Lexical Scaffolding through the "Toolbox": A Lever for Enhancing Performance in Written Production in French as a Foreign Language (FFL)- The Case of First-Year Middle School Learners (Algeria)

الدعم اللغوي عبر "صندوق الأدوات": لرفع الأداء في الإنتاج الكتابي باللغة الفرنسية كلغة أجنبية- حالة تلاميذ السنة الأولى متوسط بالجزائر

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Abstract: This stady examines the effectiveness of lexical scaffolding through a pedagogical tool called the **"toolbox"** in improving written production among first-year middle school learners of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in Algeria. The study addresses a common challenge faced by beginner learners: writing insecurity caused by limited vocabulary, weak grammatical knowledge, and difficulties in organizing ideas. Using a quasi-experimental design, the researchers worked with 29 students who completed two writing tasks: one without support and another using a structured toolbox containing nouns, verbs, adjectives, and connectors related to the writing topic. The study is grounded in theories of scaffolding, particularly Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, Bruner's concept of support, and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. The results showed significant improvements in writing performance when the toolbox was used. Students produced longer texts, demonstrated greater lexical richness, and made fewer grammatical and syntactic errors. The availability of vocabulary reduced cognitive overload, allowing learners to focus on organizing ideas and constructing coherent sentences. The toolbox also increased motivation and confidence by helping learners overcome the fear of writing. The study concludes that the toolbox is more than a simple vocabulary list; it is an effective scaffolding device that promotes writing autonomy and enhances learners' communicative competence. However, the authors note that excessive reliance on the tool may lead to imitation rather than genuine language development. They recommend adapting and diversifying such support tools to meet learners' varying needs.

- **Keywords:** Written production, toolbox, scaffolding, FFL, lexical competence, first-year middle school.

- **الملخص:** تناول هذه الدراسة فعالية الدعم المعجمي من خلال أداة بيداغوجية تُعرف باسم "صندوق الأدوات" في تحسين مهارات الإنتاج الكتابي لدى تلاميذ السنة الأولى متوسط المتعلمين للغة الفرنسية كلغة أجنبية في الجزائر. وتعالج الدراسة إحدى المشكلات الشائعة التي يواجهها المتعلمون المبتدئون، والمتمثلة في عدم الثقة في الكتابة الناتج عن محدودية الرصيد اللغوي، وضعف المعرفة النحوية، وصعوبة تنظيم

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الأفكار. اعتمدت الباحثتان منهجًا شبه تجريبي شمل 29 تلميذًا أنجزوا مهمتين كتابيتين: الأولى دون أي دعم، والثانية باستخدام صندوق أدوات منظم يضم أسماءً وأفعالًا وصفات وروابط لغوية مرتبطة بموضوع الكتابة. وترتكز الدراسة على أبرز نظريات الدعم التربوي، ولا سيما نظرية منطقة النمو القريب لفيغوتسكي، ومفهوم السقالات التعليمية لدى برونر، ونظرية الكفاءة الذاتية لباندورا. أظهرت النتائج تحسنًا ملحوظًا في أداء التلاميذ الكتابي عند استخدام صندوق الأدوات. فقد أنتج المتعلمون نصوصًا أطول، وأظهروا ثراءً معجميًا أكبر، وارتكبوا عددًا أقل من الأخطاء النحوية والتركيبية. كما ساهم توفر المفردات في تقليل العبء المعرفي، مما أتاح للمتعلمين التركيز بشكل أفضل على تنظيم الأفكار وبناء جمل مترابطة ومتسقة. إضافة إلى ذلك، عززت الأداة دافعية التلاميذ وثقتهم بأنفسهم من خلال مساعدتهم على تجاوز الخوف من الكتابة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن صندوق الأدوات ليس مجرد قائمة مفردات بسيطة، بل هو أداة دعم فعّالة تسهم في تنمية الاستقلالية في الكتابة وتعزيز الكفاءة التواصلية لدى المتعلمين. ومع ذلك، يشير الباحثان إلى أن الإفراط في الاعتماد على هذه الأداة قد يؤدي إلى التقليد والمحاكاة بدلاً من التطور اللغوي الحقيقي. لذلك يوصيان بتكييف هذه الأدوات وتنويعها بما يتناسب مع احتياجات المتعلمين ومستوياتهم المختلفة.

- **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الإنتاج الكتابي، صندوق الأدوات، الدعم البيداغوجي، اللغة الفرنسية لغة أجنبية، الكفاءة اللغوية، السنة الأولى متوسط.

- Introduction:

In Algeria, mastery of French as a Foreign Language (FLE) represents a major challenge from the middle school level onward, as it serves as a medium for scientific knowledge. Among the four fundamental skills (oral and written comprehension and expression), written production is undoubtedly the most complex to acquire. It constitutes the culmination of language learning and reflects the learner's communicative competence.

The transition from primary school to the first year of middle school (1st Year MS) marks a methodological shift. Learners are henceforth confronted with more demanding literacy objectives: it is no longer merely a matter of copying words or completing sentences, but of producing structured, coherent, and meaningful texts.

During our field observations, particularly within a middle school (CEM), we noted that the writing session is often experienced as a challenging ordeal by learners. When faced with a blank page, the majority encounter a dual difficulty:

- **A cognitive difficulty**: an inability to organize ideas according to a logical structure.

- **A linguistic difficulty**: a severe lack of vocabulary and insufficient knowledge of basic syntactic structures.

This situation gives rise to what researchers refer to as *"writing insecurity."* Learners, fearing spelling mistakes or being unable to find the appropriate words, tend to limit their written production to the bare minimum, or even withdraw into complete writing silence.

2. Research Problem:

The school textbook offers *"writing workshops"* that generally include a *"toolbox."* However, the use of this tool often appears to be limited to a simple list of words, lacking any dynamic connection with the writing process. Consequently, a central research question emerges:

"What extent can the effective use of a lexical and syntactic toolbox serve as pedagogical scaffolding to improve the writing performance of first-year middle school learners?"

From This main question arise several sub-questions:

- Does the toolbox help reduce learners' cognitive load by providing the necessary linguistic resources?
- Does it promote greater autonomy during the writing phase?
- What qualitative impacts can be observed on the coherence and richness of the produced text?

Thus, this situation creates a form of *"writing insecurity,"* in which learners, due to fear of making mistakes or lack of vocabulary, retreat into writing silence. The central issue, therefore, is to determine how a lexical and syntactic *"toolbox"* can function as pedagogical scaffolding to reduce cognitive overload and foster learner autonomy.

3-Research Hypotheses:

In order to address this research problem, we formulated the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The integration of a structured toolbox (organized by grammatical categories: nouns, verbs, adjectives) would facilitate the planning and drafting phases, thereby enabling longer and better-structured written production.

Hypothesis 2: The use of this didactic tool would enhance learner motivation by reducing linguistic stress, thus fostering an overall improvement in writing competence (spelling, vocabulary, and syntax).

4-Objectives and Methodology:

The primary objective of this article is to demonstrate the effectiveness of lexical scaffolding in the learning of French as a Foreign Language (FFL). We aim to provide teachers with a practical approach for designing writing-support tools that function not as mere crutches, but as genuine levers for learning.

From a methodological perspective, our study is based on an experimental approach conducted with a sample of 29 learners. We implemented a comparative design: an initial writing task completed without specific support, followed by a second production supported by a toolbox developed according to the learners' actual needs. The collected data were analyzed using a multi-criteria evaluation grid.

Our work is structured around three major axes:

- **The Conceptual Framework:** A synthesis of theories related to written production in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) and a definition of the components of the text (lexicon and morphosyntax).
- **The Contribution of the Toolbox:** An analysis of the concept of scaffolding and the role of motivation in the act of writing.
- **The Experimental Analysis:** A presentation of the results of our field investigation, the interpretation of the data, and the pedagogical recommendations derived from them.

5. Theoretical And Conceptual Framework:

5.1. Production Models and Complexity:

Writing in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) is a *"total task"* that requires the simultaneous management of both the graphic code and meaning. We rely on the model developed by Hayes and Flower (1980), which breaks down the activity into three phases: planning (organizing ideas), text production (translating ideas into sentences), and revision.

5.1.1. Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):

The concept of scaffolding, theorized by Jerome Bruner, lies at the core of this approach. The toolbox functions as a mediator within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It enables learners to overcome technical difficulties by transforming a task perceived as impossible into one that is achievable.

5.1.2. Psychological Dimension: Motivation and Self-Efficacy:

Motivation is a dynamic state linked to the learner's self-perception. Drawing on Bandura's work, we argue that having immediate access to resources enhances the sense of self-efficacy. The shift from *"I cannot do it"* to *"I can do it with the help of a tool"* reduces anxiety and turns a burdensome task into an immediate success.

5.2. The Complexity of Writing in FLE:

Writing in a foreign language is not a simple transcription activity but a complex problem-solving process. As highlighted by Jean-Pierre Cuq (2003, p.192), it mobilizes intertwined cognitive, linguistic, and pragmatic resources. For first-year middle school learners, writing is a *"total task"* in the sense defined by Vigner (1982, p.12), as it requires the simultaneous management of code (spelling, writing system) and meaning (coherence, communicative intention).

5.2.1. Distinction Between Writing and Written Production:

According to Sophie Moirand (1982, p.45), written production cannot be reduced to mere graphic mastery. It involves a communicative intention in which the learner must mobilize linguistic resources to construct meaning. This is precisely

where the toolbox plays a role: it provides the necessary material for this intention to be realized without blockage.

It is essential to follow Moirand's (1982, p.45) distinction between the act of writing (mastery of the graphic system) and written production. While writing may be limited to a motor activity, written production is defined by Robert (2008) as a communicative activity aimed at producing coherent discourse in a specific context.

5.2.2. Cognitive Models of Writing:

Our work is based on the model of Hayes and Flower (1980, p.31), which divides the writing process into three cyclical phases:

Planning: The learner organizes ideas. At this stage, the toolbox provides initial "idea-words."

Text Production: The translation of ideas into sentences. This is the most demanding stage in terms of *cognitive load* (Sweller, 1988), as it requires real-time mastery of syntax.

Revision: The evaluation and correction of the text, a phase often neglected by beginners.

5.3. Components of Writing Competence:

5.3.1. Lexis: The Engine of Meaning:

According to Galisson (1991, p.42), lexis is the cornerstone of communicative competence. In first-year middle school, the main difficulty lies in mobilizing *active vocabulary*. The toolbox acts as a contextual dictionary that facilitates this mnemonic recall.

5.3.2. Morphosyntax and Grammar:

Grammar, as defined by Besse and Porquier (1991, p.112), should not be viewed as a set of fixed rules but as a tool for textual cohesion. The toolbox helps learners move from a simple juxtaposition of words to the construction of complex sentences.

Grammar should no longer be taught in isolation but as support for production. For Besse and Porquier, the objective is to provide learners with the means to regulate their own production using appropriate linguistic tools.

5.3.3. The "Toolbox" as Didactic Scaffolding:

The concept of scaffolding, theorized by Bruner (1983, p. 263), lies at the heart of our study. It refers to the set of supportive interactions that enable learners to accomplish a task situated just beyond their current level of competence (the Microgenetic Zone or Zone of Proximal Development defined by Vygotsky).

"The effectiveness of the toolbox is grounded in the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theorized by Vygotsky (1934/1997, p. 352). According to the author, the ZPD is the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what he or she can achieve with the assistance of an adult or a mediating support. In our research, the toolbox precisely plays this mediating role: it enables learners to overcome the threshold of difficulty that previously blocked them by providing the necessary words to transform thought into structured text. It transforms an impossible task into an achievable one, thereby fostering a gradual transition toward writing autonomy."

Functions of the Tool:

"As emphasized by Grandaty (2001, p. 52), teachers should not merely provide instructions; they must organize a 'semiotic mediation.' The toolbox fulfills this function by becoming an instrument of mediation between the learner's thinking and the demands of the target language. For Grandaty, the didactic tool makes it possible to 'reduce the complexity of the task' without altering its final objective. In the first year of middle school, this material scaffolding enables learners to focus on textual coherence (content) while having at their disposal the necessary resources to ensure formal accuracy (form)."

Thus, the toolbox fulfills the functions defined by Grandaty within the framework of writing support:

- Reduction of complexity: By providing lexical resources, learners are able to concentrate on sentence structure.
- Maintenance of orientation: It reinforces the theme and the instruction through the selected vocabulary.

Motivation and Sense of Self-Efficacy:

Drawing on the work of Bandura (2003, p. 54) on self-efficacy, we posit that having access to material support such as the toolbox strengthens learners' intrinsic motivation. Feeling "capable of doing," they engage more readily in the writing effort.

5.4. The Relationship Between the "Toolbox" and Motivation:

Motivation is a complex psychological construct, defined by Viau (1994, p. 7) as "a dynamic state rooted in the perceptions a learner has of himself or herself and of the environment." In the first year of middle school, written production is often perceived as a threat to self-image due to linguistic deficiencies.

5.4.1. Sense of Self-Efficacy:

The use of the toolbox directly influences the sense of self-efficacy theorized by Bandura (2003, p. 54). When learners have immediate access to resources (nouns, verbs, adjectives), the writing task no longer appears insurmountable. This shift from "I cannot" to "I can with the tool" constitutes the driving force of intrinsic motivation. The tool reduces anxiety and stress, particularly in examination contexts, by providing linguistic security.

5.4.2. From the Desire to Learn to the Pleasure of Writing:

The toolbox stimulates curiosity. By discovering new word combinations suggested by the teacher, learners enrich their linguistic repertoire without the frustration of unsuccessful searching. As Galisson (1991, p. 42) emphasizes, lexicon is the locus of meaning; providing words means providing the power to express oneself. This immediate success transforms the writing activity: from a burdensome chore, it becomes a rewarding act of construction.

6-Methodology And Experimental Design:

6.1. Quasi-Experimental Approach:

The study was conducted on a sample of 29 first-year middle school learners. The design compares two production phases with the same group of students:

Phase 1 (Without scaffolding): Free writing to identify difficulties and obstacles.

Phase 2 (With toolbox): Writing on the same topic (*"Explaining scientific progress: the computer"*) using a structured lexical support.

6.2. The Didactic Tool:

The toolbox is not a simple list but a table organized by grammatical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, connectors), designed to support sentence construction.

6.3. Description of the Experimental Design:

To measure the actual impact of the toolbox, we adopted a quasi-experimental approach within a middle school (CEM). The objective is to compare two states of written production within the same sample of learners (29 first-year middle school students).

6.3.1. Choice of Topic: Describing a Technological Advancement:

The selected topic corresponds to Project II of the official curriculum: *"Explaining scientific progress."* The instruction given was: "Write a short text to present the computer and its main components to your classmates."

6.3.2. Didactic Use of the Toolbox: Process and Stages:

The integration of the toolbox into classroom practice goes beyond mere distribution. It follows a structured scaffolding process built around two key stages.

6.3.3. The Familiarization Phase: Preparation for Writing:

Before the actual writing task, learners go through a preparatory session. At this stage, the teacher introduces the toolbox implicitly. Through gap-filling or substitution exercises, key vocabulary related to the topic (e.g., technological progress) is practiced.

This phase helps transform passive vocabulary into active vocabulary. Its objective is to stimulate learners' interest while providing them with the necessary *"building blocks"* for future text construction.

6.3.4. The Production Phase: The Writing Session:

During the writing session, the use of the toolbox becomes explicit. The procedure follows a clear protocol:

Presentation of the instruction: The teacher clearly defines the task.

Explanation of success criteria: Based on evaluation grid indicators.

Provision of the lexical table: The toolbox is presented in columns (Nouns / Verbs / Adjectives / Connectors).

6.3.5. A Tool for Autonomy:

According to Grandaty (2001, p.52), this tool acts as a mediation instrument. It facilitates the teacher's role by enabling simultaneous scaffolding of an entire class and helps learners structure their thinking.

The toolbox serves as a guide that supports learners during both the planning stage (selection of ideas) and the writing stage (sentence construction), thus ensuring more coherent and richer production.

6.4. The Two Phases of the Experiment:

Phase 1 (Without scaffolding): Learners produce a text based solely on their prior knowledge. This phase helps identify difficulties such as lack of vocabulary and syntactic errors.

Phase 2 (With toolbox): One week later, the same instruction is given, but this time accompanied by a structured lexical table.

Presentation of the Toolbox Used:

The tool was designed to address the gaps observed in Phase 1. It is not an exhaustive list, but a strategic selection organized by grammatical category to assist sentence construction:

Table N°1. Presentation of the Toolbox Used, Prepared by the authors.

Nouns (Subjects/Objects)	Verbs (Actions)	Adjectives (Qualifiers)	Connectors
Computer, screen, keyboard	Allow, use	Modern, fast	First, then
Central unit, mouse	Modify, process	Useful, essential	Finally, because
Information, data	Store, type	Digital	Because

Quantitative Analysis of the Results:

The analysis focuses on comparing performance across the two phases. We used an evaluation grid based on the work of Vigner (1982).

Production Length and Lexical Richness:

The first indicator of success is text length. Without the tool, the average ranged from 15 to 20 words. With the tool, it increased to 35–45 words.

Observation: Immediate lexical availability frees the writer. Learners no longer waste time searching for the translation of a word and can instead focus on organizing their ideas.

Reduction of Morphosyntactic Errors:

We counted structural errors (sentences without verbs, incorrect agreement).

Result: A 40% decrease in syntactic errors was recorded. Seeing the verb in the infinitive form in the toolbox stimulates learners to conjugate it rather than omit it entirely.

Qualitative Analysis: Case Study (Learners' Scripts):

Analysis of Script A (Without Tool):

The learner writes: *"The computer is good. There is screen. It is finished."*

The text is poor, punctuation is absent, and vocabulary is limited to everyday language.

Analysis of Script B (With Tool):

The same learner writes: *"The computer is a modern machine. It consists of a screen and a keyboard. It allows storing information because it is fast."*

Commentary:

We observe the use of connectors ("because") and adjectives ("modern," "fast") drawn from the toolbox. The text gains coherence and scientific relevance.

Comparative Analysis and Interpretation of Results: The Case of the Computer:

The objective of this stage is to demonstrate how the "toolbox" enabled first-year middle school learners to move from a poor description to a structured technical production about the computer. Here, we compare the control group (without support) and the experimental group (with toolbox).

Revised Results Table (Theme: Information Technology):

The following table presents the quantitative data collected after evaluating the scripts according to the success grid.

Table N°1. Comparative Analysis of Performance, Prepared by the authors.

Evaluation Criteria	Experimental Group (With Toolbox)	Control Group (Without Toolbox)
/	Number / Percentage	Number / Percentage
Presence of a title (e.g., *The Computer*)	26 / 90%	10 / 34%
Respect of the technical lexical field	27 / 93%	05 / 17%
Use of the present simple tense	24 / 83%	08 / 27%
Punctuation and enumeration of components	23 / 79%	06 / 21%
Textual cohesion (logical connectors)	22 / 76%	04 / 14%
Mastery of technical spelling	18 / 62%	03 / 10%
/	29/100%	29/100%

In-Depth Interpretation of the Data:

A. Accuracy of Computer-Related Vocabulary:

In the experimental group, 93% of learners correctly used technical terms such as *central unit, keyboard, screen, mouse, process,* and *store*. In contrast, the control group (only 17%) showed considerable difficulty in naming components, often using

vague expressions such as "television" to refer to the screen or "box" to designate the central unit.

The toolbox therefore functioned as an immediate lexical reference, compensating for the lack of technical vocabulary.

B. Sentence Structure and Enumeration:

Describing a computer requires the use of enumeration devices (*first, then, finally*). We observed that 79% of learners equipped with the toolbox structured their texts logically.

The control group, however, produced short, juxtaposed sentences ("The computer is good. It has a keyboard."), lacking fluency and cohesion. The tool thus contributed to organizing the learner's technical reasoning in a structured manner.

C. Reduction of Cognitive Load:

The spelling of technical terms (e.g., *computer science, electronic*) is complex for a first-year middle school learner. By providing these words correctly written in the table, we observed a 52% improvement in overall spelling quality.

Since learners no longer needed to worry about the spelling of the word *computer*, they were able to devote their cognitive resources to syntax and meaning construction.

Synthesis of the Tool's Contribution

- The analysis of students' written work shows that the toolbox transforms the learner from a *"passive writer"* into an *"active writer."*
- **For the experimental group:** Productions are longer (average of 40 words), technically more precise, and comply with the structure of explanatory texts.
- **For the control group:** Memory and lexical difficulties hinder writing, resulting in incomplete or off-topic texts.

In conclusion, the use of the toolbox for the theme of technological progress (the computer) constitutes an observable success. It validates the idea that scaffolding is the key to success in developing writing skills in the first year of middle school.

Interpretation of Results and Limitations:

The data collected validate our first hypothesis: the toolbox constitutes a genuine lever for performance. It transforms the "blank page" into a space of guided construction.

Observed limitations:

Risk of mimicry: Some learners merely copy from the toolbox without creating their own logical connections.

Heterogeneity: Learners experiencing significant difficulties (dyslexia or severe academic delay) require even more structured scaffolding (e.g., gap-filling sentences).

Conclusion:

At the end of this study devoted to examining the impact of the "toolbox" on written production in French as a Foreign Language among first-year middle school learners, several major conclusions emerge. The experiment conducted in the middle school (CEM) confirmed that learners' writing insecurity is not inevitable, but often results from insufficient scaffolding during the transition to written expression.

The results validate our two initial hypotheses. On the one hand, the toolbox reduces cognitive overload by providing immediate lexical availability. On the other hand, it acts as a motivational catalyst, transforming a task perceived as insurmountable into a rewarding act of construction. The texts produced during the second phase of the experiment demonstrate significant improvement, not only quantitatively (text length) but also qualitatively (relevance and coherence).

Contributions and Limitations:

This article has highlighted that the toolbox should not be a mere list of words, but a repertoire structured according to grammatical categories. However, the tool has its limits: it does not replace deep language learning. While it facilitates immediate textual production, the long-term objective must remain the learner's full autonomy.

7. Conclusion And Perspectives:

The experiment confirms that writing insecurity can be alleviated through structured lexical scaffolding. The toolbox reduces cognitive overload and acts as a catalyst for motivation.

However, certain limitations remain, particularly the risk of imitation among some learners. For future practice, it is recommended to:

- Co-construct the toolbox with learners during the instructional sequence.
- Diversify the formats by moving from a paper-based toolbox to interactive digital tools.
- Differentiate support by providing toolboxes of varying density according to each learner's level.

Ultimately, writing is a skill that is learned through the use of tools. The pedagogical toolbox is one such instrument that enables learners to build, sentence by sentence, their own writing competence in a foreign language.

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Appendix : Lesson Plan

La fiche de préparation de la leçon.

Niveau : 1ère Année Moyenne (1AM)

Projet II : Je réalise avec mes camarades un dossier documentaire pour **expliquer les progrès scientifiques.**

Séquence 1 : J'explique les progrès de la science.

Activité : Production écrite (Phase expérimentale).

Objectif d'apprentissage : Produire un texte explicatif court et cohérent pour présenter un appareil technologique en utilisant un étayage lexical.

Déroulement de la séance :

1. **Mise en train (5 min) :** Rappel des composants d'un ordinateur (cerveau de la machine, écran, etc.).

2. Présentation du sujet (5 min) : Lecture et explication de la consigne.

3. Phase d'étayage (15 min) : Présentation de la "Boîte à outils" au tableau.

Exercice oral de "combinaison" : Comment utiliser le verbe 'stocker' avec le nom 'informations ?

1. **Rédaction individuelle (30 min)** : Les apprenants rédigent en s'aidant de l'outil.
2. L'enseignant circule pour encourager l'utilisation des connecteurs logiques.