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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 tests of two French verb tenses—imparfait and passé composé—using Vendler’s four categories and things 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 areas.

## 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 point for native speakers of English attempting to learn French.

## Sources of Difficulties

- Aspects rather than tense difference  
- Lack of perfect match in translation  
- Learner preference for one grammatical aspect over another  
- Complex, long, and confusing explanations in traditional textbooks

## Lexical Aspect - The Four Vender 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:  
- States: Je suis heureuse. (I am happy)  
- Activities: Je mange. (I eat)  
- Accomplishments: Je mange une pomme. (I eat an apple)  
- Achievements: J’entre dans la salle. (I enter the room).

## 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 testing of item difficulty of a passé composé / imparfait grammar task, based on the psychometric structure of the items, with a relatively large number of participants. The present investigation is devised with the intention to bridge this gap.

## 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 146 because of the missing data in many of the participant responses.

### Instrument and procedure

The subjects were given two cloze tasks – two texts (Appendix 1 & 2) in which the verbs were supplied in parentheses in the infinitive and blanks 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Operations Hypothesized to Explain Item Difficulty for the French Grammar Test</th>
<th>LLTM</th>
<th>Rasch</th>
<th>LLTM</th>
<th>Rasch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. States</td>
<td>0.0207</td>
<td>0.0507</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.0819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Activities</td>
<td>0.3972</td>
<td>0.5722</td>
<td>0.8638</td>
<td>0.5930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Achievements</td>
<td>0.1486</td>
<td>0.1450</td>
<td>0.1979</td>
<td>0.1605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Imparfait</td>
<td>0.1450</td>
<td>0.1979</td>
<td>0.1605</td>
<td>0.1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Passé composé</td>
<td>0.1979</td>
<td>0.1605</td>
<td>0.1605</td>
<td>0.1605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Precise moment of event</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Precise span of time</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Frequency of repetition in the past</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Action in progress interrupted by a one-time event</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Event interrupting action in progress</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Agreement of tense</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
<td>0.0858</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The Pearson correlation between actual (Rasch) and predicted (LLTM) item difficulties was r = .794

## Results

In Table 3, positive estimates of basic parameters indicate that the cognitive operations associated with these parameters increase the item difficulty. Conversely, negative parameter estimates indicate that the cognitive operations associated with these parameters facilitate the correct answer on the respective items. Both Rasch and LLTM estimates of the item difficulties for the test used in this study are provided in Table 4 (higher algebraic values indicate higher item difficulty). The complexity/easiness components were strong predictors of item difficulty or easiness because they were used in their most non-protopypical or prototypical 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 indicated”, “(8) precise span of time indicated”, and “(9) frequency of repetition in the past indicated”. According to the calculated difficulty of test items, out of 12 cognitive operations, (7) came third easiest, (8) and (9) fifth most difficult. Why were in our case some adverbials (7,8) more helpful than others (9) ? We believe that adverbials pointing at the choice of passé composé have been of better use for the learner because of the earlier acquisition of passé composé. On the other hand, adverbials referring to imparfait were less helpful because of the greater internal complexity of the tense (Andrews, 1992; Kaplan, 1987).

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## References

Andersson, J., & Shirai, K. (1994). *First and second language learners will initially be influenced by the inherent semantic aspect of verbs or predicates in the acquisition of tense and aspect markers associated with/of these verbs*. *Andersson & Shirai*.  


Note: The Pearson correlation between actual (Rasch) and predicted (LLTM) item difficulties was r = .794.