

French (continuers)

2009 ASSESSMENT REPORT

Languages Learning Area



Government
of South Australia

SACE
Board of SA

FRENCH (CONTINUERS)

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ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 3: ORAL EXAMINATION

General Comments

Overall performance of students in relation to the criteria

The overall performance of students in this section of the examination was very strong. Almost half the students scored 17 or more out of 20 for the conversation, and well over half scored 8 or more out of 10 for the discussion. Eleven per cent of students scored 11 or less for the conversation, and a similar number scored 5 or less for the discussion.

This very strong performance was in contrast to this cohort's handling of the written paper, where results were not as convincing. Examiners commented on the increasing number of new immigrant students with oral skills close to native-speaker level, and also on the increasing number of students who had benefited from an extended recent stay in France. Many had spent 3 to 4 weeks in a home-stay, and some had stayed for 3, 4, or 5 months. This clearly had a positive effect on their spoken French.

Advice to students/teachers

Within this impressive overall performance, examiners were able to identify one or two areas in which improvements might be made. A fair number of students do not appreciate the need to go beyond a basic, even one-word, response when answering a question. They should realise that they have only 10 to 12 minutes in which to convince the examiners of their ability to speak and understand French, and must therefore make the most of every opportunity to do so.

A common theme in examiners' reports was that many students were able to convey factual information successfully, even in impressive detail, but that only a few were able to go to the next level by giving and justifying opinions. Examiners will usually give students an opportunity to do this by broaching a topic that goes beyond the superficial. Teachers could work with students on more challenging topics in class as a way of preparing them for this more difficult aspect of the examination.

Another frequent comment was that many students were unable to manage the different tenses that must be learnt by the end of French Stage 2 studies. Assuming that the theoretical aspects of these tenses have been dealt with, and that students are managing to incorporate them into their written work, a closer focus on the use of tenses in spoken French could be a worthwhile approach to revision before the oral examination.

Section 1: Conversation

Capacity to maintain a conversation (comprehension, communication strategies)

Students were well prepared in this area. Most had learnt key phrases (*Reformulez la question s'il vous plaît — Désolé, je ne comprends pas*) and were able to ask for a question to be repeated or, better still, for clarification of what an examiner might have meant. Examiners were impressed by the presence of mind and poise of most students in what can be a stressful situation.

Relevance and depth of treatment of information, opinions, and comment

Most students understood the initial questions asked and were able to feel at once a sense of confidence. Examiners generally begin with a fairly general, open-ended question to break the ice. A number of students, however, were thrown by what is quite a normal opening gambit '*Comment êtes-vous venu ici ce matin?*' It seemed that students had not had much experience of the question '*Comment...?*' A variety of answers led to some confusion on both sides of the table, not the best way to begin the examination.

Very few students were unable to respond adequately to basic questions. Once examiners sense that a student is at ease, they try to extend the boundaries of the conversation to assess fully that student's ability. If a student relied mainly on rehearsed answers, this became apparent quite quickly. There was often a significant difference in the standard of a student's rehearsed and spontaneous answers. The most successful students fielded all questions with a consistent level of confidence.

Most students were able to provide information in good detail. Only the most successful were able to express and justify opinions in any depth.

Clarity of expression (pronunciation, intonation, stress)

The main negative comment from examiners in this area was that many students tended to pronounce letters that should remain silent in French (e.g. final consonants). The ending *-tion* was also frequently anglicised. Correct intonation is also difficult to master.

Accuracy, range, and appropriateness of vocabulary and sentence structures

All but the least successful students used vocabulary correctly within the range of topics discussed. Basic sentence structures were also handled well. One of the key differences between average or quite good and more successful students was the way in which tenses were managed. For about half the cohort, tense differentiation proved to be difficult. Many students managed to use the perfect tense adequately, but only the most successful were able, for example, to use two or more past tenses together correctly. Constructions with *si* and *quand* were generally not handled well.

Students who learn one or two phrases requiring the subjunctive and produce them in the middle of a discourse where there are no other sentences of any sophistication tend to do themselves a disservice. The startling inappropriateness of the more complex sentences merely serves to draw attention to the very basic nature of the other language produced.

It was pleasing to hear students correcting their own minor errors. This is a natural part of language use, and the sign of a relatively sophisticated speaker.

Section 2: Discussion

Capacity to maintain a discussion (comprehension, communication strategies)

Examiners commented on the high standard of students' involvement and performance. Most knew quite a lot about their chosen topic and were well prepared for this part of the examination. Many could give opinions and make comparisons, where appropriate, between the French and Australian experiences.

Less successful students were often thrown by examiners' follow-up questions to the initial brief presentation. Students should be made aware that there is more to this part of the examination than just a simple exposé of the topic.

Relevance and depth of treatment of information, opinions, and comment

Many students were quite involved in their topic and spoke extremely well. To some extent, the topic chosen often seemed to be a factor in this. For example, a student who talked about *Coco Chanel* merely from a factual, biographical point of view, was less able to elaborate beyond the superficial than someone who had considered Chanel's influence on women in Western society. Teachers have a role to play in guiding students, not only to a reasonable initial choice of topic, but also in shaping their approach to it.

Students must be prepared to discuss those areas of their topic outlined on the in-depth study outline form handed to examiners. Clearly, no student is expected to know everything about a topic, but the headings provided will guide examiners in their choice of questions, and students need to understand this. In many cases there were no problems, but a number of students seemed unable to discuss, even at a basic level, matters which, according to their form, they had studied.

Students should also make sure they know what they are talking about. A student who uses technical, special, or unusual vocabulary should be prepared to explain such terms to the examiners. The most successful students were certainly able to do so, but it was a point of difference for a number of less successful students.

It is not possible to give here an account of all the topics chosen. Examiners often found that the students who had chosen a difficult, more challenging topic, for example, *Voltaire et Candide*, gave a more convincing account of themselves than students who settled for something more mundane, such as *La Tour Eiffel*. It was generally felt that, overall, students had approached this part of the course with a greater sense of originality and from a more personal perspective. Marks were quite high and there were many convincing discussions.

In some cases there was a lack of coherence in the student's approach to his or her topic. At times the link between the topic, *Modern French Cuisine*, and the main points covered, for example, *The modern French woman — The rise of fast food in France — My experiences with French food*, was tenuous to say the least. Although great depth of insight is not expected in this component of the course, it is hoped that there will be a modicum of intellectual rigour in the way students deal with their topic.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 4: WRITTEN EXAMINATION

General Comments

Overall performance of students

Student performance in the written examination was marked by its inconsistency. Many students wrote quite poor answers in Section 1: Listening and Responding. The standard in Section 2, Parts A and B was much better, although many students lost marks in Part B for poor use of written French. This problem was exacerbated in Section 3: Writing in French, where students not only made a great number of errors, even in basic structures, but were unable to respond adequately to the requirement of the text types involved.

The patchy performance of this cohort in the written examination contrasts markedly with its handling of the oral examination, where there were many high marks and where the standard was generally very good. It might seem that teachers prepared their students very well for the oral examination, but that other areas of the course, particularly Listening and Responding, and Writing in French, require closer attention. It is disappointing that students were unable to write basic structures involving principles of language, which are elementary, and which are certainly assumed knowledge well before Year 12.

Section 1: Listening and Responding

General Comments/Observations

Examiners were surprised and disappointed at the level of student achievement in this section of the examination. It was felt that the texts were clear and well presented, at a fair pace, and that the questions, while not always straightforward, offered most students the opportunity to show that their listening comprehension skills are of a reasonable level. It can only be suggested that teachers do not neglect this important aspect of learning, and that specific listening tasks be an essential component of language programs at all levels.

Students found this section of the examination the most difficult. The average score out of 20 was between 11 and 12. Markers commented that many students failed to understand the context of one or more of the texts. Often relevant details were understood, but students seemed unable to analyse the information, or to shape it properly in the context of the question.

Text 1

Thirty-five per cent of students scored 1 or 0 out of 3, yet 30% were able to give full, correct answers and score 3. Students who struggled did not understand that the text was an advertisement for a cleaning service. Misinterpreting the context of the text led to some wildly inaccurate and fabricated answers.

Text 2

This text was handled with greater ease. More than half the cohort scored 5 or 6 out of 6. Fourteen per cent scored 2 or less, so there was still a significant group that struggled. Despite the slight awkwardness of the question format, students were generally able to rank the four interviewees in the correct order, showing that they were able to analyse the information provided in this text. At least 2 marks were given for this analysis, the other 4 being given for students' comprehension of the details of each interviewee's circumstances.

Text 3

Only 25% of students scored 3 or 4 out of 4 for this question. Thirty-five per cent scored 1 or 0. Examiners had felt that basic procedures such as writing down a name as it was spelt out and writing down a phone number, would pose little problem, but such was not the case, as very few students were error-free in these two tasks. Given these problems, it was then not surprising to note that many students answered the question about the tone of the message (which meant of course that they would have had to understand the message to some extent) very poorly. Madame Lenôtre was thought to be a therapist, a dentist, a primary school principal, a security guard, an electrician, a social worker...the list goes on.

Text 4

Sadly, 23% of students scored 1 or 0 out of 7 on this text. A similar percentage scored 6 or 7, so again, performance varied considerably. Confusion about who went where when reigned supreme. Many thought Kate had gone to Australia from France, and were therefore well off the track right from the start.

Interpreting '*Quelle chance!*' proved to be very difficult, yet it is the kind of interpretive question with which students are expected to be familiar. It was often mistaken for '*Bonne chance!*'

Many students were very vague about the reasons Kate and Christine had for going to see the film, and Kate's homesickness was apparent to only a few students.

The question about the women's reactions to the film posed problems of analysis of information that students found difficult. Understanding '*la morale*' was a major difficulty.

Section 2: Reading and Responding, Part A

General Comments

Overall, students wrote convincing answers in this section of the examination. Text 5 was handled better than Text 6, which is rather surprising as the relevant information in Text 5 was perhaps more difficult to identify.

Text 5

Thirty-five per cent of students scored 7 or 8 out of 8 — an excellent result. Fourteen per cent scored 3 or less. The relative sophistication of the text in which students had to understand that the story of *Cochons d'Inde* was placed within the external framework of an article about Sébastien Thiéry caused some confusion. There was also confusion for some as they discussed 'characters' in Thiéry's plays and not 'characteristics'. The verb *retirer* was often misunderstood, being translated as 'retire' rather than 'withdraw'.

Text 6

Only three students scored 7 out of 7 on this text. Forty per cent of students scored 3 or 4, suggesting that they had basically understood the text, but had framed their answers poorly.

Students are reminded to read **all** the instructions in their question booklets. For example, 'PLEASE TURN OVER' at the bottom of a page means that the examination continues on the next page. It would seem that some students ignored this instruction and failed to answer Question 6.

Section 2: Reading and Responding, Part B

General Comments

Thirty-five per cent of students scored 12 or more out of 15 for this section, with eight students scoring full marks. It is clear that students appreciate the chance to write as individuals, but within a clear framework. There were many lively and entertaining answers. Many students tended to side with M Sergène despite his being critical of today's young people. This phenomenon has been noted before in this type of question. Some students who had begun by agreeing with M Sergène ended up writing as if they were arguing against him. This lack of clarity and consistency marred otherwise good pieces.

It is pleasing to note how well nearly all students observed and adhered to the relevant text type conventions/characteristics. The required response, in this case a letter to the editor, was well presented in most cases. It was also pleasing to note that the kind of confusion evident in previous years when this kind of question has been set, where students responded directly to the writer of the original letter, instead of to the editor of the newspaper, was far less frequent.

The major concern for examiners was no doubt the number of mistakes in students' written French, even on a topic where the context was clear and certain key phrases were provided in the stimulus text. It is impossible to provide here a comprehensive list of errors, but basic mistakes in present tense verbs (*tout vais bien, apprennent, je comprende*); contractions (*de les jeux, de le media*); pronouns (*je les parle, je ne leur comprends pas*), and many other

areas give cause for concern. These are mistakes one might expect in the lower years, it is a real problem that students are unable to write without correcting such elementary slips. More sophisticated areas of language, such as correct forms and use of other tenses, proper use of relative pronouns, and judicious selection of the right preposition for the right context pose even more problems. Five marks out of 15 are given in this exercise for range and precision of vocabulary and grammar. Students would surely do even better if they paid more attention to detail.

Section 3: Writing In French

General Comments

Sixty students chose to answer Question 8, eighty answered Question 9, and fifty-one answered Question 10. No one question seemed to be significantly more difficult than the others, with average marks being 12.8, 12.9, and 11.8 respectively. Examiners felt that students did not handle Question 10 quite as well as the others, finding it difficult to tie the photograph effectively into the story that they wrote.

A significant feature of this year's cohort was that only two students scored 20 out of 20 in this section of the examination. A little over 15% scored 17 or more, with 26% scoring 10 or less. Given the overall averages shown above, it is clear that examiners felt that the general standard in this section was not particularly high.

Although there were some very good answers, the way in which students handled the text types was not particularly convincing. Examiners felt that a recount in the first person was not the same thing as a story (Question 10). Diary entries (Question 8) were often a simple recount without any real diary rhetoric or emotion. Speeches (Question 9) often did not seem to take the audience into account in any serious way.

Students seemed confident in expressing ideas and feelings. Most tended to write in an oral style, which suited Questions 8 and 9, but which did not really suit Question 10, where some idea of narrative technique was needed. Nearly all students were at least able to write an answer of the minimum length, or more.

Question 8

Most students wrote an answer that was relevant to the context of the question and, given that the topic covered areas familiar to most students, were able to achieve a reasonable depth in treatment of ideas and opinions. Many answers read more like a letter than a diary entry. It is not sufficient to put a date at the top, to start off '*Cher journal*', and then to finish with '*A demain*', yet for many students, that was the only deference they made to the requirements of the text type. The great danger of writing a diary entry is that one tends to lapse into a kind of personal narrative, with no real diary rhetoric or feel. Many students wrote a great deal about actually getting to the film event, with no reference to their feelings and no real sense of excitement. The topic set in the paper asks the students to 'reflect on' their evening, yet very few did so.

Question 9

The general way in which language is used in a speech corresponds well to the oral approach to language most students are comfortable with. However, there are specific aspects of rhetoric in a speech that go beyond, '*Chère Classe*' and '*Merci de votre attention*'. Many of the speeches did not really read like a speech at all and showed little appreciation of the context in which the speech was being made. Moreover, many showed little appreciation of the need to make comparisons, nor of the kind of language required to do so. Apart from these problems, too many students were very loose in their interpretation of 'aspects of life', talking mainly about the school day, uniforms, and the weather. Although these topics are relevant enough, they are extremely banal and predictable, and give the students little

opportunity to deal with the subject in any depth. Depth of treatment of ideas is a significant criterion in the assessment of this part of the examination. More successful students discussed things such as binge drinking, immigration, impact of different climates on activities, population differences, pollution, smoking, and sun sense. They showed that it is possible to achieve more than the humdrum.

Question 10

Many students did not write a story with a satisfactory narrative structure. Those who wrote a personal recount of a day at the market could not score highly on this question. A story requires tense sequencing, combines description and narration, and should have characteristics of tension and resolution. Too few answers were in this category.

Accuracy and range of vocabulary and sentence structures

The examiners commented at great length on the many problems that beset the students' control of written French. There were outstanding pieces of writing, but they were not the norm. One excellent response included, for example, a clause with *si*, correct use of *avec laquelle, de plus, de crainte que, bien que, donc, avant que, après avoir vu, finalement, je lui ai posé la question, j'y ai réfléchi, actuellement*, clear understanding of the preceding direct object agreement, imperative, subjunctive. Such writing was rare.

The frequency of basic errors in students' writing was disturbing.

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