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Difficulty Components in French Verb Tenses Imparfait and Passé Composé for Anglophone Learners

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Difficult Components of a French Grammar Test

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Abstract

This study examined two of French verb tenses – imparfait and passé composé - the usage of which represents a problem area for most native speakers of English. Twelve cognitive operations were hypothesized, which were proven to explain the difficulty of the test items that were calibrated with the linear logistic test model. The results of the study brought evidence that cognitive categories, such as "action in progress interrupted by a one-time event" and "achievement" were significant predictors of item difficulty and item easiness, respectively. The information about the psychometric structure of a grammar test and the particular "weights" of its components in a model predicting item difficulty will allow test developers to construct items whose difficulty is known prior to administering the test without having to pilot individual items in study groups. Knowledge about the cognitive operations underlying item difficulty can help teachers target specific cognitive and processing characteristics of the student response style in a variety of subject matters.

Sources of Difficulties

• Aspectual rather than tense difference
• Lack of perfect match in translation
• Learner preference for one grammar aspect over another based on the lexical aspect of the verb
• Complex, long, and confusing explanations in traditional textbooks

Lexical Aspect - the Four Vendler Verb Categories

Grammatical aspect is external to the verb, lexical aspect has to do with the meaning of the verb. Vendler (1967) came up with four distinct categories corresponding to the four possible lexical aspects for verbs:

1. States: Je suis heureuse.
2. Activities: Je mange.
3. Accomplishments: Je mange une pomme.
4. Achievements: J’ai fait la salade.

Background

The correct usage of the two past tenses passé composé and imparfait is one of the highlights of mastering the French language, allowing the learner to narrate and describe in the past and it is at the same time a stumbling block in study groups. Knowledge about the cognitive operations underlying item difficulty can help teachers target specific cognitive and processing characteristics of the student response style in a variety of subject matters.

Literature Review

Overall, studies of passé composé/imparfait acquisition have shown that it is a grammatical topic, which is difficult to master for anglophones and that learners are influenced by the lexical aspect of the verb in their choice of grammatical form. No studies have conducted, however, a comparison of two texts (Appendix B). The LLTM basic parameters, \( \eta \) in Equation 2 are analogous to regression coefficients when item difficulties are predicted from variables specified in the weight matrix. These parameters are estimated here using the computer program LPMC-WIN (Fischer & Poncy-Seliger, 1998). This program provides also statistical and graphical tests for the validity of the weight matrix with the LLTM.

Method

Participants

The participants were 205 second-semester students of French from several mid-western universities. However, the number of participants was brought down to 148 because of the missing data in many of the participant responses.

Method cont’d

Instrument and procedure

The subjects were given two close tasks – two texts (Appendix 1 & 2) in which the verbs were supplied in parentheses in the infinitive and blanks were left immediately preceding the infinitive. The participants were instructed to fill in the correct verb form – passé composé or imparfait for each verb. Three native speakers of French were given the same task to establish a baseline of native-like answers.

Based on Vendler’s four categories and learner think-aloud protocols, the following cognitive operations were identified which led the learners to choose one tense over another:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Operations Hypothesized to Explain Item Difficulty for the French Grammar Test</th>
<th>LLTM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishments</td>
<td>1.0679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States</td>
<td>0.4709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>0.4042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievements</td>
<td>0.1122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imparfait</td>
<td>0.4937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions in progress interrupted by one-time event</td>
<td>0.5930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precise moment of event</td>
<td>0.5722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precise span of time</td>
<td>0.6638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical change of state</td>
<td>0.6190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real physical change</td>
<td>0.8318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event interrupting action in progress</td>
<td>1.4320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement of tense</td>
<td>4.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stative</td>
<td>5.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfective</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The Pearson correlation between actual (Rasch) and predicted (LLTM) item difficulties was r = .704.

Results

In this study, the weight matrix of 25 items and their weights on 12 cognitive operations is a two-way (25 x 12) table with an entry of 1 when the item requires the respective cognitive operation, 0 otherwise (Table 2). The LLTM basic parameters, \( \eta \) in Equation 2 are analogous to regression coefficients when item difficulties are predicted from variables specified in the weight matrix. These parameters are estimated here using the computer program LPMC-WIN (Fischer & Poncy-Seliger, 1998). This program provides also statistical and graphical tests for the validity of the weight matrix with the LLTM.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>LLTM</th>
<th>Rasch</th>
<th>Item Difficulty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0207</td>
<td>0.3627</td>
<td>14.5679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0207</td>
<td>0.3627</td>
<td>15.0512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.1675</td>
<td>0.6572</td>
<td>16.3767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.4709</td>
<td>0.6053</td>
<td>17.0370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.5722</td>
<td>1.0466</td>
<td>18.0743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.4042</td>
<td>0.3118</td>
<td>19.0412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.6638</td>
<td>0.3270</td>
<td>20.0322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.5722</td>
<td>1.0358</td>
<td>21.0369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.6638</td>
<td>0.3796</td>
<td>22.0688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.5722</td>
<td>0.3796</td>
<td>23.0793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.0207</td>
<td>0.3627</td>
<td>24.0426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.0207</td>
<td>0.3627</td>
<td>25.0671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.0207</td>
<td>0.3627</td>
<td>26.0512</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All 12 difficulty components used by LLTM in this study were statistically significant which validates their role in the hypothesized cognitive structure of French grammar tests. The complexity/easiness components were strong predictors of item difficulty or easiness because they were used in their most non-protoypical or protoypical contexts respectively. A new element in this study was the hypothesizing of several adverbials as components of complexity for the reviewed items. The adverbials were (7) "precise moment of event", (8) "precise span of time", (9) "frequency of repetition in the past", (10) "action in progress interrupted by a one-time event", (11) "event interrupting action in progress", (12) "agreement of tense".

Conclusions

All 12 difficulty components used by LLTM in this study were statistically significant which validates their role in the hypothesized cognitive structure of French grammar tests. The complexity/easiness components were strong predictors of item difficulty or easiness because they were used in their most non-protoypical or protoypical contexts respectively. A new element in this study was the hypothesizing of several adverbials as components of complexity for the reviewed items. The adverbials were (7) "precise moment of event", (8) "precise span of time", (9) "frequency of repetition in the past", (10) "action in progress interrupted by a one-time event", (11) "event interrupting action in progress", (12) "agreement of tense".

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