

**THE EFFECTS OF BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND SYNTACTIC CUES
IN READING FRENCH NARRATIVES**

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**31 AUGUST 2009
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ABSTRACT

This study compared two groups of intermediate/advanced L2 French learners on a reading comprehension test when presented with or without background knowledge of the text. This study also compared intermediate and intermediate/advanced L2 French learners' reading comprehension when presented with increasing syntactic complexity. The results of t-tests of independent samples indicated that subjects with background knowledge of the topic scored higher than subjects with no prior knowledge of text content. In addition, subjects in the intermediate/advanced group appear to have greater facility to comprehend more complex sentences than intermediate L2 French learners. In conclusion, the investigation found: (1) prior knowledge plus high cognate levels facilitate reading comprehension; (2) syntactic maturity is cumulative and quantitative; (3) reading rates may be slower in L2 French readers to increase comprehension; and (4) automaticity is not fully realizable at the intermediate and intermediate/advanced level because of emerging syntactic, morphological and lexical maturity.

The effects of background information, and syntactic cues in reading French narratives

Researchers have long been interested in reading as a skill in L2 classrooms and a widely acknowledged problem remains that many L2 learners lack fluency and speed in reading narratives (Fraser, 2007; Grabe, 2004; Segalowitz and Hulstijn, 2005). The addition of native writers to the core of pedagogical ancillaries have made difficult rapid and smooth reading when there are multiple embedded clauses and digressions within long narratives (Barry and Lazarte, 1995; Kaplan, 1966). Jiang and Nekrasova (2007) posit that multiword expressions such as idiomatic expressions and prepatterned formulaic sequences figure in the L2 processing of phrases. Nevertheless, narratives involve a variety of devices joined in complex ways to convey meaning, thus syntactic fluency in reading narratives requires some knowledge of systematic coordination and subordination. Berman (1984) finds that reading problems occur when syntactic and

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semantic relations in sentences conflict. In addition, L2 reading in the twenty-first century has become more complex due to easy access to digital media, audio CDs, audio/video DVDs, CD ROM, video clips, satellite radio, high definition television and iPods (Shelly, 2009). At any rate, Barry and Lazarte (1995) and Grabe (2004) point out that L2 reading research implicates several variables that render L2 reading difficult for learners:

1. Many L2 readers resort to strategies of poor L1 readers when confronted with long complicated texts.
2. Many L2 readers lack knowledge of the textual topic.
3. Many L2 readers lack speed or reading fluency.
4. Many L2 readers lack syntactic and/or lexical fluency.

Segalowitz, Pousen and Komoda (1991) find that some advanced French-English bilinguals read 30% slower in L2 than in L1. Haynes and Carr (1990) reveal that Arab, Chinese and Spanish L2 learners of English at the intermediate and advanced levels read at less than 50% of their L1 rate. Furthermore, Segalowitz and Heber (1990) evidence that L2 learners maintain acceptable levels of reading comprehension, yet Favreau and Segalowitz (1982) and Nassaji and Geva (1999) posit that slow L2 reading has negative effects on comprehension. Fraser (2007) reports that reading comprehension and fluency are not always comparable in learners. L2 learners may lack the lexicon for the task, cannot navigate an unfamiliar context, or fail to process sequential data within the text such as time adverbials and conjunctions.

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Many L2 readers may also lack knowledge of the textual topic. Barry and Lazarte (1995) report that knowledge of the topic improves recall of a text. Allen (1995) suggests that there are two cognitive steps in internalizing a second language: (1) L2 learners must build connects between what they read and what words signify; this binding solidifies mental representations; and (2) L2 learners must map or inventory meaning-form connections held in memory, process these mental representations automatically and transfer them to real-life representations. Several studies propose that L2 learners who have a general knowledge of the subject within the text exhibit improved recall (Anderson and Urquhart, 1988; Levine and Haus, 1985).

The area of syntactic fluency is another area of research specific to reading. Several studies in L2 development indicate that learners who combine short independent sentences into longer complex sentences are more syntactically mature (Hunt, 1967; Monroe, 1975; Thornhill, 1969). Santana-Seda (1975) notes that native Spanish writers prefer digressions, coordination and long sentences. Kaplan (1966) reports that French and Spanish writers have a tendency to embed clauses in linear texts. These researchers suggest that the ability to write syntactically complex texts equate to more advanced skills; Monroe (1975) reports that advanced writers reduce collapse complex clauses into participials, prepositional phrases, appositives and infinitive phrases. Berman (1984) contends that the “heaviness” of the text poses a problem for L2 readers: syntactical realignments of complex sentences cause specific errors and diminish the ability of some readers to assemble the pertinent details of the text.

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Another problem for L2 readers is automaticity (Fraser, 2007; Segalowitz and Hulstijn, 2005). Fraser defines automaticity as rapid, effortless and ballistic (unstoppable) reading requiring little attention on the part of the reader. Contemporary researchers equate automaticity with speed or fluency in reading, and that controlled processing, slow lexical recognition and problematic syntactical comprehension decrease both general comprehension of the text and reading rates. Fraser (2007) points out that slow reading rates may or may not reduce reading comprehension. The question arises: Does slow reading enhance comprehension or lower fluency and automaticity?

In this investigation we aim to determine if: (1) intermediate or intermediate/advanced L2 readers of French resort to different strategies to attend to a communicative event; (2) intermediate or intermediate/advanced L2 readers of French formulate different levels of automaticity; (3) intermediate/advanced L2 readers focus or fail to focus on their knowledge of the topic; and (4) intermediate or intermediate/advanced L2 learners of French process syntactic units (subordination, coordination, participials) in different manners.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference between the mean scores of the reading comprehension test of L2 intermediate/advanced L2 readers of French when presented with or without background knowledge of the topic.

2. There is no significant difference between the mean scores of the reading comprehension test of L2 intermediate and intermediate/advanced readers of French when presented with differential syntactical structures.

Assumptions and Limitations

The profile of successful and unsuccessful readers of French includes a myriad of variables that cannot be accommodated in the present study. It is well known that diverse paths lead to L2 reading and that human variability accounts for many learning situations. Aptitude, motivation and cognitive styles figure in L2 learning; however, these variables are not incorporated into this study. L2 learning to read also involves mapping the links between phonemes and graphemes. It is not within the scope of this investigation to measure reading rates, phoneme-grapheme mappings, levels of difficulty of certain phoneme-grapheme correspondences, the context of a grapheme, recall of conventional spelling, syllable stress, and primacy and recency effects (Treiman, Berch and Weatherston, 1993). Last of all, this investigation will not study systematically memory as a process of encoding, storing and retrieving information. Short and long term memory, working memory models, retrospective and prospective memory, and declarative versus procedural memory are beyond the scope of the present investigation (Anderson, 1976; Baddeley, 1966, 2000).

METHOD

The purpose of this investigation is to explore the differences in mean scores of L2 readers of French from two groups (intermediate and intermediate/advanced readers) by means of a reading passage placing the accent on differential syntactical structures. This study also focuses on intermediate/advanced L2 readers of French who have and do not have prior background knowledge of the reading topic.

Participants

Data for the first hypothesis came from a subset of 30 of the total 43 learners in intermediate/advanced French at a South Atlantic university. Sample was randomly drawn from 43 students in two sections of intermediate/advanced French (French composition). Sample was then divided into two groups of fifteen to represent prior knowledge and no prior knowledge groups. No subjects had studied Business French. Data for the second hypothesis came from a subset of 15 of the total 79 learners of intermediate French II at this same South Atlantic university: one group of fifteen students were randomly drawn from three sections of Intermediate French II. All students in Intermediate French II had completed the equivalent of Elementary French I-II and Intermediate French I; 15 students were randomly drawn from two sections of French composition. All had completed the equivalent of Intermediate French II. Both groups represented two vary degrees of reading comprehension (lexical, syntactic and reading rates). All subjects were American born native speakers of English.

For control purposes, subjects were briefed about the nature of this investigation and informed that data collected would be strictly confidential. Scores would not be reported and scores did not affect course grades. Subjects were informed that normal course assignments would resume after the investigation.

Data-gathering instruments

The subjects in the intermediate/advanced L2 French groups were given an identical passage taken from Comprendre le marketing (Levasseur, 1986, pp. 17-26). The final passage resulted from three instructors of French at the university who agreed upon the validity (item and sampling) of this passage on the elements of marketing. The instructors selected the passage as an exemplar of moderate syntactic density (appropriate number of words per clause, clauses per T-unit, T-units per sentence, subordinate clauses per T-unit, and number of absolute phrases, gerunds and/or participials). Subjects reading time was set at thirty minutes using 150-200 wpm as a normal L2 reading rate.

Ten questions were selected and pretested by the instructors using students not selected for this investigation. Each question represented an objective answer to be gleaned from the passage (definitions, inferences, information from graphics and background knowledge).

Background information about the passage took the form of two steps leading to an organized pre-reading phase:

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1. An outline of the text
2. A glossary of difficulty words
3. Pre-reading organizers

In relation to the syntactic density measure, all subjects (intermediate French II and intermediate/advanced French) were administered an instrument constructed by the investigator two weeks after midterm examinations. The base for the instrument was Linguistic Analysis Worksheet (Peltz, 1974) applied to the French language. Syntactic levels represented three stages of development or sequences:

10 points

Subject-Verb-Object

Subject-Verb-Infinitive

20 points

Coordinate clauses joined by et, mais, ou, mais, or ainsi.

Que + sentence as object

Qui + sentence as subject

Ce qui + sentence as subject

Ce que + sentence as object

Infinitif passé

Infinitif present

Le Gérondif

9.

30 points

Relative clause	Ce garçon, qui
Adverbial Clause of Time	<u>quand</u> , <u>lorsque</u> , <u>dès que</u> , <u>après que</u> , <u>aussitôt que</u>
Adverbial Clause of Place	<u>où</u>
Adverbial Clause of Manner	<u>comment</u>
Adverbial Clause of Motive	<u>pourquoi</u>
Clause insertion	
Conjunctions joining dependent clauses	<u>pour que</u> , <u>sans que</u> , <u>à moins que</u> , <u>avant que</u>

Si + Clause

Last of all, the investigator constructed 30 sentences (simple and complex) to indicate increasing syntactic complexity. Subjects would fail to complete the translation of the sentence representing syntactic complexity beyond their level of comprehension.

Data Analysis and Results

To compare the difference between the mean scores of the reading comprehension test of L2 intermediate/advanced readers of French with or without background knowledge of the topic a t-test was conducted. The means for groups were 44.0 and 73.33, respectively. The analysis, t-test of independent samples,

indicated a significant effect, $t(28) = -8.88, p < .001$. The researcher concluded that prior knowledge advantages L2 readers in this investigation.

To compare the difference between the mean scores of the reading comprehension test of L2 intermediate versus L2 intermediate/advanced readers of French when presented with differential syntactical structures, a t-test of independent samples was conducted. Mean scores for groups were 14.0 and 24.67, respectively. The analysis indicated a significant effect: $t(28) = -5.06, p < .001$. The researcher concluded that L2 intermediate/advanced readers had significantly different skills in French syntax than L2 intermediate French learners.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This investigation tested the hypothesis that there is a differential distance between intermediate/advanced learners of French on a reading passage when presented with or without background knowledge of the topic. This study also tested the hypothesis that intermediate and intermediate/advanced readers exhibit differing levels of syntactic maturity. T-test analysis indicated significant differences when both hypotheses were tested. The efficacy of prior knowledge of the topic before reading had been confirmed by Allen (1995), Barry and Lazarte (1995), Grabe (2004) and Young (1989). This investigator found that prior knowledge and pre-organizers facilitated reading the passage in business French (marketing). The following conclusions can be gleaned from subject responses:

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1. The ability to analyze longer and more syntactically complex sentences is an emerging skill for both intermediate and intermediate/advanced students.
2. T-units involving subordinate conjunctions plus tenses other than the present indicative introduce new problems for intermediate L2 readers; however, such sentences are more easily read by intermediate/advanced L2 readers because of more hours of instruction to build linguistic maturity.
3. Syntactic patterns are cumulative and quantitative from the intermediate to the intermediate/advanced levels.
4. Prior knowledge of the topic facilitates reading comprehension. High cognate levels within the lexicon also facilitate reading and making inferences about meaning.
5. Reading rate in L2 is slower than the normal L1 reading rate to increase comprehension and to allow closer syntactic and/or lexical parsing.
6. Automaticity (ballistic reading) is not fully realizable at the intermediate and intermediate/advanced levels because of emerging syntactic, morphological and lexical maturity.

In terms of recommendations for further investigation, the following suggestions have merit:

1. There is a need for additional research in schema theory and background knowledge required for French for special purposes.
2. There is a need for additional research on the relationship between superior L1

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reading skills and L2 levels of automaticity.

3. There is a need for additional research on the impact of language distances:

English L1 and non-Western L2 learners.

4. There is a need for additional research on inductive rule acquisition in L2 readers and analogy formation.

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APPENDIX

READING PASSAGE--EXCERPTS

Le marketing—une définition

Le concept moderne du marketing est de comprendre les besoins et les desirs du consommateur afin de lui donner satisfaction au moyen des produits ou services qu'on lui offre.

Le prix que le consommateur est disposé à payer pour la satisfaction de ses besoins comprend normalement une marge de profit qui est en quelque sorte la récompense versée à l'entreprise qui a su contribuer à la satisfaction du consommateur. . . .

Objectifs pour l'entrepreneur

Satisfaction du client > Anticiper la demande > Fabriquer le produit >

Transmettre de l'information sur le produit > Organiser la transaction >

Distribuer les produits

Les 4P: les 4 coins

Cette approche et la classification des données sur les variables principales du processus marketing ont été rendues célèbres par E. Jérôme McCarthy. Selon lui, les décisions prises par rapport aux 4P constituent l'essentiel de la démarche marketing. Ces décisions portent sur:

1. le produit
2. la promotion
3. la place
4. le prix

Excerpts from: Levasseur, P. (1986). Comprendre le marketing. Montréal: Les Editions de l'Homme, 17-25.