

THE CHALLENGES OF WRITTEN DECODING IN FRENCH LANGUAGE CLASSES IN THE ALGERIAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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Abstract

This article has highlighted the embarrassments that hinder the decoding of the written message among university students at the end of their graduation in the French department of the University of El-Oued. The expected objective is to highlight the origins of these embarrassments. We have implemented two investigation tools, namely a questionnaire survey technique with targeted students and a content analysis. The results lead to the conclusion that it is an armada of sources of difficulties of any particularly socio-didactic-pedagogical order.

Keywords: Embarrassment; Comprehension; Writing; French; Sociodidactics; Pedagogy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are activities that dominate our everyday life. Learning is, above all, understanding, as we cannot learn and retain what we have not understood. Understanding is, by definition, "*the ability to decode and interpret the meaning of a verbal message emitted by others.*" (D. BAILLY, 1998: 45)

According to the Dictionary of Didactics of French as a Foreign and Second Language, "*comprehension is the ability resulting from the implementation of cognitive processes, which allows the learner to access the meaning of a text they listen to (oral comprehension) or read (written comprehension).*" (J.-P. CUQ, 2003: 49)

When we discuss the issue of written comprehension, we can say that it traditionally is a crucial concern in the didactics of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), especially in the didactics of writing. It is defined in turn as "*the implementation of the ability to interpret the meaning of a scriptural document by identifying distinctive and meaningful units and structures with lexicosemantic and grammatical status.*" (J.-P. CUQ, 2003: 46)

This contribution addresses the question of written comprehension in French as a foreign language (FFL) in the Algerian university context, particularly at the University of El-Oued, located in the southeast of Algeria, the source of the sample. According to the final minutes of the national pedagogical committee in the field of foreign languages and literature, dated June 27, 2019, this module is officially present throughout the six semesters of the first-cycle degree.

For 15 weeks (the duration of a semester), university students receive 45 hours of instruction, not counting additional semester-long consultation work. Obtaining a French bachelor's degree administratively means the validation of six semesters, which make up the first cycle of the degree, i.e., more than 270 hours of written comprehension instruction. This implies a good acquisition of the relevant competence for master's students.

This written comprehension represents a fundamental linguistic competence, as it not only enables students to decode the messages from a pre-established written medium and access their meaning, but it also prepares them for writing their graduation thesis¹.

It is, therefore, an essential foundation for any writing activity and an adaptable additional support that ensures scriptural security for second-cycle master's university students. As this passage highlights: "*acquiring a dual reading/writing competence seems to be an urgent necessity from the beginning of the learning process.*" (P. MARTINEZ, 2011: 99)

To reach this level, university students must first have a sufficiently broad knowledge of the linguistic system of the target language (French in our case) and writing. They are invited to be able to access the meaning of the supporting text, process various pieces of information, and organize themselves to create coherent mental representations that will allow them to perform adequately in their medium-term exams, their second-cycle graduation thesis, and future competitions for further study. Therefore, a very interesting relationship is established between comprehension and written production. Are they not two facets of the same competence?

In this experimental contribution, the emphasis is placed on the various origins of the different difficulties that hinder written comprehension among first-year master's students in didactics and applied languages at the French department of the University of El-Oued. Motivated by this fact, as we have been teaching in the second-cycle master's program for twelve consecutive semesters².

II. STATE OF AFFAIRS

Through our longitudinal observations of 5 cohorts, we have been able to observe that a significant number of second-cycle students have issues with correct written production, especially during supervised assessments. These students are primarily the ones who have difficulties that hinder their written comprehension. This observation has led us to pose the central question: What is the origin of this dysfunction at the university level?

This dysfunction has also prompted us to create a semester-long assessment while inviting students to respond and/or comment concisely on statements conveying concepts covered during the semester of the current academic year 2020-2021. These concepts include the role of technology, error handling, cognitive strategies, concept mapping, portfolios, heterogeneity, written comprehension, and classroom life. The evaluation criteria are already known to the student audience.

We have mentioned these parameters to be considered during the official in-person sessions of the module: Theories & Learning Situations. These parameters include content, textual coherence, relevance of ideas, language, expression, neatness of work, correct use of punctuation marks, and more. As for clumsy rephrasing, such as empty phrases, incorrect syntax, and systematic repetition of words from the supporting text, these are marked negatively.

At the end of the correction and analysis of the results of 195 students in the module in question, we obtained the following results:

- 40 papers scored between 00.00 and 03.00/20;
- 38 papers received scores between 03.50 and 05.00/20;
- 37 papers achieved scores between 05.50 and 07.00/20;
- 39 papers earned scores between 07.50 and 10.00/20;

- 27 papers attained scores between 10.50 and 13.00/20;
- 11 papers were awarded scores between 13.50 and 15.00/20;
- 02 papers garnered scores between 15.50 and 17.00/20;
- 01 paper scored between 17.50 and 20.00/20.

Secondary questions also deserve clarification to transform our central research question into partial questions: Firstly, are the sources of this dysfunction related to didactic and pedagogical factors? Secondly, do the difficulties originate from a lack of institutional support? Thirdly, is there a sociodidactic insecurity triangulation at the core of this issue? To achieve the objective of identifying the sources of this observed dysfunction, the majority of data construction was conducted using a questionnaire survey technique administered to 200 students from the 9th Master's cohort (M. MILOUDI 2020, 229), accompanied by in-situ observations. The questions posed relate to the sources of difficulties encountered in written comprehension within the university curriculum. (A blank copy of the questionnaire is attached in the annex of this document). We position our research in the field of sociodidactics, a discipline at the forefront of recent research. Its central principle is to consider that every didactic situation is a human and social situation. It represents the situated approach at the intersection of sociolinguistics and language didactics. (M. RISPAIL, 2017: 117)

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

Written comprehension also represents a complex task that calls for complementary knowledge and skills, primarily based on three main elements, as stated by Jocelyne Giasson: the reader, the text, and the context.

III.1. The Reader Variable

The reader is required to assimilate the structures to be employed when reading. These are cognitive structures that encompass knowledge of language (syntactic, phonological, semantic, and pragmatic) on one hand, and knowledge of the world on the other, as well as affective structures representing the reader's attitude and interests during reading. The student mobilizes numerous processes to understand the text according to the same author. This understanding involves the hypotheses built by the students. First, micro-processes come into play in the comprehension of the information contained in the phrasal support. They involve knowledge of words, reading word groups, and micro-selection, meaning the identification of the central idea of the given support.

Next, integration processes that establish connections between the components of the support. They manifest through the appropriate use of words, referents, relationship markers, and the formulation of inferences.

Furthermore, macro-processes with the goal of determining the overall comprehension of the text and the links ensuring coherence within the support. These processes contribute to identifying the central ideas of the text.

Moreover, elaboration processes that offer the reader the opportunity to go beyond the text support and make inferences. We can distinguish five types of elaboration processes: making predictions, forming a mental image, reacting emotionally, integrating new information into prior knowledge, and reasoning about the text. These are transferable, especially for the composition of a graduation project.

Finally, metacognitive processes encourage the reader to adapt to the text and the situation. They provide support for managing their interpretative process.

III.2. the Text Variable

The text support is typically a crucial element in written comprehension, representing the physical passage to be read. In other words, it involves understanding a message with one's eyes, which is essential for the reader. This variable encompasses several criteria. "The most relevant classification criteria in education are the author's intent and literary genre, text structure, and content." These criteria can make reading easy or difficult.

III.3. the Context Variable

Frequently, the context illustrates the situation in which the student reader finds themselves when approaching their text support. This situational context influences linguistic choices and, thus, productions. We can emphasize the following three types:

First, the psychological context relates to contextual conditions specific to the reader, meaning their passion for the text support to be read, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and their reading intention.

Second, the social context encompasses all forms of interactions that may occur during reading between the reader and their environment.

Finally, the physical context includes various material conditions in which the act of reading occurs, such as noise, ventilation, ambient temperature, lighting quality, and the quality of the text support production.

Operational Considerations:

Based on the investigative tools used, we have also chosen to perform a content analysis of exam responses as a methodology to analyze the collected data. We were able to detect a conglomerate of sources of difficulties in understanding written documents (exams in our situation), including the following:

IV.1. Lack of a tracking sheet throughout the academic journey

The portfolio (M. MILOUDI & A. DJEDIAI, 2021: 92), or the student's learning and evaluation file, is not used by both parties in the teaching-learning situation, i.e., the guided part and the guiding part, throughout the semesters of the first cycle of the bachelor's degree, according to the overwhelming majority of students. This implies the absence of reviews and diagnostics. In other words, expectations and needs in this regard are not taken into account. This results in a lack of knowledge about the profile required for entry into the second cycle of the Master's program. Therefore, the idea of ensuring follow-up of acquisitions is nonexistent for the various partners in the teaching-learning situation.

IV.2. Ineffectiveness of strategies adopted by teachers

According to the surveyed public, the effectiveness of the strategies adopted is also lacking when it comes to the choice of text study modalities during modules that consist of text comprehension questions and language structure without prior negotiation³, as confirmed by M. MILOUDI in this passage:

"Teachers tend to opt for a more one-way, vertical relationship with the public rather than promoting interactive horizontality. The latter supports

practices more centered on the student and promotes the development of their autonomy to act alone, unlike lecture-style classes, which appear to be an ineffective method for preparing students for the exercise of various written and oral skills." (M. MILOUDI & M. BEKTACHE, 2020: 11)

For this reason, the strategies adopted at this level need to be reviewed.

IV.3. Evaluation methods during the bachelor's degree

The validation methods for achievements during the first cycle of the bachelor's degree, as well as the evaluation system based on single-choice or multiple-choice questions, play a part in this context. This type of evaluation does not encourage understanding of the written material offered. Note also that, by definition, evaluation consists of collecting a set of information that is sufficiently relevant, valid, and reliable (X. ROGIERS, 2012: 52).

IV.4. Lack of bridges between different cycles

In addition, the absence of bridges between different cycles exacerbates the dysfunction in this context. Furthermore, the failure to take into account the expectations and needs of students widens these fissures. We recommend in this regard that negotiation, coordination, cooperation, and contribution tasks be carried out among all partners in university education to ensure the profile of each module's exit via diagnostic tests that guarantee the profile for entry into the next cycle.

IV.5. Lexical incompetence

According to the responses obtained, knowing all the vocabulary on the day of the exam seems to be the only way to understand the proposed support, according to the surveyed public. The majority of students seem to agree on this point. Ignorance of some lexical items is seen as a barrier that blocks access to the meaning of the statement. This means that vocabulary is the first obstacle to understanding. In accordance with the corpus found, the lack of sufficient language proficiency hinders comprehension.

IV.6. Syntactic inadequacies and grammatical complexity

The French language is a difficult language that can contain complex grammatical structures, according to the perceptions of the majority of those surveyed. Providing the correct answer on the day of the test is consequently a complex task for them. The highly irregular spelling of the language further exacerbates the situation. In this context, enriching the public's lexical repertoire has become a priority.

IV.7. Lack of reading habits among a significant number of students

Reading is the acquisition of the meaning of a written message. There is no denying the role of this factor in understanding written material. It is very important in our investigation to bring this parameter into play. A significant percentage, exceeding 82 %, do not have the habit of reading outside the school context. This, in turn, hampers any decoding operation by the student during exams.

IV.8. Insufficient activation of prerequisites in the Master's class

In parallel, the use of prior knowledge is crucial in our research. This important moment of any session, also called interest awakening, recall, situational setting, or launch

situation, facilitates understanding. According to three-quarters of those surveyed, checking students' prerequisites is almost non-existent. Therefore, resources that facilitate comprehension are not mobilized. These resources serve as the basis for any comprehension.

IV.9. Error handling

Here, we mention the concept of error as a sign of a need for learning. This notion is predominant in the university and is continually used in various studies on the functioning of teaching or learning (Y. REUTER & al., 2010: 99), especially during consultation sessions after exams. According to over half of the surveyed public, these sessions do not represent a remedy for the shortcomings observed during exams in any way. The vast majority of the public opts for immediate remediation to overcome problematic aspects of understanding. For them, this idea is conveyed: "*Learning always entails the risk of making mistakes.*" (J. P. ASTOLFI 2008: 22)

IV.10. Decoding difficulties

Similarly, decoding is a very important stage for acquiring different language skills in written language, both in reception and production. It involves the grapheme-phoneme correspondence and relies on visual perception rather than auditory perception. It is said that understanding written language is the oral expression of a written message. A considerable percentage finds it difficult to hypothesize the meaning of textual materials they confront on the day of the exam. In this case, the student fails to have a complete representation of the information that will be mentally processed later. A significant portion is not satisfied with their level of proficiency in the French language.

IV.11. Exploitation of the inference process

These processes are part of cognitive strategies and are also known as guessing strategies (CYR, 1998: 50), used to learn a language. They contribute to the construction of comprehension and interpretation of written material. In this case, these processes have not been sufficiently exploited by both parties in the teaching-learning situation during the previous training period, specifically during the first cycle of the bachelor's degree.

IV.12. Incompetence in terms of the overall organization of the text

All things considered, students are unable to sort important information in textual materials, such as the author's intent, illustrations, central ideas, etc. This is due to the absence of different types of reading in the university language classes. Overall, global, selective, and linear reading does not have the desirable importance for a second-cycle French student, according to almost all of those surveyed. This prevents a proper understanding of the text support.

IV.13. Memory incapacity

In our research, we have taken into account the role of memory. To read and understand, good memory is necessary. Memory must be characterized by the ability to register, store, retain, and recall ideas related to the lived experience. (R. GALISSON & D. COSTE, 1976: 335) More than half declare their inability to memorize, which reflects their performance on the day of the exam.

IV.14. Unfamiliarity with the field of didactics

A significant number of students, 92% of those surveyed, are unable to understand the jargon of the field of didactics. This field we discuss in the exam must be known to the student through experience, previous studies, or prior readings so that they can easily understand its content and prepare for future knowledge. Therefore, it is a matter of forming good habits in the language class.

IV.15. Environmental background and the predominant influence of the mother tongue:

This question was posed with the aim of understanding the impact of extralinguistic factors on written comprehension difficulties. The limitation of vocabulary used in the responses and syntactical poverty prompted us to ask such a question. This passage confirms the predominant influence of the mother tongue in the region where the university is located:

"A real sense of devaluation of language practices in French is reflected in negative language behavior resulting from a certain feeling of inferiority in the face of language practices qualified as linguistic insecurity. This conflictual and problematic situation of the French language is the result of a complex interweaving of many sociolinguistic factors." (M. MILOUDI, 2019: 235)

The results lead to the conclusion that the source of these difficulties is due to a variety of factors, including the lack of a tracking sheet for each student, the strategies adopted by teachers in the practice of written comprehension, lexical ignorance, and syntactic deficiencies resulting from language insecurity, scriptural insecurity, and methodological insecurity, the lack of reading habits, error handling, etc.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In light of what we have just presented, the above-mentioned conglomerate of sources of dysfunction of all kinds, especially didactic-pedagogical and sociodidactic, is crippling the understanding of written text within the French department at the University of El-Oued.

Sociodidactically speaking, the French language appears to be complex to Master's level students in this department; its mastery often poses problems, especially for non-natives, and its teaching-learning process proves to be challenging due to its rules and exceptions.

Empirically speaking, these students encounter significant difficulties, especially when they are asked to produce written work. Our humble experience as a French teacher and inspector has allowed us to observe that those who do not understand what they read are usually the weakest in written production. Furthermore, students must be more aware of the role of written code, thoroughly understand the statements presented during the exam, and attempt to leverage their prior knowledge to present a somewhat acceptable piece of writing in terms of text coherence. Knowing how to judiciously and effectively select texts during the Written Comprehension module is fundamental.

Textual coherence, which often poses problems during writing, requires us to use learning strategies based on cognitive skills to teach students to link ideas, follow information progression, and establish connections between response segments.

Moreover, students' prior knowledge plays a crucial role in facilitating comprehension of exam statements. This idea, in turn, facilitates the development of scriptural skills and the acquisition of new learning.

The mismatch between undergraduate and postgraduate training is considered, by those surveyed, a major gap in terms of performance on exam day. This requires harmonizing bridges between academic levels to address the observed deficiencies.

VI. CONCLUSION

Opting for a pedagogical remediation project at the master's level has become essential. It represents an opportunity to experience reading situations and enjoy books. The proposal of specific support sessions to address difficulties has become a necessity in this context. A support program could be implemented during the undergraduate cycle, allowing students to develop their reading and writing skills, adopting a dual role as both readers and authors. (M. MILOUDI & M. BEKTACHE, 2020: 7). In this context, teachers are encouraged to adopt more effective strategies, such as text preparation before coming to class. In the end, we find it useful to consider this preliminary study as a first step forward.

Footnotes

- 1) Harmonization of the offer of training in Master of Didactics and Applied Languages, University of El-Oued Hamma Lakhdar, academic year 2016-2017.
- 2) During these semesters, we taught the following modules: Didactics of FFL: Methods, Manuals & Materials, Observation of Pedagogical Practices, Evaluation in FFL, Theories & Learning Situations of FFL, Research Tools, Writing Techniques, Academic Writing, Written & Oral Practice of Language, Multimedia & FFL Teaching, Introduction to Didactics, Cognitive Psychology, Communication Sciences, and Culture(s) & Civilization of the Language.
- 3) The written comprehension session, according to the surveyed public, consists of a series of texts to study following the orientations and recommendations of official BEM and BAC exams. We cite their titles as mentioned by the concerned students: memories and nostalgia, sharing, the right to be different, war and peace, freedom, the call for modernity, man and science, in the light of reason, travel narratives, autobiographical writings.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

- 1) Vos activités d'apprentissage sont-elles suivies par le biais d'une fiche suiveuse et/ou une fiche de progrès ? (Are your learning activities monitored through a follow-up sheet and/or a progress report?)
- 2) Les stratégies adoptées par les enseignants pendant votre 1^{er} cycle de licence sont-elles efficaces pour faciliter votre compréhension des supports écrits ? (Are the strategies employed by the teachers during your first cycle of the Bachelor's program effective in facilitating your understanding of written materials?)
- 3) Les modalités d'évaluation lors de votre 1^{er} cycle de licence se basent-elles sur les questions ouvertes et la rédaction ? (Are the evaluation methods during your first cycle of the Bachelor's program based on open-ended questions and writing?)
- 4) La formation universitaire en français est-elle une continuité de formation pré-universitaire ? (Is university education in French a continuation of pre-university education?)
- 5) La méconnaissance du lexique du support écrit entrave-t-elle la compréhension du support écrit suggéré ? (Does a lack of vocabulary in written materials hinder your comprehension of the suggested written content?)
- 6) Les carences syntaxiques entravent-elles le décodage des messages contenus dans un support écrit ? (Do syntactical deficiencies impede the decoding of messages contained in written materials?)
- 7) Avez-vous l'habitude de lire en français ? (Do you have a habit of reading in French?)
- 8) Les prérequis sont-ils souvent contrôlés par vos enseignants du 1^{er} cycle ? (Are prerequisites often assessed by your teachers during the first cycle?)

- 9) La séance de consultation à l'issue de l'examen est-elle une séance de remédiation et de traitement de l'erreur ? (Is the consultation session following the exam a remediation and error treatment session?)
- 10) Êtes-vous satisfait de votre niveau de langue ? (Are you satisfied with your language proficiency level?)
- 11) Les stratégies de divinement sont-elles activées pendant votre formation du 1^{er} cycle ? (Are guessing strategies activated during your first-cycle training?)
- 12) Êtes-vous capable de comprendre l'organisation globale du texte proposé la journée de l'examen ? (Are you capable of understanding the overall organization of the text presented on the day of the exam?)
- 13) Êtes-vous capable de faire des activités de mémorisation ? Ces activités vous facilitent la compréhension de vos supports écrits ? (Can you engage in memorization activities? Do these activities facilitate your understanding of written materials?)
- 14) Vous comprenez facilement le jargon de didactique utilisé en Master ? (Do you easily understand the didactic jargon used in the Master's program?)
- 15) Le contexte socio environnemental impacte-t-il votre compréhension des supports écrits ? (Does the socio-environmental context impact your comprehension of written materials?)