# A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN FRENCH LANGUAGE ORAL COMPREHENSION

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## Abstract

This study comparatively examines students' performance in French language oral comprehension at the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta. The study focuses on two groups of learners enrolled in different programmes: the University of Ibadan degree programme in French and the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) French programme. The participants comprised 43 final-year NCE students and 61 100-level degree students, selected purposively. An oral comprehension test was administered in two sections: Section A, an audio-only listening test, and Section B, an audio-visual comprehension test. Each section contained ten multiple-choice questions. The findings indicate that the group with a longer duration of French-language learning performed better overall, irrespective of programme. The results also show that students performed better in the audio-visual component than in the audio-only component. The study therefore recommends sustained and extensive use of appropriate audio-visual materials in teaching and assessing French oral comprehension, together with adequate time allocation for oral comprehension courses.

Keywords: French as a foreign language; oral comprehension; listening comprehension; audio-visual instruction; teacher education.

## Introduction

Language serves primarily as a means of human communication and constitutes an important foundation for the teaching and learning of additional languages. Within language education, this communicative function provides a basis for the Communicative Approach, which places meaningful communication at the centre of classroom practice. The approach emerged prominently in Europe in the 1980s and gained wider attention in Nigeria in the 1990s, including through the introduction of French-language textbooks such as Trans Afrique, On y va ! and Nouvel Horizon.

The Communicative Approach seeks to develop learners' ability to use the target language effectively in real-life situations. It consequently gives attention to the four major language skills: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, written expression and oral expression (Besse, 1985; Moirand, 1982). These skills are commonly grouped into receptive and productive skills. Listening and reading constitute receptive skills because learners receive and interpret linguistic information through them, whereas speaking and writing are productive skills through which learners produce language to communicate meaning.

The present study focuses on oral, or listening, comprehension as a receptive skill. Comprehension may be understood as the ability to understand and interpret a stimulus, which may take the form of a written text, spoken text or audio-visual document. In this study, oral comprehension refers to the learner's ability to listen to an oral or oralised text, or to watch an audio-visual material, and understand and interpret the information conveyed (Jimoh, 2005).

Listening comprehension is a demanding language skill because it requires the learner to process several linguistic layers, including vocabulary, as well as cognitive operations associated with understanding and interpreting meaning (Jimoh, 2002). Ziane (2011) and Hien (2015) similarly emphasise the central role of listening in language learning because spoken input provides learners with linguistic forms and meanings that must be attended to, processed and interpreted.

Listening may be considered in terms of passive and active engagement. Passive listening involves relatively limited conscious processing of the details or intended meaning of a message, while active listening requires deliberate attention and sustained mental engagement with the speaker's message (Nation & Newton, 2009). In formal listening-comprehension activities, learners are generally expected to attend carefully to spoken input and respond to questions requiring either general or specific information (Hargie, 2011; Floyd, 2011). This type of focused listening constitutes the context of the present study.

In the Nigerian context, learners of French as a foreign language often experience phonological difficulties that affect their ability to perceive and reproduce French sounds accurately (Jimoh, 2020). The difficulty becomes particularly apparent when learners are required to understand native speakers communicating naturally in French or to comprehend recorded passages without visual support. The addition of images to sound is considered capable of supporting comprehension and learning, thereby providing a rationale for examining audio-visual presentation alongside audio-only presentation.

Against this background, this study compares the performance of two groups of French teacher trainees and examines the relationship of programme of study, mode of assessment and duration of learning with performance in oral French comprehension.

## Literature Review

## Language and Communicative Language Teaching

The communicative function of language has important implications for language pedagogy. Mounin (1995) and Lyons (1990) present language from perspectives that recognise its role in human communication. In language classrooms, this communicative orientation is reflected in approaches that seek to move learners beyond knowledge of linguistic forms towards the effective use of the target language. Moirand (1982) and Besse (1985) provide an important pedagogical basis for viewing language teaching in relation to communicative competence and classroom practices.

Within this orientation, the four language skills are not isolated abilities but interconnected components of communicative competence. Listening and reading expose learners to linguistic input, while speaking and writing enable them to produce language. For learners of French as a foreign language, effective development of receptive skills is particularly important because comprehension provides the linguistic input needed for subsequent interaction and production.

## Listening and Oral Comprehension in Foreign-Language Learning

Listening comprehension involves more than hearing sounds. Learners must identify linguistic forms, connect them to meaning, retain relevant information and interpret the message within its context. Nation and Newton (2009) emphasise the importance of purposeful engagement with spoken language, while Hien (2015) identifies difficulties that learners may encounter when processing spoken input. Ziane (2011) likewise highlights listening comprehension as an important component of language learning and as a foundation for the development of speaking ability.

The difficulty of listening is heightened in foreign-language contexts where learners have limited exposure to naturally occurring speech. Differences in pronunciation, speed, vocabulary and phonological patterns can make it difficult for learners to segment and interpret continuous speech. Jimoh (2002, 2005, 2020) draws attention to the challenges associated with oral language, evaluation and French phonology in Nigerian educational contexts.

## Audio-Visual Support in Oral Comprehension

Audio-visual materials combine auditory input with visual information. In oral comprehension, the visual component may provide contextual cues that support learners' interpretation of spoken language. The present study therefore distinguishes between an audio-only condition and an audio-visual condition. The comparison is pedagogically relevant because learners may find it easier to infer meaning when spoken language is accompanied by images or contextual visual information.

The study is consequently concerned not only with whether students can answer comprehension questions after listening to spoken French, but also with whether their performance changes when the same general comprehension task is supported by audio-visual presentation.

**Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored primarily in the Communicative Approach to language teaching. The approach regards language as a means of communication and emphasises learners' ability to understand and use the target language in meaningful situations. Its focus on listening, reading, speaking and writing provides an appropriate framework for examining oral comprehension as a core receptive skill.

The Communicative Approach is relevant to the present study in two principal ways. First, oral comprehension is essential to successful communication because learners must be able to receive and interpret spoken messages before they can respond appropriately. Second, the use of audio-visual materials reflects an attempt to provide learners with contextualised input rather than relying exclusively on isolated sound. Within this framework, performance in oral comprehension can reasonably be examined in relation to the amount of learning experience and the conditions under which spoken input is presented and assessed.

The framework also supports the study's interest in learning duration. Repeated exposure to spoken French may provide learners with greater opportunities to develop familiarity with French sounds, vocabulary and patterns of oral communication. The comparison of the two groups, therefore, provides an empirical basis for considering whether longer exposure to French learning is associated with better oral comprehension performance.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

The study adopted a comparative approach to examine the oral comprehension performance of two groups of French language students enrolled in different teacher-education programmes. The comparison was based on students' performance in an oral comprehension test comprising audio-only and audio-visual components.

**Population and Sample**

Purposive sampling was used to select two groups of French students at the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta. Group 1 comprised 43 final-year NCE students who had spent five semesters learning French. During their programme, they had taken five oral/aural comprehension courses with a total of nine units: FRE 111 (2C), 121 (2C), 211 (2C), 221 (2C) and 321 (1C). The students were in 300 level, second semester.

Group 2 comprised 61 100-level degree students who had spent two semesters learning French. They had taken two oral/aural comprehension courses with a cumulative total of six units: ESF 103 (3C) and ESF 104 (3C). None of the students in either group had prior knowledge of French before admission to the institution.

**Research Instrument**

Data were collected through an oral comprehension test consisting of two sections. Section A contained ten objective questions based on a pre-recorded listening-comprehension passage. The speaker was a Nigerian who had also learnt French as a foreign language. Section B contained ten objective questions based on an episode selected from Bienvenue en France, an audio-visual instructional material produced by French native speakers for the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language.

Each question had four response options, A to D. Students were required to select the option corresponding to the most appropriate answer after listening to the passage in Section A and watching the episode in Section B. One mark was awarded for each correct answer.

**Procedure for Data Collection**

The oral comprehension test was administered to both groups under the two presentation conditions. Students completed the audio-only component and the audio-visual component, responding to ten comprehension questions in each section. The resulting scores were organised according to group and section for comparison.

**Method of Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using the arithmetic mean as a measure of central tendency. The mean scores of the two groups were compared for Section A, Section B and the cumulative test. The original study formulated three hypotheses concerning programme of study, assessment mode and duration of learning; interpretation of these hypotheses was based on the observed group mean differences.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

For clarity, Group 1 refers to the 43 final-year NCE students, while Group 2 refers to the 61 100-level degree students.

**Students' Scores in Section A: Audio-Only Test**

| Score (X) | 10 | 09 | 08 | 07 | 06 | 05 | 04 | 03 | 02 | 01 | 00 | Σf | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group 1 ($f_1$) | 01 | 00 | 04 | 05 | 11 | 13 | 05 | 02 | 02 | 00 | 00 | 43 | 5.53 |
| Group 2 ($f_2$) | 00 | 00 | 01 | 00 | 01 | 05 | 17 | 08 | 20 | 07 | 02 | 61 | 2.92 |

Section A scores ranged from 2 to 10 for Group 1 and from 0 to 8 for Group 2. The mean score for Group 1 was 5.53, compared with 2.92 for Group 2. On the basis of the mean scores, Group 1 performed better than Group 2 in the audio-only component.

**Students' Scores in Section B: Audio-Visual Test**

| **Score (X)** | **10** | **09** | **08** | **07** | **06** | **05** | **04** | **03** | **02** | **01** | **00** | **Σf** | **Mean** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group 1 ($f_1$) | 00 | 03 | 07 | 07 | 10 | 05 | 05 | 04 | 02 | 00 | 00 | 43 | 5.88 |
| Group 2 ($f_2$) | 00 | 02 | 08 | 28 | 20 | 03 | 00 | 00 | 00 | 00 | 00 | 61 | 6.77 |

Section B scores ranged from 2 to 9 for Group 1 and from 5 to 9 for Group 2. Group 1 recorded a mean score of 5.88, while Group 2 recorded a mean score of 6.77. Thus, Group 2 performed slightly better than Group 1 in the audio-visual component, with a mean difference of 0.89 in favour of Group 2.

**Cumulative Scores for the Two Groups**

| **Score (X)** | **17** | **16** | **15** | **14** | **13** | **12** | **11** | **10** | **09** | **08** | **07** | **05** | **Σf** | **Mean** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group 1 ($f_1$) | 01 | 03 | 01 | 02 | 07 | 07 | 06 | 05 | 07 | 03 | 00 | 01 | 43 | 11.42 |
| Group 2 ($f_2$) | 00 | 00 | 00 | 02 | 01 | 03 | 14 | 11 | 15 | 10 | 05 | 00 | 61 | 9.69 |

The cumulative scores for Group 1 ranged from 5 to 17, whereas those for Group 2 ranged from 7 to 14. The mean cumulative score was 11.42 for Group 1 and 9.69 for Group 2. Overall, the mean scores therefore indicate better performance by Group 1.

## Discussion of Findings

### Programme of Study and Oral Comprehension Performance

The results present a mixed pattern across the two test sections. In the audio-only component, Group 1 recorded a substantially higher mean score than Group 2 (5.53 compared with 2.92). In the audio-visual component, however, Group 2 recorded a slightly higher mean score than Group 1 (6.77 compared with 5.88). When the two sections are considered cumulatively, Group 1 recorded the higher mean score (11.42 compared with 9.69).

The pattern suggests that programme of study, considered on its own, does not provide a consistent explanation for performance across the two assessment conditions. The original hypothesis that there is a significant correlation between programme of study and students' performance is therefore not supported by the descriptive comparison presented in the study. It is important, however, to note that the analysis reported here is based on mean scores; no inferential correlation or significance test was reported in the original data analysis.

**Assessment Mode and Oral Comprehension Performance**

Both groups obtained higher mean scores in the audio-visual component than in the audio-only component. Group 1 improved from 5.53 in Section A to 5.88 in Section B, while Group 2 improved from 2.92 to 6.77. The stronger improvement observed in Group 2 suggests that visual support may have been particularly helpful to learners with shorter exposure to French.

The finding supports the original interpretation that the audio-visual assessment condition was more rewarding than the audio-only condition. The visual component appears to have provided additional contextual information that supported comprehension. In practical terms, the result strengthens the case for incorporating suitable audio-visual resources into the teaching and assessment of French oral comprehension.

**Duration of Learning and Oral Comprehension Performance**

The two groups differed in their duration of French-language learning. Group 1 had spent five semesters learning French, whereas Group 2 had spent two semesters. Group 1 also achieved the higher cumulative mean score. Its stronger performance in the audio-only component is especially notable, given the greater difficulty of comprehending spoken French without visual support.

The findings are consistent with the view that longer exposure to the target language may contribute to improved oral comprehension. Greater learning duration potentially provides more opportunities for learners to encounter French sounds, vocabulary and patterns of oral communication. The original study therefore considered the third hypothesis supported. Nevertheless, because the analysis reported only descriptive means, the conclusion is appropriately understood as an observed association rather than a statistically established causal relationship.

## Conclusion

This study examined the oral comprehension performance of two groups of French language students at the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta. The comparison focused on programme of study, assessment mode and duration of learning. The results show that Group 1, consisting of final-year NCE students with longer exposure to French, performed better than Group 2 overall. However, Group 2 performed slightly better in the audio-visual component.

The study consequently highlights two important considerations in the teaching and assessment of oral French comprehension. First, sustained exposure to French appears to be associated with improved performance, particularly when learners are required to process spoken language without visual support. Second, audio-visual presentation appears to facilitate comprehension for both groups and was especially beneficial to the group with shorter learning experience.

The findings reinforce the importance of giving oral comprehension adequate attention within French teacher-education programmes. They also point to the need for instructional and assessment practices that expose learners to spoken French in forms that support active comprehension.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

Audio-visual methods should be encouraged in the teaching and learning of French oral comprehension at different levels of the educational system. Materials should be carefully selected in relation to learners' linguistic competence and the learning objectives of the course.

Adequate time should be allocated to oral comprehension courses. The study particularly recommends reconsideration of the one-unit allocation for related courses in the 2020 NCCE Minimum Standards, with a return to two units as provided in the 2012 edition, in order to create greater opportunities for sustained practice.

Learners should be encouraged to watch French-language films and other audio-visual materials independently. Such exposure can provide additional opportunities to acquire vocabulary and become more familiar with French sounds and spoken communication.

Curriculum developers and other relevant stakeholders should promote greater coherence between NCE and B.A.Ed. French curricula so that learners entering degree programmes through Direct Entry can build on an appropriately aligned foundation in oral French.

## Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted with two purposively selected groups of French students associated with the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta and the University of Ibadan degree programme. The sample and institutional context therefore limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised to all learners of French in Nigeria. In addition, the analysis relied on mean scores. Although the study formulated hypotheses in terms of significant correlations, the reported analysis did not include an inferential statistical test of correlation or statistical significance. Future studies may therefore employ larger samples and appropriate inferential procedures to test the relationships more rigorously.

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