The Bag of Winds: Navigating AI-Assisted Writing Instruction in French as a Second Language

Spyridon Simotas
University of Virginia

Writing as an Odyssey

Writing is hard.

It can be rewarding when it's over, but the actual process of putting one word after the other in a manner that renders tangled thoughts legible doesn't always feel like a purely fun experience. It becomes even less enjoyable when one is writing in a language not yet fully mastered.

I often compare writing to an odyssey. The writer embarks on a journey that is slow and messy. Thick clouds of uncertainty obscure the potential horizon of a final destination.

Just like Odysseus, the writer must endure many challenges: overcome obstacles, fend off temptations and distractions, and remain focused on reaching the desired shore.

But neither Odysseus nor the poet is alone. Homer invokes the Muse, much as today's writer invokes a Large Language Model. As for Odysseus, despite being a man of many devices, he receives crucial assistance from the gods at critical moments in his journey.

My favorite intervention of all is the bag of winds. Aeolus, the god of the winds, gives Odysseus the bag to help him sail home. Yet Odysseus' crew, suspecting gold lies within, opens it recklessly and secretly (while Odysseus is asleep), causing a storm that blows them off course: "They opened up the bag, and all the winds rushed out at once. A sudden buffet seized us and hurled us back to sea, the wrong direction, far from our home." (Homer, trans. [E. Wilson], 2017)

This cautionary tale feels apt for generative artificial intelligence (GenAI)—a technology so powerful that it requires skillful and responsible handling.

As a language instructor who writes both in French and English — languages acquired in addition to my native Greek — I have firsthand experience with the challenges associated with writing in a foreign language. Fortunately, I was lucky to have mentors and first readers who, when I needed it most, pulled up a chair next to me, poring over my drafts and revealing the craft of revision.

Before GenAI came along, how many of my students had the privilege of having a first reader? Google Translate, being as easily accessible as it is, has been appropriated as an editing service with mixed success and questionable results (O'Neill, 2019). The arrival of GenAI presented an intriguing possibility: what if it could serve as that essential first reader for students, providing immediate, personalized feedback to guide them through the revision process?

The idea was compelling, but I couldn't dismiss the negative press AI was receiving. News headlines warned of AI's dangers in education, and students were already finding creative ways to misuse the technology. Like any pedagogical innovation – especially one involving emerging technology – implementation could backfire. Despite my good intentions, I worried I might be about to throw my students into the storm.

By the time I started integrating GenAI into assignments, the winds were out of the bag. ChatGPT had already gained unprecedented momentum in academic circles, especially among students. Mollick and Mollick's influential approach to teaching with AI (2023) was the catalyst that prompted educators, including myself, to start experimenting with it. My task, I realized, was not simply to offer a bag of winds and hope for the best, but to design a course where AI could act as a navigation aid, and where the journey remained the students' own.

The Initial Experiment

I tentatively piloted GenAI feedback into my upper-level French writing courses in a single assignment, before extending it to all written assignments in subsequent semesters. To support this shift, I brought writing into the classroom through multiple writing workshops for each assignment and redesigned the writing process as a scaffolded four-stage approach: planning, drafting, revising, and editing.

The idea was to keep students in control of their drafts, while integrating AI during revision and editing. This approach deliberately avoided both uncritical adoption and outright rejection of GenAI. By framing it as a revision aid rather than a draft generator, I aimed to preserve students' language-skill development and awareness of their voices. Each assignment was paired with a reflection to support students' metacognitive awareness and foster their development as autonomous learners.

I was intrigued by GenAI's potential to offer immediate and, at least in theory, more expansive feedback than a spellchecker or Google Translate. So, I designed a prompt for Copilot (UVA's official GenAI tool) to steer the Large Language Model to act as a tutor — posing questions about grammar, vocabulary, organization, and style. Copilot wasn't meant to rewrite the draft, but to suggest corrective action from students. To support the revision process, I implemented a shared feedback repository (*Carnet de corrections*) where students documented their interactions with Copilot. This collaborative document enabled systematic evaluation of AI feedback and sparked productive discussions about the tool's strengths and limitations.

Positive Feedback Despite the Challenges

As it turned out, one of the major limitations of the experiment was prompting! Even with carefully written prompts, Copilot sometimes veered off course, offering suggestions that did not correspond to the students' needs, either because they did not match the students' proficiency level or because they were superfluous.

After several semesters using GenAI to support feedback for revision, I saw clear improvements in students' writing, despite these limitations. While common grammatical errors in French did not disappear, their frequency decreased for most students. At the same time, knowing that students could get thorough feedback on their grammar from Copilot freed up time for conversations about narrative structure and storytelling. In addition, the process of revision itself became more transparent, bringing into focus the kind of meticulous work that goes into editing to achieve clarity and precision: thoughtful word choice, attention to argumentation, and the importance of drawing the reader's attention. Ultimately, students were able to produce more coherent work without losing their voices.

When surveyed, students also reported positive perceptions toward GenAI feedback. The majority agreed that it improved their writing skills, helped them learn from mistakes, and motivated them to tackle challenging writing tasks. They appreciated AI as a low-pressure reviewer that reduced anxiety and encouraged risk-taking. It also helped them notice errors and explore language nuances. That said, some students remain neutral or skeptical, echoing critical voices against AI's encroachment in the educational sector.

Evolution of The Model: Building Grammélie

The fear that classrooms are becoming testing grounds for half-baked technologies from Silicon Valley startups is legitimate. As Laurent Dubreuil (2025) notes, GenAI represents the latest phase in the modern project to standardize and bureaucratize the human experience of the mind.

Spelling and grammar checkers built into word processors already contribute to the trend toward homogenization. Yet, they remain end-stage proofreading tools that offer no explanations for their recommendations. GenAI occupies a unique middle ground between automation and instruction. It creates an interactive space where students can engage with their writing in a conversational way.

However, the strong pull of automation can undermine this potential for meaningful interaction. That's because, despite their dynamic entrance into education, proprietary AI systems remain oriented toward task completion rather than learning. Even thoughfully crafted prompts can't easily override chatbots' default behavior of prioritizing customer satisfaction. To address this issue, our class discussions emphasized the "human in the loop" principle (Mollick, 2024), which requires us to actively engage with and take responsibility for AI outputs rather than passively accepting them.

This early experiment with AI and class discussions revealed the limitations of using generic chatbots for pedagogical purposes. But, as AI platforms evolve to allow more customization, I saw an opportunity to create *Grammélie* — a specialized AI French language tutor designed to guide students through their writing revision process. What sets *Grammélie* apart is that it does not require intricate prompting or constant reminders of its pedagogical role. It is preconfigured to:

1. Help improve drafts without doing the work for students.
2. Use guiding questions to help students better formulate their ideas.
3. Support reviewing structure, grammar, and vocabulary based on individual needs.
4. Encourage step-by-step progress at the student's own pace.
5. Offer a structured menu of revision options, from understanding the assignment to final proofreading.

The goal is to foster student autonomy and growth through reflective dialogue.

The Journey Continues

Looking back, the evidence is clear: students' writing grew stronger and more coherent, with fewer errors and greater confidence. The collaborative revision process, supported by GenAI, fostered a low-pressure environment where the focus of revision extended from grammatical accuracy to questions of voice and style.

But as I reflect on this intervention, I realize there is a bigger lesson for educators. We cannot remain passive in the face of AI's rapid advancement. We must take a deliberate and critical stance toward GenAI. We owe it to our students to chart a thoughtful course between two extremes: the winds of automation with their seductive allure of effortless writing on one end, and wholesale resistance to AI on the other. For me, navigating these technological winds requires both ancient wisdom and collaboration — working alongside students and AI systems to chart the way forward.

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