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Improve the comprehension and answering of multiple choice questions in French reading skills with Wolfert's students

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Citation

Leba, C. (2022). *Improve the comprehension and answering of multiple choice questions in French reading skills with Wolfert's students.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3636003>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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with Wolfert's students**

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Abstract

The multiple-choice questions seem to be a nightmare for many Havo 4 students at Wolfert Bilingual during the French reading comprehension test since the beginning of my internship at this school and we agreed that we would work together with them to improve them. Thus we decided to answer the following question: How can we improve the understanding and answering of multiple choice questions in French reading skills with Wolfert's students? We started from a traditional approach and analysed it based on the theories of Dieudonné Leclercq (1986, 2006), Rafael Moreno (2006), Thomas Haladyna (2019) and the existing working questionnaire in the French department which we adjusted. There appears to be a considerable improvement in these students at the end of this experiment, as they applied the necessary instructions well. This was the aim of this experiment, which could be useful for these students, me, my colleagues, our school, everyone who is interested in it and for future generations.

Keywords: multiple-choice questions, understanding, answering, French reading skills, comprehension, improve, with, students, Action Research.

Introduction

The multiple-choice questions seem to be a nightmare for many Havo 4 students at Wolfert Bilingual during the French reading comprehension test since the beginning of my internship at this school. However, this test is unavoidable for them because it is one of the compulsory exercises for those who choose French as a foreign language (L2) in the Netherlands. It is for this reason that I, Jacqueline and these students are interested in working collectively to see how we can make this activity less nightmarish for them. The following research question must therefore be answered: *How can we improve the understanding and answering of multiple choice questions in French reading skills with Wolfert's students?* The aim is to show, using a descriptive and analytical method, how we will work together with the students of Havo 4 to improve understanding and the choice of correct answers among the various possibilities (MCQ). The goal of this study is to work together to better assist these students in choosing the right answers from the various multiple-choice questions, which would also be useful for future generations who could use them or for anyone interested in them.

This research also seems relevant in the context of Wolfert Bilingual which is part of the WTP because it takes place in a bilingual or even multilingual context, which is different from the ordinary context of some Dutch schools which is purely Dutch-oriented and which uses only foreign languages as subjects. We will therefore have as complementary work tools the 4 competences of the WTP¹ and the role of intercultural communication skills related to learning French². We will start from the theories that have been developed in multiple choice questions by Dieudonné Leclercq³(1986, 2006), Rafael Moreno⁴(2006) and Thomas Haladyna⁵(2019). These will help us better explain our research question from a traditional approach that will be divided into six points. First, we will present the theoretical framework of this study. Second, we will explain our research question. Third, we will describe the instruments and implementation of the method used. Fourth, we will analyse the results obtained. Fifth, we will clearly state the conclusion that follows. Sixth, we will conclude our work with a discussion.

I- Theories

Theories on multiple choice questions are well known in the academic field, especially in the social sciences and economics, but we also use them in other fields such as literary

¹ Study Guide, World Teachers Programme, ICLON academic pre-service teacher education: Plus programme specialising in bilingual and international education, Leiden, Leiden University ICLON, 2020-2021, p. 10, 13-14.

² Byram, M., Nichols, A. & Stevens, D. (2001) Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

³ https://orbi.uliege.be/bitstream/2268/17835/1/La_conception_des_QCM_avril_2008.pdf consulted on 26.04.2021.

⁴

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jose_Muniz3/publication/248780394_New_Guidelines_for_Developing_Multiple-Choice_Items/links/54b558810cf28ebe92e509c5.pdf , consulted on 26.04.2021.

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1080/08957347.2019.1660348> , consulted on 26.04.2021.

studies. We note among others the theories of Leclercq, Moreno and those of Haladyna. These form our theoretical basis for practically addressing our research question.

Leclercq defined a multiple-choice question as "a question to which the student answers by making a selection (at least) among several proposed solutions, each of which is judged (by the test constructor and by a consensus among specialists) to be correct or incorrect independently of the student who must answer it." ⁶In addition he explored their advantages, their disadvantages as well as their structures⁷. Moreno and Haladyna have worked more on their design rules⁸. This allowed us to understand their principles, their elaboration and their operating rules. Therefore, this theoretical part, although brief, puts us into the swing of our research question which starts from the same model and introduces questionnaires of MCQ established by the French department of Wolfert Bilingual. These questionnaires follow the same principles and rules of operation as those elaborated by these theorists. We no longer need to formalise and conceptualise them theoretically in this study because these questionnaires⁹ already exist. We tailor them to the needs of the students in this study, since it is their outputs that are being discussed. This leads us to our research question.

II- Research question

How can we improve the comprehension and answering of multiple choice questions in French reading skills with Wolfert's students? In other words, it is about showing how we will work together to improve the understanding, choice and handling of MCQs with Havo 4 students. Similar work has already been done in the economic sciences by Jean-Pierre Moussette¹⁰ (2001) who showed the importance of MCQs in the first year of a Bachelor of Economics degree. In our case, we will focus on learning French as a foreign language, where we will test how to improve the understanding and choice of MCQs during the reading comprehension test with Havo 4 students at Wolfert Bilingual. In short, it is a team effort that places these students at the centre of any process of answering this research question because their contributions determine its progress. Jacqueline and I simply act as guides because it is the students' work. We will then elaborate on how this will actually happen practically.

III- Method

We started by describing the results of test No. 1 on reading comprehension in French carried out in October 2020 (see table 1 below) which serves as a barometer to see the level of the class where the students had to fill in a questionnaire called "Foutenanalyse Leestoets". The questionnaire included: multiple-choice questions (meerkeuze vragen),

⁶ https://www.cartotalents.fr/uploads/1587992944252_Guide%20QCM%20SUPFC.pdf , consulted on 30.04.2021.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8, 23-28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-22, 29-40.

⁹ <file:///C:/Users/31639/Downloads/Foutenanalyse%20Leestoets%20%2022.01.20.pdf> , consulted on 30.04.2021.

¹⁰ Moussette, Jean-Pierre, QCM de cours d'économie de niveau Licence 1, 2001.

open-ended questions (open vragen), questions where to choose a point of view (stellingenvragen) and questions where to find the missing word (gatentekst).

It shows that 70% of Havo 4 students expressed that their difficulties in this test were mainly related to multiple-choice questions (MCQs), which we also find predominantly in the other types of questions, so we have taken into account the various MCQs in the other types of questions. We agreed that we would work with these students to overcome this great challenge of QCM to improve their understanding and choice of right answers from MCQs (see summary in Table 1 below).

Students	MCQ	open vragen	stellingvragen	Gatentekst	NOTES	Sex
Jade					8.7	Female
Aline					6.3	Female
Esther	X				5.7	Female
Nadège	X				5.3	Female
Monique	X	X	X	X	2.5	Female
Paul	X				4.7	Male
Julienne	X				4.3	Female
Nestor	X				5.7	Male
Martine					6.3	Female
Jules	X				4.3	Male
%	70	10	10	10	-	-

Table 1: The impact of MCQs on Havo 4 students in test 1

Before moving on to the experiment itself, we shall first present the size of the class and the age of the students actively participating in this research. Then we will recall the research problem for methodological reasons. Finally, we will describe the various stages that these students will go through to carry out this experiment. As far as the analysis is concerned, it refers to the interpretation of the results that will be derived from it, which we will discuss in the section entitled results.

This is a class of 10 students who are between 15 and 18 years old, divided as follows: three boys and seven girls from different backgrounds who diligently follow courses in French as a foreign language, sometimes alongside Spanish or Chinese. They are informed about the process and techniques of foreign language learning as mentioned in the introduction (WTP). The issue remains the same, namely: "*how can we improve the comprehension and answering of multiple choice questions in French reading skills with Wolfelt's students?*"

This experiment is done by Havo 4 students who want to improve their comprehension and their choice of correct answers among the multiple choice questions they have during the French reading comprehension tests. To carry out this experiment, we used the answers to the questionnaire in Table 1 which they filled in honestly after the first reading comprehension test. It appears that out of the 10 students we had at the beginning

(see Table 1) one student had no problem with this test as she submitted a questionnaire with positive answers and her score was also very good. We left her out of the experiment and the other nine students actually did it (see Table 2).

Students	MCQ	Notes:	Sex
Aline		6.3	Female
Esther	X	5.7	Female
Nadège	X	5.3	Female
Monique	X	2.5	Female
Paul	X	4.7	Male
Julienne	X	4.3	Female
Nestor	X	5.7	Male
Martine		6.3	Female
Jules	X	4.3	Male

Table 2: Test results of the participants at the beginning of the experiment in October 2020

These nine students wanted to actively continue the experiment and we moved on to the actual experiment with them, which was done in two phases. Here we explained to them each time how they should go about optimising their score. They asked all sorts of questions and then practised hard based on the feedback they received from Jacqueline (my supervisor) and me about the aspects they found difficult to better understand this exercise from the textbook *D'accord!*¹¹ and the old Cito exams¹², in order to choose the right answer among the multiple choices offered during the tests. As implementation, they noted a few rules adapted to each student's needs: 1- read all the possibilities, 2- work by elimination, 3- use a dictionary to look up the key words in the question, 4- enrich your vocabulary before the test, 5- read a lot to develop good reflexes during the test, 6- practise on your own, 7- divide your time well during the test, 8- base your answer on what you read in the text & 9- always choose an answer because you never know.¹³ Most of them said that they had understood what they had to do, then we interviewed them to test their implementation and their degree of satisfaction based on their individual needs (see table 3). Finally, we did the test again in April (see Table 3). Given the current health constraints, it was not easy to carry out several face-to-face tests, which is also the aim of this experiment, otherwise we were not sure of the reliability of the results if we let them do the test online. We will comment on these results later.

IV- Results

The results of the interview with the participants, based on simple questions about the course of this activity, are expressed in terms of a satisfaction rate of progress and implementation. One part of the results is qualitative. The students filled in a questionnaire

¹¹ www.inloggenvo.malmberg.nl

¹² <https://www.examenblad.nl/examen/frans>

¹³ Our own practice elements adjusted to the need of students.

and explained how they dealt with the experiment. They answered to these questions: 1- Did you read all the possibilities? 2- Did you work by elimination? 3- Did you use a dictionary to look up the key words in the question? 4- Did you enrich your vocabulary before the test? 5- Did you read a lot to develop good reflexes during the test? 6- Did you practise on your own? 7- Did you divide your time well during the test? 8- Did you base your answer on what you read in the text? & 9- Did you always choose an answer? Because you never know. Some students had completely different answers like “I had not enough time, Sir and now I know how it works”. Another one said I didn’t study before, Sir, Sorry!” I liked their reactions. I put some answers in the appendix 3, here, Jacqueline and I learned from our students. The way they think, ask questions and plan to solve this problem. The other part of the results has been measured quantitatively by 100 according to their answers in Table 3. This same table is an analytical summary of the figures for this experiment, which runs from its start in October 2020 to its end in April 2021.

Students	Notes October 2020	Satisfaction rate of progress and implementation of the experiment end March 2021	April 2021
Aline	6.3	60%	6.6
Esther	5.7	50%	5.6
Nadège	5.3	90%	9
Monique	2.5	100%	5
Paul	4.7	70%	6
Julienne	4.3	75%	7.6
Nestor	5.7	65%	6.6
Martine	6.3	95%	9.2
Jules	4.3	80%	6.8

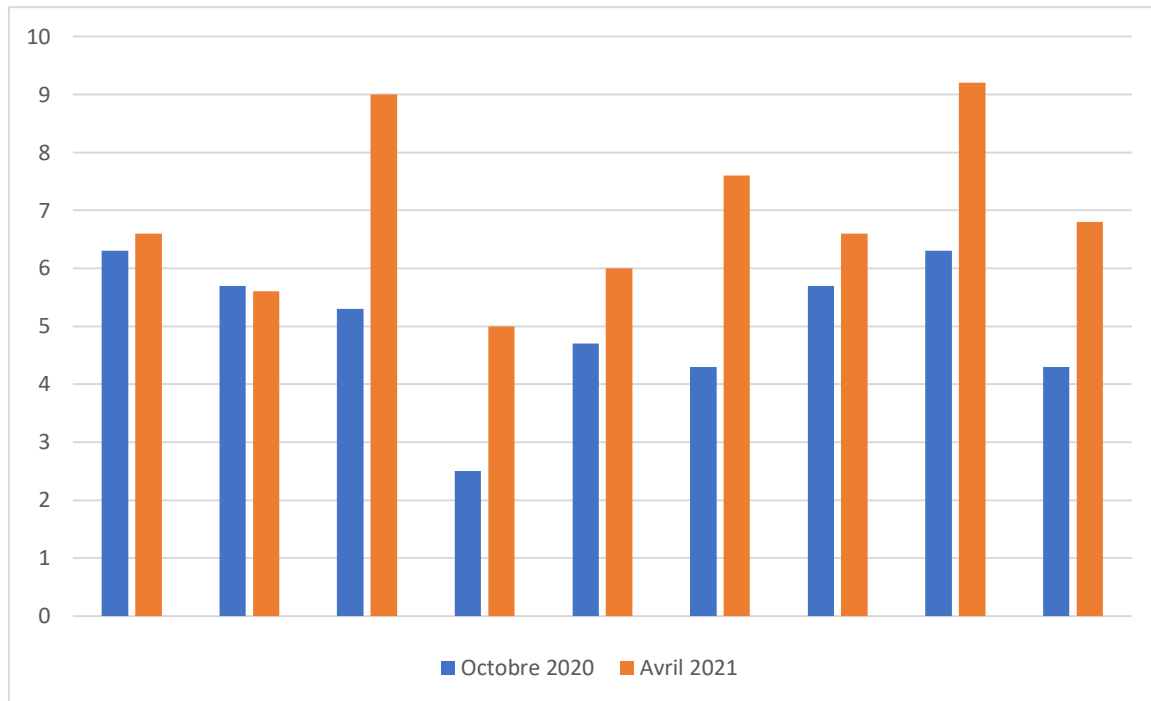
Table 3: MCQ test results in October 2020 and April 2021 & the satisfaction rate of the progress and implementation of the experiment at the end of March 2021 before the test

From tables 2 & 3 we observe that the students improved considerably, one student even doubled her score from 2.5 to 5. This is a very positive improvement overall. We illustrate this difference in table 4 below:

Students	Notes October 2020	Notes April 2021	Differences
Aline	6.3	6.6	+ 0.3
Esther	5.7	5.6	-0.1
Nadège	5.3	9	+3.7
Monique	2.5	5	+2.5
Paul	4.7	6	+1.3
Julienne	4.3	7.6	+3.3

Nestor	5.7	6.6	+0.9
Martine	6.3	9.2	+2.9
Jules	4.3	6.8	+2.5

Table 4: Differences in scores before and after the experiment



Graph showing the improvement per student according to the order of first names in Table 4

V- Conclusion

We find that the students have indeed improved during the experiment. We base our findings on the changes of their grades because the grade is an important element in explaining the progress during an experiment. In a nutshell, our research question: "How can we improve the comprehension and answering of multiple-choice questions in French reading skills with Wolfelt's students?" was answered positively because these students successfully completed the experiment and improved by more than 95%. We can see this in the graph above. The most useful strategy for our experiment was to make the students feel more confident and more motivated because they learned and knew how to work with a clear structure as my handout (reading skills), an adjusted questionnaires of MCQ established by the French department of Wolfert Bilingual, Leclercq, Moreno and Haladyna's theories about MCQ. Next time I could let the students write their own rules first after that we could adjust them based on theories then we could get a more complete view on the successful strategies.

VI- Discussion

Our experiment went well and we are all proud of it, Havo 4 students first, Jacqueline and me. This experiment could be useful for the school, especially as reading comprehension

plays a crucial role in language learning in general and foreign languages such as French in particular. It could also be used as a source of inspiration or a basis for further research along the same lines. Moreover, the theories used could guide anyone interested, especially at a time when hybrid teaching seems to be becoming the norm and when many teachers would like to apply their own MCQs from a Google Meet Attendance of a Quizizz.

As a teacher in general and a WTP teacher in particular, this experiment allowed me to see how foreign language learning works in a bilingual context where some students are perfectly bilingual and this serves as an asset for them to better understand some of the details related to MCQs. It also allowed us to learn from each other and to apply critical thinking in a healthy emulation of some aspects of Byram's (2001) theory of knowledge such as "knowing how to understand 'Interpreting from different perspective'". Here, Jacqueline and I also learned a lot from our students and vice versa as these students often asked very pertinent questions that allowed us to adjust our working approach. In conclusion the Action Research process was very useful to me as a teacher because I learned how others work and think about solving problems with why, when & how questions. I also learned how I can make such practical research because I am used to research as a researcher at the University of Leiden but here it is something small and we made it concrete and clear together with the students and my colleague. I will certainly incorporate Action Research strategies in the further years.

In summary, our experiment went well overall, we would have liked to extend it to other classes but this was not possible because we needed to have enough time for each participant and with several classes we would not have had this time. It would therefore be possible to continue further research.

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www.inloggenvo.malmberg.nl

<https://www.examenblad.nl/examen/frans>

Appendices

Appendices 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Appendix 1 October 2020 test

Appendix 2 Implementation with www. Malmberg.nl (chapter 1, 2 & 3) +

<https://www.examenblad.nl/examen/frans> (2015 & 2016 tijdvak 1 Frans) + handout (reading skills)

Appendix 3 Qualitative results of the students

Appendix 4 Satisfaction rate of progress and implementation questionnaire of the experiment

Appendix 5 test April 2021