered the issue of tense-concordancing across matrix and embedded clauses and particularly, the extent to which the learners reflect French prescriptive norms, as outlined earlier. The following patterns emerged for each group, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Tense-concordancing in Conditional Clauses

Group 1

Main clause	<i>si</i> + embedded clause	Acceptability according to prescriptive norms	
		n	%
Present	Present	10/14	71
Future	Present	-	-
Conditional	Imparfait	2	100
Imperative	Present	2	100
Other structures			
Present	Plus-que-parfait	1	
Present	Imparfait	3	
Present	Conditional	2	
Imparfait	Imparfait	2	
Total		14/26	54

Group 2

Main clause	<i>si</i> + embedded clause	n	%
Future	Present	3	100
Conditional	Imparfait	1	100
Imperative	Present	1	100
Imparfait	Imparfait	1	100
Other structures			
Passé composé	Imparfait	1	
Present	Imparfait	2	
Present	Conditional	1	
Imparfait	Imparfait	1	
Total		18/25	72

Group 3

Main clause	<i>si</i> + embedded clause	n	%
Future	Present	1	100
Conditional	Imparfait	2	100
Imperative	Present	1	100
Imparfait	Imparfait	1	100
Other structures			
Present	Conditional	1	
Imparfait	Present	1	
Future	Present	1	
Future	Imparfait	2	
Conditional Anterior	Present	1	
Total		12/19	63

A first point to note is that although we previously observed higher levels of use of the conditional among the learners in Group 3, the same gain does not emerge in relation to tense-concordancing. On this score, the study abroad learners demonstrated a greater advantage. However, across the groups, we also note that the present dominated among the morphological forms used in both the dependent and independent clauses. Although used, more sophisticated forms, such as the structures ‘future + *si* + present’ and ‘conditional + *si* + *imparfait*’ were much less frequent, suggesting that the learners, irrespective of their group, have yet to develop their confidence in relation to their usage. Examples of such structures that were produced by the learners are given in (18) and (19):

(18) *Si je décide de travailler avec eux ce sera bien*
 if I decide-PRES PREP work with them it be-FUT good
 ‘if I decide to work them it will be great’

(19) *Si je passais plus de temps en France ça améliorerait peut-être*
 if I spend-IMP more of time in France it improve-COND perhaps
 ‘if I spent more time in France it might improve’

The rarity of these more sophisticated structures across the groups gives rise to a number of tense-concordancing over-generalisations, as reflected in the ‘other structures’ detailed in Table 2. Such over-generalisations typically concern the expression of more hypothetical conditions which require such more sophisticated tense-concordancing structures in the target language. In contrast, more realistic conditions pose much less difficulty to the learners as evidenced in their very high level of use of the present to mark such conditions expressing a general truth value as in (20).

(20) *C’est assez difficile de parler*
 it be-PRES enough difficult PREP speak

si on (n’)a pas confiance en soi
 if one (NEG) have-PRES NEG confidence in self
 ‘it is quite difficult to speak if you don’t have confidence in yourself’

From a functional perspective, although the full range of hypothetical contexts is produced in the learners’ speech, the corresponding inflectional forms in terms of tense-concordancing are minimally used in relation to the ‘conditional + *si* + *imparfait*’ and ‘future + *si* + present’ structures to convey the semantic values which they hold in target language French. In contrast, the learners produced a range of other structures as exemplified in (21) and (22):

- (21) *S'ils réussissaient ils gardent l'argent*
 if they succeed-IMP they keep-PRES the money
 'if they were successful they would keep the money'
- (22) *S'il y a un argument c'était difficile*
 if there be-PRES an argument it be-IMP difficult
 'if there were an argument it would be difficult'

Although tense-concordancing necessarily entails use of a different inflectional marker in the dependent and independent clause, neither clause-type, however, constitutes a more difficult one relative to the other for use of the appropriate marker—there are equal simplifications in both clause-types concerning use of the appropriate marker.

Conditional Marking in Past Contexts

Such concordancing difficulties further emerge in relation to past conditional contexts where the conditional anterior and the *plus-que-parfait* would be prescribed, as exemplified in (23):

- (23) *Si j'avais passé une année en France, j'aurais fait*
 If I AUX spend-PQP a year in France, I AUX make-CA
- plus de progrès que pendant deux mois en été*
 more of progress than during two months in summer
 'If I had spent a year in France, I would have made more progress than during two months in the summer'

While our previous study of the *plus-que-parfait* (see Howard, 2005a) has detailed the considerable difficulty that use of this form poses to even quite advanced learners, such difficulty is further reflected in the fact that tense-concordancing involving this form and the conditional anterior emerges as minimally evident in relation to this study—in all the data, we found just one token of such concordancing produced by a learner in group 2, and produced in (24).

- (24) *Si on les avait pas emmenés ils ne l'auraient pas fêtée*
 if one them AUX NEG bring-PQP they NEG it AUX NEG celebrate-PC
 'if we hadn't brought them they wouldn't have celebrated it'

Even in cases where the *plus-que-parfait* was used—just 1 token in the case of the learners in Group 1, and 2 each for Groups 2 and 3—the conditional anterior is not, occurring just once in such complex clauses involving a main and subordinate clause among the learners in Group 2, while occurring just once in a simple clause.

This is in spite of the fact that the learners across the groups produced a number of complex clauses where the *plus-que-parfait* and the conditional anterior could be expected, as exemplified in (25).

- (25) *Si quelqu'un lui avait fait quelque chose mauvais ils sont venus*
 if someone him AUX do-PQP some thing bad they AUX come-PC
 'if someone had done something bad to him, they would have come'

Such minimal use of the *plus-que-parfait* in modal contexts contrasts with its more frequent use in aspectuo-temporal contexts to mark the expression of reverse order, as shown in (26) below.

- (26) *Ils ont gardé l'argent parce qu'on (n')avait pas lu*
 they AUX keep-PC the money because we NEG AUX NEG read-PQP

les petits les petits lignes
 the small the small lines
 'they kept the money because we hadn't read the small print'

Our previous work on use of the *plus-que-parfait* in such contexts, (see Howard 2005a), reported a rate of use of 35% and 31% respectively for groups 2 and 3, based on a far larger number of tokens. For example, we respectively found 25 and 28 tokens of the *plus-que-parfait* in reverse-order contexts for these groups, compared to the 2 tokens in the modal contexts we report on here. Such findings suggest much more productive use of the *plus-que-parfait* to express an aspectuo-temporal value before the form is productively used with a modal value. Instead, in the latter clauses—2 in the case of group 1, 9 in the case of group 2, and 5 in the case of group 3—the learners produce a range of other morphological forms, reflecting the difficulty that the morphological marking of such clauses in terms of tense-concordancing poses to them, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Tense-concordancing in Past Conditional Contexts*

Group 1

Main / Simple clause	<i>Si</i> clause
Present	<i>Plus-que-parfait</i>
Conditional	-

Group 2

Main / Simple clause	<i>Si</i> clause
Conditional anterior	<i>Imparfait</i> (x2)
Conditional anterior	<i>Plus-que-parfait</i>
Conditional	<i>Imparfait</i>
<i>Passé composé</i>	<i>Passé composé</i>
Future	<i>Plus-que-parfait</i>
Conditional anterior	-
Future	-
Conditional	-

Group 3

Main / Simple clause	<i>Si</i> clause
<i>Imparfait</i>	Present
Conditional	<i>Passé composé</i>
Conditional	<i>Plus-que-parfait</i>
<i>Passé composé</i>	<i>Plus-que-parfait</i>
Conditional	Present

* Unless otherwise indicated, each morphological pattern is produced just once in the data.

In spite of such lack of tense-concordancing, the study abroad learners of group 2 do produce the conditional anterior to a reasonable extent at 44%, albeit in just 4 out of 9 contexts where this form could be expected, as exemplified in (27).

(27) *Même si nous étions dans la cité* *je pense* *que*
 even if we be-IMP in the residence I think-PRES that

on ne les aurait pas rencontrés
 one NEG them AUX NEG meet-CA
 ‘even if we had been in the student residences I don’t think that we would have met them’

It seems therefore, that, although there remains some development to be made on use of this form, tense-concordancing involving this form and the *plus-que-parfait* is a more acute issue at their level of development.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results call into question the extent to which the conditional can actually be considered as a morphological form which is late to emerge — the use of this form is relatively high, such that when we compare it with our previous findings for use of the past tenses among the same cohort of learners, it is

difficult to see the form as constituting a difficult form in and of itself. In relative terms, it approaches the levels of use of the *passé composé* while surpassing levels of use of the *imparfait*. Table 4 re-presents the level of use of the conditional in relation to the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*, as investigated in Howard (2001, 2005b).

Table 4. Average Level of Use of the Conditional, the Passé Composé and the Imparfait

	Conditional	<i>Passé composé</i>	<i>Imparfait</i>
Group 1	55%	75%	25%
Group 2	66%	60%	40%
Group 3	74%	71%	29%

Without longitudinal data, it is, however, difficult to track the relative emergence of the conditional in relation to the past tenses. Nonetheless, in relation to our cross-sectional data, the difficulty in use of the conditional by our learners seems to lie less in its use *per se* than in the morphological distinctions at work in target language French in relation to the expression of varying degrees of conditionality in complex clauses. It is in this regard that we have found that the learners, irrespective of their groups, have considerable development to make beyond use of the present in order to more confidently use and distinguish their use of the structures ‘conditional + *si* + *imparfait*’ and ‘future + *si* + present’, as well as of the past time equivalents involving ‘conditional anterior + *si* + *plus-que-parfait*’. As we have seen, although the semantic contexts in which such structures occur in target language French are present in the learners’ speech, the morphological structures themselves are minimally used. While it is unclear which structure will first emerge more strongly in their speech, such semantic distinctions are, however, clearly seen to be at work in the learners’ expression of conditionality, whereby they mark conditions of a general truth nature to near-categorical levels with the structure ‘present + *si* + present’. Apart from such general truth conditions, however, the expression of conditionality by our various groups is characterised by considerable variation, such that, while they use the various appropriate structures, they do so in alternation with a range of other non-target-like ones. It remains therefore for our advanced learners to develop greater control over their usage in real time. This is particularly true in the case of complex clauses where the expression of conditionality is primarily restricted to general truth hypotheses and it remains for all the learners, irrespective of their group, to develop their morphological expression of more hypothetical conditions.

CONCLUSION

As a preliminary study, there remains a lot of interesting work to be carried out in future research on the subject. For example, given the advanced status of our

learners who had considerable exposure to the language in both a classroom and naturalistic environment, the question remains as to just whether the learners will go on to engage in more sophisticated tense-concordancing that we have outlined, which is by no means a morphological rarity in native speaker discourse. A related question concerns the type of input necessary to bring about such development, such that it may be the case that the learners have reached a developmental plateau in this regard. That is to say, given that the hypothetical meaning of irrealis can be inferred in their discourse, there may be little functional motivation on their part to develop their morphological system any further. Although such a perspective might suggest that their language development has in some way fossilised, it is a question which future research must consider in relation to a far larger number of learner-participants with much more extensive naturalistic exposure in the target language community. For example, recent studies of the near-native speaker are beginning to show that even after extensive naturalistic exposure over long periods of up to 25 years, there remains a number of ‘fragile zones’ in grammar in spontaneous spoken French (see Bartning, 2009).

Such work will complement the very rich body of research that exists on the L2 learner’s tense-mood-aspect development. Apart from the need for such work, our study also points to the need for considerably more empirical research of an experimental nature concerning the impact of various types of pedagogic input on stimulating further tense-mood-aspect growth in the advanced learner. Such work will contribute to the provision of a fuller picture of how the various components of the learner’s tense-mood-aspect development relate to each other. A further issue for future study concerns the relationship between the learner’s knowledge of such morphological rules and their real-time activation in the learner’s speech production. As many of our graduates attain such an advanced level, these are crucial questions which will demonstrate the increasingly beneficial links to be developed between the field of Second Language Acquisition and language practitioners in the field who are confronted with such issues in their everyday work.

NOTES

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¹ Bardovi-Harlig (2005) similarly reports on the important role of modal verbs and adverbs in the expression of modality in L2 English relative to other morphological forms such as the future tense.

² For respective studies in each area, see Howard (2004, 2006a, 2006b).

³ Although the phonetic distinction between /e/ and /ɛ/ is prescribed to contrast future and conditional morphology, the distinction is increasingly found to only occur in very formal speech.

⁴ Such lexically-restricted use of morphological form reflects earlier findings for the acquisition of past time morphology — see Howard (2002).

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Martin Howard is a Lecturer in French and Applied Linguistics at University College, Cork (Ireland). His research interests are specifically in the areas of Second Language Acquisition, Sociolinguistics of French, and Canadian Studies. A former President of the Association for Canadian Studies in Ireland, he has also served as Director-at-large of the International Council for Canadian Studies. He is an Executive Committee member of the European Second Language Association.