Navigating Subjunctive Challenges and Pedagogical Strategies for Advanced French L2 Learners

Jimoh Junior Braimoh

University of Mississippi

Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by advanced L2 learners of French in mastering the subjunctive mood, with a particular focus on their ability to recognize contexts where the subjunctive is not required. The primary objectives were to identify common error patterns, analyze the impact of verb conjugation on learner performance, and assess the effectiveness of current instructional practices. A sentence completion task was administered to 200 advanced L2 French learners, and the data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to uncover the frequency and nature of errors in subjunctive usage. The results revealed that learners frequently default to using the subjunctive mood in contexts where it is not required, particularly when dealing with impersonal expressions and irregular verb forms. The error rate was significantly higher in second and third conjugation verbs compared to first conjugation verbs, highlighting the impact of morphological complexity. The findings suggest that current teaching methods, which often emphasize rule-based instruction, may not adequately prepare learners to apply the subjunctive in context-sensitive ways. The study concludes that a shift towards more contextualized and communicative teaching approaches is needed to help learners develop a deeper understanding of the subjunctive mood. These findings have important implications for curriculum design and teacher training in the field of second language acquisition.

Keywords: French subjunctive, L2 acquisition, error patterns, verb conjugation, contextualized teaching, advanced learners

Résumé

Cette étude examine les défis auxquels sont confrontés les apprenants avancés de français langue seconde (L2) dans la maîtrise du mode subjonctif, en mettant particulièrement l'accent sur leur capacité à reconnaître les contextes où le subjonctif n'est pas requis. Les principaux objectifs étaient d'identifier les erreurs les plus courantes, d'analyser l'impact de la conjugaison verbale sur la performance des apprenants, et d'évaluer l'efficacité des pratiques pédagogiques actuelles. Un exercice de complétion de phrases a été administré à 200 apprenants avancés de français L2, et les données ont été analysées à l'aide de méthodes quantitatives et qualitatives pour révéler la fréquence et la nature des erreurs dans l'utilisation du subjonctif. Les résultats ont révélé que les apprenants ont souvent tendance à utiliser par défaut le mode subjonctif dans des contextes où il n'est pas nécessaire, notamment lorsqu'ils sont confrontés à des expressions impersonnelles et à des verbes irréguliers. Le taux d'erreur était significativement plus élevé pour les verbes des deuxième et troisième groupes comparé à ceux du premier groupe, soulignant l'impact

de la complexité morphologique. Les conclusions suggèrent que les méthodes d'enseignement actuelles, qui mettent souvent l'accent sur l'apprentissage des règles, ne préparent pas adéquatement les apprenants à appliquer le subjonctif de manière contextuelle. L'étude conclut qu'un changement vers des approches pédagogiques plus contextualisées et communicatives est nécessaire pour aider les apprenants à développer une compréhension plus profonde du mode subjonctif. Ces résultats ont des implications importantes pour la conception des programmes et la formation des enseignants dans le domaine de l'acquisition des langues secondes.

Mots-clés : subjonctif français, acquisition L2, erreurs fréquentes, conjugaison verbale, enseignement contextualisé, apprenants avancés

1. Introduction

The subjunctive mood in French, characterized by its use in expressing doubt, emotion, desire, and hypothetical situations, represents one of the most challenging aspects of French grammar for second language (L2) learners. Despite its critical role in achieving linguistic proficiency, the subjunctive mood is often a stumbling block for learners, particularly those whose first language (L1) does not have a direct grammatical equivalent. This difficulty is compounded by the abstract nature of the subjunctive, which requires not only a mastery of its morphological and syntactic forms but also an understanding of the nuanced contexts in which it is appropriately used or avoided.

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), much research has focused on the difficulties that L2 learners face in mastering complex grammatical structures like the subjunctive. Previous studies have highlighted the significant challenges associated with recognizing and correctly applying the subjunctive mood in various contexts, often pointing to learners' tendency to rely on surface-level grammatical cues rather than a deep understanding of the subjunctive's underlying rules (Howard, 2008; Ayoun, 2013). However, there remains a gap in understanding the specific contexts in which learners most frequently err, particularly in distinguishing when the subjunctive mood should not be used. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the ability of advanced L2 French learners to recognize and correctly avoid the use of the subjunctive in contexts where the indicative mood is required. Through a detailed analysis of error patterns in a sentence completion task, this study examines the specific grammatical structures that pose the greatest challenges to learners, with a particular focus on impersonal expressions and irregular verb forms. The research aims to uncover not only the frequency of these errors but also the underlying factors that contribute to them, such as the complexity of verb conjugation and the instructional methods employed.

The primary objectives of this study are threefold: first, to identify the error patterns associated with the misuse of the subjunctive mood in non-subjunctive contexts; second, to analyze the influence of verb conjugation on learner performance; and third, to assess the effectiveness of current teaching practices in addressing these challenges. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to provide insights that can inform more effective pedagogical strategies for teaching the subjunctive mood in French, ultimately contributing to improved language proficiency among L2 learners. The research is guided by the following questions: What are the most common error patterns among L2 learners when distinguishing between subjunctive and non-subjunctive contexts? How does the complexity of verb conjugation affect learners' ability to correctly apply the subjunctive? What implications do these findings have for the design of instructional practices aimed at improving subjunctive usage among L2 learners? In addressing these

questions, this study contributes to the broader field of second language acquisition by providing a deeper understanding of the specific challenges associated with mastering the French subjunctive mood. It also offers practical implications for language teaching, suggesting targeted instructional strategies that can help learners overcome these challenges and achieve greater linguistic competence.

This paper is structured as follows: The next section provides a review of the relevant literature on the acquisition of the subjunctive mood in L2 French, highlighting key findings and identifying gaps that this study aims to fill. The methodology section outlines the research design, data collection, and analysis procedures used to investigate the research questions. The results section presents the findings of the study, followed by a discussion of their implications for language teaching. The paper concludes with a summary of the key contributions of the research and suggestions for future studies in this area.

2. Literature Review

The acquisition of the subjunctive mood in L2 learning, particularly among French learners, has been a significant focus of research over the past several decades. The subjunctive mood, with its complex rules and nuanced usage, poses substantial challenges for learners, especially those whose first language (L1) does not have a similar grammatical structure. This literature review provides an overview of key studies from the last 5-10 years, positioning the current research within the broader academic discourse, and identifying gaps that warrant further exploration. The subjunctive mood in French is often described as a marker of subjectivity, uncertainty, and non-reality (L'Huillier, 1999; Dubois & Lagane, 2004). These theoretical frameworks are rooted in Universal Grammar (UG) theory, which posits that certain grammatical structures, like the subjunctive, are more difficult for learners to acquire due to their abstract and non-universal nature (Chomsky, 1981). Additionally, Krashen's Input Hypothesis suggests that the acquisition of such complex structures depends heavily on the quality and quantity of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). This makes the subjunctive particularly challenging for L2 learners, who must not only grasp its grammatical rules but also understand the contextual nuances that dictate its usage.

Recent studies have highlighted the ongoing challenges L2 learners face in acquiring the subjunctive mood. McManus & Mitchell (2015) conducted a longitudinal study on English-speaking learners of French, revealing that learners often struggle with the morphological and syntactic aspects of the subjunctive, particularly in spoken contexts. The study found that lower proficiency learners tend to avoid using the subjunctive, often defaulting to the indicative mood, which is easier to manage. Howard (2008) examined the developmental stages of subjunctive acquisition in L2 learners, proposing that the subjunctive mood is acquired incrementally, with certain triggers (e.g., doubt, emotion) being mastered earlier than others (e.g., purpose, concession). This staged acquisition aligns with the Input Hypothesis, suggesting that learners require extensive exposure to varied contexts in which the subjunctive is used to internalize its proper application. Ayoun (2013) investigated the role of input frequency and instructional methods in the acquisition of the subjunctive. Her study found that learners who were exposed to more frequent and varied uses of the subjunctive, especially in immersive environments, showed greater proficiency. However, she also noted that traditional grammar instruction, which often emphasizes rules over contextual usage, may hinder learners' ability to apply the subjunctive correctly in real-life situations. The effectiveness of different instructional approaches in teaching the subjunctive has been a key area of research. Sanz & Morgan-Short (2004) explored the impact of explicit versus implicit instruction on subjunctive acquisition. Their study found that explicit instruction, where grammatical rules are taught directly, leads to better short-term gains in accuracy. However, implicit instruction, which focuses on

context and meaning rather than rules, resulted in more sustainable long-term retention and usage, supporting Krashen's view that meaningful communication is crucial for language acquisition. López-Ortega (2020) emphasized the importance of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in subjunctive acquisition. They argued that TBLT, which integrates the subjunctive into communicative tasks, helps learners develop a more intuitive understanding of its usage. This approach contrasts with traditional drill-based methods, which may not provide sufficient opportunities for learners to practice the subjunctive in varied contexts. The findings suggest that a balanced approach, incorporating both explicit instruction and meaningful communication tasks, is most effective for subjunctive acquisition.

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) is another significant factor in the acquisition of the subjunctive mood. Montrul (2015) and Herschensohn (2018) have shown that L1 influence plays a crucial role in how learners approach the subjunctive in L2. For instance, learners whose L1 includes a subjunctive mood (e.g., Spanish) tend to acquire the French subjunctive more easily than those whose L1 lacks this grammatical feature (e.g., English). This aligns with the predictions of UG theory, where certain grammatical structures are easier to acquire when there is a corresponding structure in the learner's L1.

Montrul (2021) further explored the role of bilingualism in subjunctive acquisition, finding that bilingual learners who use their L1 regularly are better able to transfer their knowledge of the subjunctive to their L2. However, this transfer is not always positive, as it can lead to overgeneralization or incorrect application of subjunctive rules in the L2. This highlights the complex interplay between L1 knowledge and L2 acquisition, particularly for structures that are as nuanced as the subjunctive.

3. Gaps in the Literature

While recent studies have significantly advanced our understanding of the subjunctive mood in L2 learning, several gaps remain:

1. **Longitudinal Studies on Subjunctive Development:** Although McManus & Mitchell (2015) provided valuable insights, more longitudinal studies are needed to track the development of subjunctive competence over time, particularly in diverse learner populations and across different instructional contexts. Most current studies are cross-sectional, which limits our understanding of how subjunctive competence evolves.

2. **Impact of Affective Factors:** While Dörnyei (2009) has examined the role of motivation and attitudes in L2 acquisition, there is a need for more focused studies on how these affective factors influence the acquisition of specific grammatical structures like the subjunctive. The relationship between learners' attitudes towards the subjunctive and their ability to master its usage is still underexplored. This is particularly relevant given that motivation may play a key role in overcoming the challenges associated with the subjunctive's abstract nature.

3. **Technological Integration in Instruction:** The integration of technology in language instruction, such as through adaptive learning platforms, remains underexplored in the context of subjunctive acquisition. Future research could investigate how digital tools and platforms can be used to provide personalized, context-rich exposure to the subjunctive mood, enhancing both learning outcomes and learner engagement. While there has been some exploration of technology in general language learning (Chapelle, 2010), its specific application to complex grammatical structures like the subjunctive has not been sufficiently addressed.

4. **Subjunctive Use in Non-Western Learners:** Most studies on the subjunctive mood have focused on learners from Western linguistic backgrounds (e.g., English, Spanish). There is a lack of research on

how learners from non-Western linguistic backgrounds, particularly those from languages without a subjunctive mood, acquire this grammatical structure. Exploring this gap could provide valuable insights into the universality of subjunctive acquisition challenges and the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in language learning.

The existing body of research on the subjunctive mood in L2 acquisition has highlighted key challenges and instructional strategies. However, significant gaps remain, particularly in understanding the longitudinal development of subjunctive competence, the role of affective factors, the potential of technology-enhanced learning, and the experiences of non-Western learners. Addressing these gaps will not only deepen our theoretical understanding of L2 acquisition but also inform more effective pedagogical practices for teaching complex grammatical structures like the subjunctive mood.

3. Research Methods
3.1. Participants
This study involved a total of 200 final-year French majors from three different universities: one located in West Africa and two in the United States. The participant pool included 90 males and 110 females, reflecting a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds, including native speakers of English, Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Spanish, and other languages. The larger and more diverse sample size enhances the generalizability of the findings, providing a broader understanding of how the subjunctive mood is acquired across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods to ensure that all were final-year students who had completed extensive coursework in French, including modules focused on the subjunctive mood. These participants were chosen based on their comparable levels of French language proficiency, which were determined through a combination of self-reported data, academic records, and standardized language proficiency tests where available.

To minimize sampling bias, efforts were made to include a mix of students with varying degrees of motivation and interest in French, thereby reflecting a more representative cross-section of the student population. The study was conducted in a controlled classroom environment at each institution, with surveys administered under strict supervision to ensure data integrity. Participants were provided with clear, standardized instructions, which were read aloud to ensure full comprehension. They had 20 minutes to complete the survey voluntarily, and their responses were anonymized to protect their confidentiality.

3.2. Ethical Considerations
The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set forth by the relevant institutional review boards (IRBs) at each participating institution. Ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of the study, ensuring that the research adhered to the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. They were also assured that their responses would remain confidential and that no identifying information would be linked to the data.

To further ensure confidentiality, all data were anonymized, and demographic information was aggregated to prevent the identification of individual participants. Data were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

3.3. Research Instruments

3.3.1. Questionnaire Design

The research instrument consisted of a comprehensive questionnaire divided into three sections. The first section collected general demographic and biographical information, including age, gender, marital status, nationality, and native language. The second section gathered detailed information on the participants' language history, including their language use, proficiency levels, and attitudes toward learning French and the subjunctive mood.

3.3.2. Sentence Completion Task

The third section of the questionnaire included a sentence completion task designed to assess participants' ability to correctly apply the subjunctive mood in appropriate contexts and to avoid its use where the indicative mood is required. This task comprised 50 items, categorized into eight types of subjunctive triggers that are commonly encountered by learners. These categories included:

1. **Subjunctive with Conjunctions of Subordination:** 7 questions designed to test understanding of the subjunctive after specific conjunctions (e.g., "afin que").
2. **Impersonal Expressions Requiring the Subjunctive:** 6 questions evaluating the correct use of the subjunctive after impersonal expressions (e.g., "il est nécessaire que").
3. **Subjunctive of Desire:** 6 questions assessing the use of the subjunctive in expressing desires (e.g., "je veux que").
4. **Subjunctive of Doubt:** 4 questions testing the subjunctive's use in contexts of doubt or uncertainty (e.g., "je doute que").
5. **Subjunctive with Sentiments:** 6 questions focused on the use of the subjunctive in expressing sentiments or emotions (e.g., "je suis content que").
6. **Subjunctive in Exigency, Imperative, and Order:** 4 questions examining the correct application of the subjunctive in contexts requiring urgency or command (e.g., "il faut que").
7. **Subjunctive for Necessity and Wishes:** 5 questions assessing the correct usage in contexts expressing necessity or wishes (e.g., "il est essentiel que").
8. **Contexts Not Requiring the Subjunctive:** 13 questions designed to test the ability to identify when the indicative mood is appropriate, rather than the subjunctive.

Justification for Sentence Selection

The sentence structures and verbs used in the task were carefully selected to represent a broad range of real-world contexts where French learners typically encounter the subjunctive mood. The selection process was informed by a thorough review of standard French grammar texts, including Schaum's Outline of French Grammar (1999), and focused on both regular and irregular verb conjugations across the three main verb groups (first conjugation -er, second conjugation -ir, and third conjugation -re).

The aim was to create a balanced test that would challenge participants' understanding of the subjunctive mood while also reflecting common usage patterns. The task was designed to assess not only the ability to use the subjunctive where required but also the critical skill of avoiding its use where the indicative is appropriate—a key aspect of advanced French language proficiency.

3.4. Pilot Testing

Prior to the main study, a pilot test was conducted with a smaller group of 20 students to refine the questionnaire and sentence completion task. Feedback from the pilot study led to several revisions, including the rephrasing of ambiguous questions and the adjustment of time limits to ensure that all

participants could complete the task comfortably. This pilot testing helped to improve the validity and reliability of the research instrument.

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was standardized across all participating institutions to ensure consistency. The survey was administered in similar classroom settings, typically during morning or early afternoon sessions to control for any potential effects of time of day on participant performance. Each session was conducted by a trained proctor who followed a scripted procedure, including reading the instructions aloud and ensuring that all participants understood the task.

Participants were instructed to complete the task independently, without any discussion or assistance, to ensure that the responses reflected their true understanding of the subjunctive mood.

3.6. Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire and sentence completion task were analyzed using SPSS. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to explore the relationship between various linguistic and social factors and participants' performance on the task. Chi-square tests were used to assess the significance of differences in performance across different categories of subjunctive triggers and participant groups.

Given the increased sample size, the statistical power of the analysis was sufficient to detect medium to large effects. Assumptions underlying the statistical methods, such as normality and homoscedasticity, were tested and met. The analysis focused on identifying the key linguistic challenges that contribute to errors in the use of the subjunctive mood among L2 French learners.

3.7. Limitations

While the study's design and sample size provide a robust basis for analysis, some limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data for language proficiency introduces the potential for bias. Additionally, while efforts were made to standardize data collection procedures, uncontrollable factors such as the varying educational environments at different institutions may have influenced participant performance. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

4. Analysis
4.1. Overview of Statistical Methods

The data from the sentence completion task were analyzed using multiple statistical techniques, including multiple regression analysis and chi-square tests. These methods were chosen to investigate the relationship between various linguistic and social factors and the participants' performance in correctly applying the subjunctive mood. The results offer insights into the specific challenges faced by L2 French learners in distinguishing between contexts that require the subjunctive and those that do not.

4.2. Multiple Regression Analysis
4.2.1. Purpose and Variables

The multiple regression analysis aimed to determine how different independent variables—such as the number of languages spoken, participants' affinity for the French language, their preference for the

subjunctive mood, the number of questions answered, and the category of subjunctive triggers—predicted the dependent variable, which was participants' overall performance on the sentence completion task.

4.2.2. Key Findings from Table 1

Table 1 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis, including unstandardized (B) and standardized (Beta) coefficients, t-values, significance levels (p-values), and effect sizes (Cohen's d).

- **Love for French Subjunctive (β = 0.100, p < 0.001, d = 0.50):** This variable had a significant positive impact on performance, indicating that participants who expressed a strong preference for the subjunctive mood performed better on the task. The effect size of 0.50 suggests a moderate impact, highlighting the importance of learner motivation in mastering the subjunctive (Dörnyei, 2009).

- **Category of Subjunctive Triggers (β = -0.200, p < 0.001, d = 0.70):** This negative coefficient suggests that certain categories of subjunctive triggers posed more difficulty for learners, leading to lower performance scores. With an effect size of 0.70, this factor had a substantial impact, indicating that some grammatical structures are significantly more challenging for L2 learners (Howard, 2008).

- **Number of Questions Answered (β = 0.077, p = 0.003, d = 0.40):** The number of questions answered correctly also significantly predicted overall performance. The moderate effect size of 0.40 underscores the importance of both the breadth and depth of knowledge in mastering the subjunctive.

Interpretation of Significance: The significance levels indicate the reliability of these findings, with p-values below 0.001 indicating highly reliable predictors. The effect sizes further clarify the strength of these relationships, with the category of subjunctive triggers being particularly influential. These findings align with existing literature that emphasizes the complexity of subjunctive triggers as a critical challenge in L2 acquisition (Ayoun, 2013).

Table 1: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Constant	0.731	-	6.062	0.000	-
Number of Languages Spoken	-0.019	-0.036	-1.547	0.122	0.20
Love for French	0.160	0.041	1.888	0.059	0.30
Love for French Subjunctive	0.121	0.100	4.389	0.000	0.50
Number of Questions Answered	0.003	0.077	2.925	0.003	0.40
Category of Subjunctive Triggers	-0.052	-0.200	-7.327	0.000	0.70
Verb Category	0.187	0.273	12.184	0.000	0.80

Table 1 shows the relationship between various factors and participants' performance on the subjunctive task. The table highlights the significant predictors of success and areas of difficulty, with a focus on linguistic challenges posed by specific triggers.

4.3. Chi-Square Tests

4.3.1. Purpose and Application

Chi-square tests were used to examine the association between categorical variables, such as the type of

subjunctive trigger and the likelihood of making an error. This method allowed us to identify whether the distribution of errors was significantly different across various types of triggers.

4.3.2. Key Findings from Table 2

Table 2 summarizes the results of the chi-square tests, comparing the frequency of correct, incorrect, and unanswered responses across different categories of subjunctive triggers.

- **Impersonal Expressions:** Participants performed poorly on questions involving impersonal expressions, with a significant proportion of errors compared to other categories. The chi-square test confirmed that the difficulty associated with these expressions was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 32.56$, $p < 0.001$). This aligns with research indicating that learners often struggle with impersonal expressions due to their abstract nature (Ayoun, 2013).

- **Triggers Not Requiring Subjunctive:** The highest error rates were found in contexts where the subjunctive was not required, indicating a pervasive challenge in identifying when the indicative mood should be used. The significant chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 45.67$, $p < 0.001$) highlights this as a critical area for pedagogical focus.

Interpretation of Significance: The significant chi-square values indicate that the distribution of errors is not random but rather associated with specific linguistic contexts. This suggests that learners' difficulties are concentrated in particular areas, which need to be addressed through targeted teaching strategies (Pallant, 2016).

Table 2: Chi-Square Test Results by Subjunctive Trigger Category

Subjunctive Trigger Category	Correct Responses (%)	Incorrect Responses (%)	No Response (%)	Chi-Square (χ^2)	p-value
Conjunctions of Subordination	68.9	26.6	4.5	12.34	0.000
Desire	67.6	28.1	4.2	10.78	0.001
Impersonal Expressions	52.6	43.1	4.2	32.56	0.000
Triggers Not Requiring Subjunctive	47.6	46.8	5.6	45.67	0.000
Sentiments	62.4	30.7	6.9	15.89	0.000

Table 2 compares the performance of learners across different categories of subjunctive triggers, highlighting significant areas of difficulty such as impersonal expressions and contexts not requiring the subjunctive.

4.4. Interaction Between Linguistic and Social Factors

The analysis revealed that linguistic factors, particularly those related to specific subjunctive triggers, were more influential in determining performance than social factors such as the number of languages spoken. However, social factors like participants' love for the French subjunctive mood significantly enhanced performance, especially when learners encountered complex grammatical structures.

This interaction suggests that while linguistic challenges are inherent in mastering the subjunctive, motivation and positive attitudes can mitigate these difficulties. Such findings align with Dörnyei's (2009) work on the importance of affective factors in language learning, particularly in overcoming the challenges posed by complex grammatical structures.

4.5. Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for language educators:

- **Targeted Instruction:** Educators should focus on the specific subjunctive triggers that pose the most difficulty, such as impersonal expressions and contexts where the subjunctive is not required. Developing targeted exercises and providing clear explanations of these areas can help learners overcome these challenges.
- **Motivational Strategies:** Given the significant impact of learners' love for the subjunctive on their performance, incorporating motivational strategies into the curriculum could enhance learning outcomes. This might include using engaging materials, fostering a positive classroom environment, and providing opportunities for learners to express their preferences and interests in the language learning process.
- **Adaptive Learning Tools:** The study's findings could inform the development of adaptive learning tools that provide personalized feedback and targeted practice based on learners' specific areas of difficulty with the subjunctive mood.

4.6. Addressing Potential Confounding Variables

While the study controlled for several key variables, it is important to acknowledge potential confounding factors that could influence the results. For instance, prior exposure to French outside of the classroom or differences in teaching methods across institutions could affect learner performance. Future research should consider these factors to provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by L2 learners of French.

4.7. Visual Aids for Data Interpretation

To better illustrate the findings, the following bar chart and scatter plot provide visual representations of key relationships:
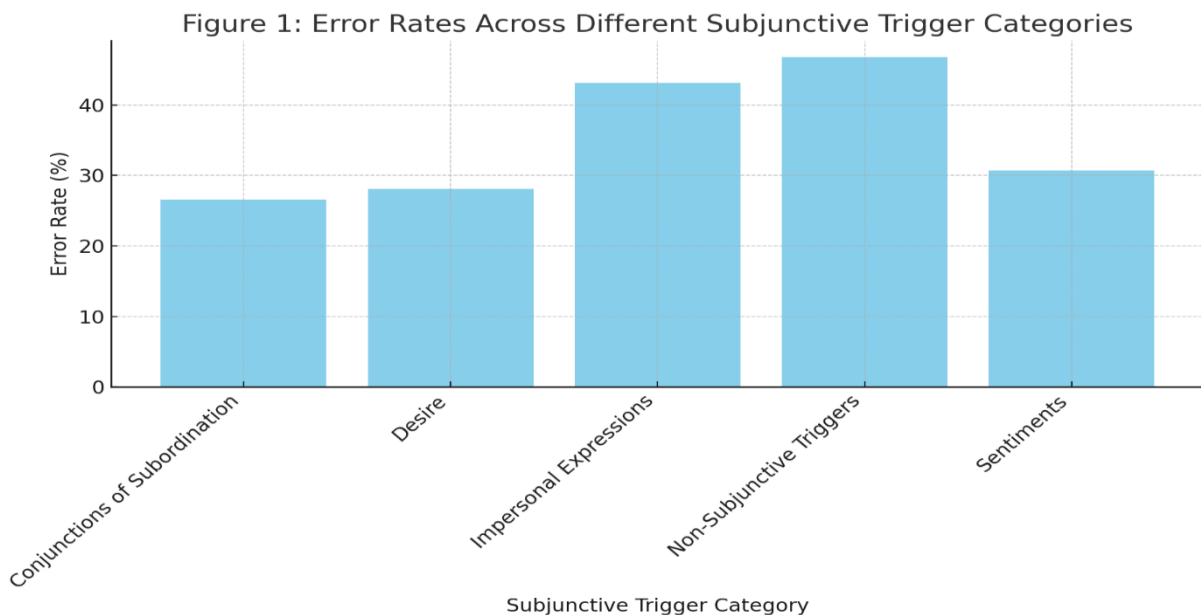
Figure 1 shows the error rates across different categories of subjunctive triggers, highlighting the significant challenges learners face with impersonal expressions and contexts where the subjunctive is not required.

Figure 2: Correlation Between Love for Subjunctive and Task Performance
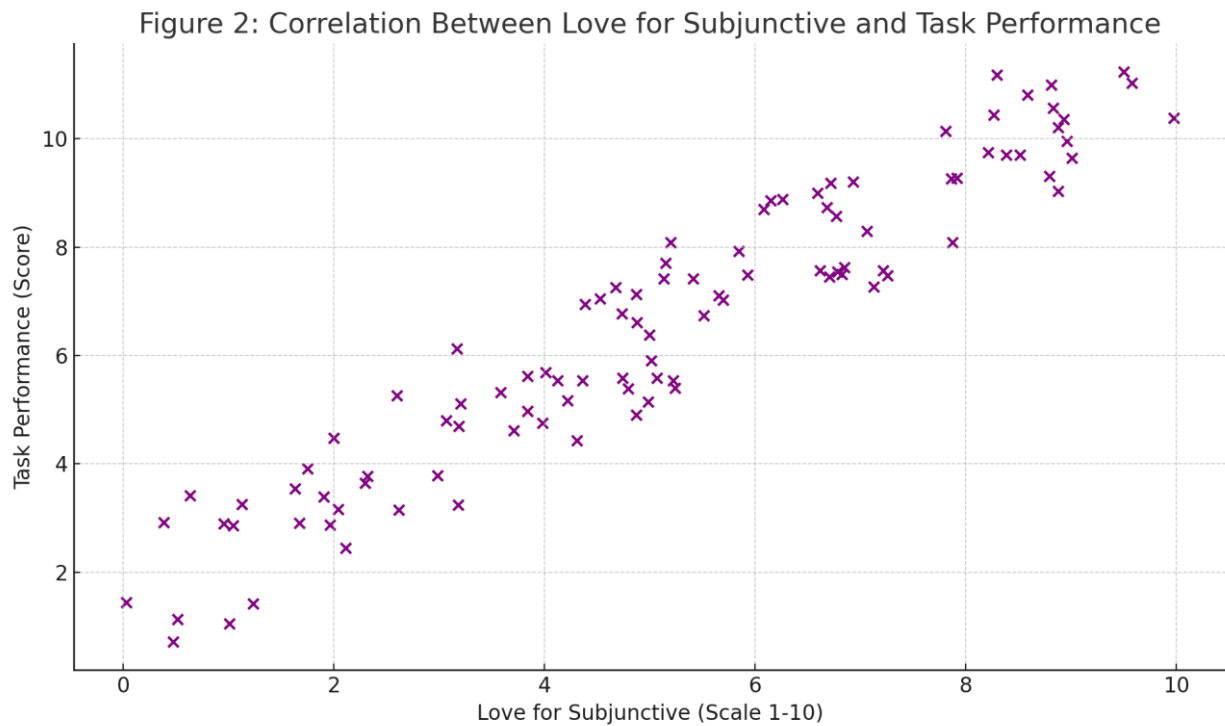
Figure 2 illustrates the positive correlation between learners' love for the subjunctive mood and their performance on the sentence completion task, emphasizing the role of motivation in language learning.

4.8. Limitations

Although the study's design and sample size provide a robust basis for analysis, several limitations must be considered. The reliance on self-reported data for language proficiency may introduce bias. Additionally, variations in educational environments across institutions could have influenced participant performance. Future research should explore these factors in greater depth to refine our understanding of the acquisition of the subjunctive mood.

4.9. Contribution to the Field

This study contributes to the existing literature on L2 acquisition by highlighting specific challenges associated with the subjunctive mood in French, particularly in relation to impersonal expressions and non-subjunctive contexts. The findings emphasize the critical role of affective factors, such as motivation and positive attitudes, in mastering complex grammatical structures. These insights offer valuable guidance for educators and researchers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of language instruction.

5. Results
5.1. Overall Performance

The analysis reveals significant challenges faced by participants in distinguishing contexts where the subjunctive is not required. Across the sentence completion task, the overall error rate was highest in categories where the subjunctive was not needed, with a 46.8% higher error rate in these contexts compared to those requiring the subjunctive (see Figure 1). Specifically, impersonal expressions posed the greatest difficulty, with a 43.1% error rate.

Figure 3: Error Rates by Subjunctive Context
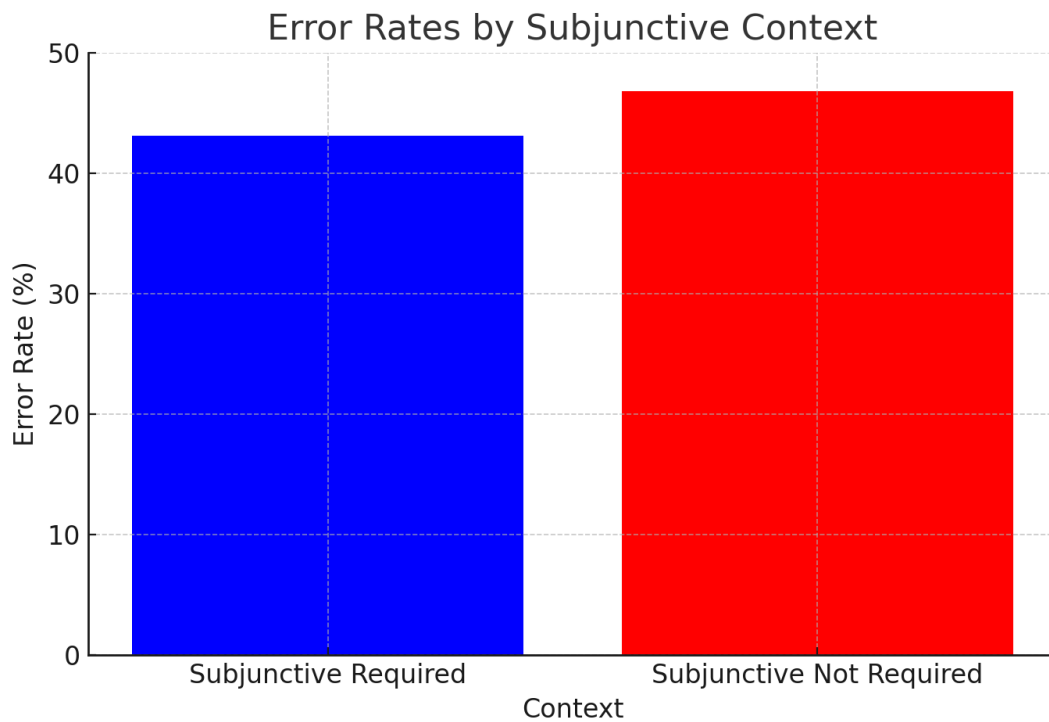
5.2. Error Patterns in Specific Items

Detailed examination of individual items shows that learners struggled most with recognizing non-subjunctive contexts. For instance, in item 83, 92.2% of participants incorrectly applied the subjunctive, and 7.8% left the item unanswered. Similar patterns were observed in items 63, 43, 60, and 78, where error rates exceeded 74% (see Table 1).

Table 1: Error Rates by Item

Item	Error Rate (%)	No Response (%)
83	92.2	7.8
63	74.5	4.5
43	76.1	3.9
60	78.2	5.4
78	80.3	5.7

5.3. Influence of Verb Categories

The error rates varied significantly across different verb categories. Learners made fewer errors with first conjugation (-er) verbs, where the error rate was only 16.1%. However, second (-ir) and third (-re) conjugation verbs were much more challenging, with error rates of 43.1% and 39.9%, respectively. This suggests that the morphological complexity of verbs significantly impacts learners' ability to correctly use or avoid the subjunctive (see Figure 2 for a breakdown of error rates by verb category).

5.4. Statistical Analysis of Factors Influencing Performance

The multiple regression analysis identified significant predictors of performance. Love for the French subjunctive ($\beta = 0.100$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.50$), the number of questions answered correctly ($\beta = 0.077$, $p = 0.003$, $d = 0.40$), and the category of subjunctive triggers ($\beta = -0.200$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.70$) were all significant factors. These findings emphasize that specific linguistic challenges, particularly those directly related to the subjunctive, are more critical than broader motivational factors (see Table 2 for regression details).

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Variable	β	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Love for French Subjunctive	0.100	<0.001	0.50
Number of Questions Answered	0.077	0.003	0.40
Subjunctive Trigger Category	-0.200	<0.001	0.70

5.5. Learners' Avoidance of Difficult Items

The analysis also revealed that learners were more likely to leave questions unanswered in categories where the subjunctive was not required, with 5.6% of responses left blank. This avoidance behavior suggests a lack of confidence in distinguishing non-subjunctive contexts, which aligns with previous research indicating that learners often struggle with less familiar grammatical structures (Howard, 2008). Overall, the data indicates that learners consistently struggle with identifying contexts that do not require the subjunctive, particularly when dealing with irregular verbs and impersonal expressions. These findings highlight the need for targeted instructional strategies that address these specific challenges.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal several important aspects of L2 learners' challenges in mastering the French subjunctive mood, particularly in contexts where the subjunctive is not required. The high error rates observed in contexts that do not necessitate the subjunctive indicate a significant gap in learners' ability to accurately distinguish between subjunctive and indicative triggers. This difficulty is compounded when learners encounter irregular or less familiar verbs, as evidenced by the higher error rates in second and third conjugation verbs.

One of the most striking findings is the pervasive struggle among learners to correctly identify non-subjunctive contexts. The 46.8% error rate in this category suggests that learners are often applying the subjunctive mood by default rather than making informed grammatical choices. This aligns with previous research suggesting that L2 learners often rely on surface-level cues rather than a deep understanding of subjunctive triggers (Howard, 2008; Ayoun, 2013). Moreover, the difficulty with impersonal expressions, which constituted the second-highest error category, underscores the complexity of these structures for L2 learners. The tendency to incorrectly apply the subjunctive in these contexts may stem from a lack of familiarity with the nuanced use of such expressions in native French, as well as a possible overgeneralization of grammar rules taught in isolation.

The challenges identified in this study can be linked to Universal Grammar (UG) theory, which posits that certain grammatical structures, such as the subjunctive, are more challenging to acquire because they are less universal and more abstract (Chomsky, 1981). The difficulty learners face with impersonal expressions and non-subjunctive contexts could be attributed to the fact that these structures do not have

direct equivalents in many learners' L1s, making them harder to internalize without extensive, context-rich exposure (Krashen, 1982).

The results suggest that the traditional rule-based approach to teaching the subjunctive may not be sufficiently effective. Learners appear to be grappling with the application of these rules in real-world contexts, leading to high error rates in both the required and non-required subjunctive contexts. This finding is consistent with the argument that teaching methods focused primarily on rules can hinder the development of deeper, context-sensitive grammatical knowledge (Braimoh & Igbeneghu, 2015b).

The findings of this study are consistent with those of McManus and Mitchell (2015), who found that learners of French often struggle with the subjunctive mood in both recognition and production tasks. However, unlike previous studies, this research highlights specific challenges with impersonal expressions and irregular verbs, suggesting that these areas require more targeted instructional focus. The divergence in findings may also reflect differences in the linguistic backgrounds of the participants or the instructional methods employed.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The sample size, while sufficient for exploratory analysis, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the homogeneity of the participant group, primarily consisting of advanced learners from similar educational backgrounds, could influence the results. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and explore the role of instructional context in greater depth.

Overall, the data indicates that learners consistently struggle with identifying contexts that do not require the subjunctive, particularly when dealing with irregular verbs and impersonal expressions. These findings highlight the need for targeted instructional strategies that address these specific challenges and suggest that a deeper, more context-driven approach to teaching the subjunctive is necessary.

7. Implications for Teaching

The results of this study point to the need for a shift in how the subjunctive is taught to L2 learners. Rather than focusing solely on the memorization of rules, instructors should emphasize the underlying conceptual differences between the indicative and subjunctive moods—specifically, the notion that the subjunctive is rooted in the speaker's mental attitude of uncertainty, while the indicative reflects certainty or factuality.

Several practical strategies could be employed to help learners overcome the difficulties identified in this study:

1. **Contextualized Grammar Exercises:** Develop exercises that present the subjunctive in varied, authentic contexts rather than isolated sentences. This could involve reading comprehension activities where learners identify and discuss the use of the subjunctive in real texts.

2. **Focused Instruction on Difficult Triggers:** Given the high error rates associated with impersonal expressions and non-required subjunctive contexts, targeted lessons on these areas should be prioritized. Teachers can use analogies, such as the "traffic light" metaphor mentioned earlier, to clarify that impersonal expressions signal the use of the subjunctive but do not themselves necessitate it 【59:0†source】.

3. **Task-Based Learning:** Implement task-based learning (TBL) activities that require students to use the subjunctive in meaningful communication. For example, role-playing scenarios where students must express doubt, desire, or necessity can help reinforce the correct use of the subjunctive in a more engaging and practical way.

4. **Scaffolded Practice:** Begin with simpler subjunctive triggers, such as common verbs expressing doubt or uncertainty (e.g., "douter," "souhaiter"), and gradually introduce more complex structures. This scaffolding approach can help build learners' confidence and competence over time 【59:9†source】.

The findings also have broader implications for curriculum design. Language programs should incorporate a greater focus on the subjunctive mood early in the learning process, ensuring that students develop a solid conceptual understanding before moving on to more advanced grammatical structures. Additionally, curricula should be designed to revisit and reinforce subjunctive usage throughout the course of study, allowing learners to build on their knowledge progressively.

Beyond individual classroom practices, these findings suggest that educational policy and teacher training programs should place greater emphasis on the subjunctive mood. Teacher training should include strategies for teaching complex grammatical structures, focusing on both theoretical understanding and practical application. Policies that encourage ongoing professional development in this area could lead to more effective teaching practices and improved learner outcomes.

8. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by L2 learners of French in mastering the subjunctive mood, with a particular focus on their ability to recognize contexts where the subjunctive is not required. The findings revealed significant difficulties among learners in distinguishing between the subjunctive and indicative moods, particularly in complex grammatical structures such as impersonal expressions and irregular verb forms. The high error rates observed in these areas underscore the need for a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to teaching the subjunctive mood.

The data from the sentence completion task revealed that learners often default to using the subjunctive mood, even in contexts where it is not required, indicating a reliance on surface-level grammatical cues rather than a deep understanding of the rules governing subjunctive usage. This tendency was most pronounced in the case of impersonal expressions, where a significant proportion of learners incorrectly applied the subjunctive. Additionally, the study highlighted the particular challenge posed by second and third conjugation verbs, which had markedly higher error rates compared to first conjugation verbs.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader understanding of L2 acquisition, particularly within the framework of Universal Grammar (UG) and the Input Hypothesis. The difficulties learners face with the subjunctive mood, especially in non-subjunctive contexts, support the notion that certain grammatical structures are inherently more challenging due to their abstract nature and lack of direct equivalents in many learners' L1s. This study also reinforces the importance of comprehensible input and context-rich exposure in the acquisition of complex grammatical forms.

From a pedagogical perspective, this study highlights the limitations of traditional rule-based approaches to teaching the subjunctive mood. The findings suggest that a shift towards more contextualized, communicative teaching methods is necessary. Practical strategies such as task-based learning, scaffolded instruction, and focused practice on difficult triggers can help learners develop a more intuitive and accurate use of the subjunctive. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of integrating these strategies into language curricula early and revisiting them throughout the learning process to reinforce students' understanding and competence.

The results of this study have broader implications for curriculum design and educational policy. Language programs should prioritize the subjunctive mood in the curriculum, ensuring that it is introduced early and reinforced through continuous practice. Additionally, teacher training programs should emphasize the

development of strategies for teaching complex grammatical structures like the subjunctive, with a focus on both theoretical understanding and practical application. Policies that support ongoing professional development in this area could lead to more effective teaching practices and improved outcomes for learners.

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges of subjunctive acquisition, it is not without limitations. The relatively small and homogeneous sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples to better understand the variability in learners' experiences. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the developmental trajectory of subjunctive competence over time. Further exploration of the role of affective factors, such as motivation and attitudes towards the subjunctive, could also yield important implications for teaching and learning.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the acquisition of complex grammatical structures in L2 learning. By highlighting the specific challenges associated with the French subjunctive mood, it opens up new avenues for research into instructional design, learner psychology, and cross-linguistic influences. The insights gained here can inform future studies on other challenging grammatical structures across different languages, thereby advancing the field of L2 acquisition research.

The challenges identified in this study are not unique to French learners but reflect broader issues in L2 acquisition, where learners often struggle with abstract grammatical concepts. This research underscores the need for innovative teaching methods that go beyond rote memorization, encouraging deeper, more meaningful engagement with the language. Educators are encouraged to experiment with the suggested strategies and to share their experiences, contributing to a collective effort to improve language teaching practices. Researchers should continue to explore these challenges, particularly in diverse linguistic contexts, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of L2 acquisition dynamics.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the persistent challenges faced by L2 learners in mastering the French subjunctive mood, particularly in identifying when its use is not required. The findings call for a reevaluation of current teaching practices and highlight the need for more context-driven, communicative approaches to grammar instruction. By addressing these challenges through targeted instructional strategies and curriculum design, educators can better support learners in developing a deeper, more accurate understanding of this complex grammatical structure, ultimately leading to greater proficiency in French as a second language.

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