



# Assessing French Proficiency

with  
stories

Eric Herman

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AC



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of Novices and Intermediates  
in communicative classrooms

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with stories

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## *Practical Tests of Proficiency*

*“At their very best, the tasks that appear on a test should resemble the kinds of tasks at which learners should be working in the classroom” (Savignon, 1997, p. 241)*

If we can make proficiency testing a common, classroom practice, then perhaps the language teaching field can finally make the shift to a communicative approach. I am also excited, because I think these proficiency testing methods make action research more meaningful and feasible. Some of the task options stick to narrative text-types and the storytelling context, thus qualifying as superb, course-referenced proficiency tests (remember: ACTFL calls this “performance”) for those teachers with story-based curriculum. Storytelling is a common assessment used in SLA research. In other words, the tasks suit the teaching. But the stories can also be the starting point for different communicative tasks.

It is a strength that the tasks are comprehension-dependent. This would have a positive backwash effect on the classroom. Teachers will prepare students with comprehension-based activities, a research-based approach given the consensus about the importance of input (arguably the only causative variable in the acquisition of a native-type knowledge). This also means that the test is not time away from acquisition, but is itself an opportunity to acquire and develop communicative skills.

On the tasks requiring output, we want to minimize time spent planning. If we just gave students a topic to discuss, then some students will spend time thinking and others may rely on language they've rehearsed. If the story were in the first language, then students may get stuck trying to think of words that they do not know in the second language. Starting with the second language story gives everyone the same, unfamiliar story and the best chance to show off their fluency.

### **Why these Stories?**

1. Graded: To bias for the best and increase the likelihood of communication (authenticity), the stories and quizzes are written within the 300 most frequently used words (Davies, 2006), plus 400+ English-French cognates, and 50 non-cognate words beyond the 300 word level. Those words with a lower frequency than 300 are either easily figured out from the context or else they are glossed at the first occurrence of the word in the speed reading course and again if it is key to understanding another passage. Sentences are short and grammar tenses have been restricted almost entirely to the present tense (although texts can be read aloud in the past tense).

2. Construct validity: By virtue of #1, there is a stronger argument that real-world language use is being measured. Sticking to the highest frequency language means that the language is the most useful and fundamental to communication in a broad range of contexts (frequency lists are determined by number of occurrences and range of contexts). This also means that communicative classrooms won't need to backwards plan lessons and syllabi to prepare students. There will be ample opportunities in a communicative classroom to acquire these words by the definition of high-frequency.



## *Assessing French Proficiency with Stories*

2. Unrehearsed content: The stories are not coming from class-created stories and are not intended to be practiced prior to testing.

3. Background knowledge = Stories are about characters who are likely to be known and relevant to the students (celebrities and cartoon characters) and thus easy to visualize, while also motivating students to read and comprehend. To decrease predictability and increase attention to meaning, some changes in familiar plots and character details have been made. Imagine: Texts on a test that are a fun and pleasurable experience!

4. Leveled: The readings get progressively more challenging. The number of different words in a story, sentence length, and structural variety all slightly increase. This enables a teacher to test with stories at different levels in order to give everyone a chance at improving. In my classroom, I repeated the same task with 2 different stories: 1 from the first half, 1 from the latter half of the book.

### **Task Characteristics:**

- All tasks are meaning-based
- All depend upon comprehension of input
- Time-pressured (a condition that favors reliance on implicit knowledge)
- Quick to administer and easy to score
- Provide objective, quantitative data

If you refer back to the definition of communication and the principles of a communicative approach, then you will see that these tasks satisfy all of the criteria for communication and could just as well be used as daily tasks in a communicative classroom. Adopt and adapt the texts and tasks as needed. Use multiple tasks when possible, because the more varied the tasks, the better our position to make claims about general proficiency.

\* Teacher Tip: Read the stories live, rather than tape-recorded. That is more real, will include non-verbal expression, and will increase engagement. In order to standardize the speech rate, decide your rate beforehand and figure out the total time. Then, just keep a watch nearby. The stories include dialogue, so the teacher ought to read that with different voices. In addition, the teacher can add to the story “Bob said. . .” in order to make it clearer who is talking.

### **Evaluation Criteria:**

- Fluency (# of words)
- Comprehension/Comprehensibility (multiple choice, # of comprehensible sentences)
- Informational content (# of correct facts)

For practical reasons, proficiency is not being assessed according to the 4 components of communicative competence. It is assumed that fluency and comprehensibility are macro-traits, which subsume the 4 components. Each component will contribute to the relative fluency and comprehensibility of the communication.

These are the same criteria used in the Savignon tests. I recommend them, because they are easy and quick methods that provide objective, quantitative data. Using test paper with numbered blanks makes this even faster (see next section). To be even more sensitive to novice level progress, count clauses (look for the verbs) rather than sentences. Don't count any words in the first language and language that is consecutively repeated, e.g. "muy, ~~muy~~, ~~muy~~ grande."

Although subjective, it would be even easier to follow Savignon and rate one or all criteria from 1-6 based on general impression. Another option is to use a rubric to assign points to the degree by which the 3 criteria are satisfied. Sum or weight the points and determine ranges that correspond to a global rating. This may be necessary if you need to turn the ratings into a grade. Below is an example you can adapt for your classes.

Points	Fluency	Comprehensibility	Facts
1	0-19	1-3	1-3
2	20-39	4-5	4-5
3	40-59	6-7	6-7
4	60-79	8-9	8-9
5	80-99	10-11	10-11
6	100+	12+	12+

Points	Grade
16+	A
12-15	B
8-11	C
4-7	D
3	F

If you apply the ACTFL guidelines, just remember that the rating cannot be taken as comparable to a rating earned from an ACTFL test. In other words, no claims can be made about someone's ACTFL proficiency level.

Simplify everything and combine all 3 criteria to count the **amount of communication**, defined as the number of comprehensible words, clauses, or sentences that are also factually correct. Even more practical, give an impressionistic rating that uses that combined criteria, but rather than counting instances, review the language sample and assign a global 1-6 rating. On the speed rewrite task, this is basically an evaluation of how well the student summarized the story.

**Norm-Referenced Evaluation:**

For placement purposes, to compare programs, and/or to measure pre and post-test results, there is an easy, norm-referenced method for evaluating overall ability. Review all language samples together and categorize based on the degree of communicative ability relative to other language samples. I first heard of this procedure when reading how SLA researchers Beniko Mason and Stephen Krashen evaluated writing samples. They summarize the procedure:

*"The two summaries were evaluated holistically by two native speakers of English on a 1-6 scale, where 1 = worst and 6 = best writing. Specifically, raters were first asked to categorize papers as 'good', 'bad', or 'average'. Then papers in each pile were re-evaluated and divided into two groups to form six categories. As in Experiment 2, judges did not know whether the papers had been written at the beginning or end of the academic year"* (1997, p. 97).

## 11. Shrek

### *la petite amie - girlfriend*

Il y a un très grand garçon. C'est un ogre qui s'appelle Shrek. Il vit à Far Far Away. Shrek a un ami qui s'appelle Donkey. Ils ont tous les deux une petite amie. Un jour, Shrek décide que c'est une bonne idée d'acheter quelque chose pour sa petite amie Fiona. Fiona est une ogresse aussi. Shrek va chez Donkey et lui dit :

- Salut mon ami. Ça fait beaucoup d'années que nous sommes avec nos petites amies et jamais nous ne leur avons acheté quelque chose. Je crois que c'est une bonne idée d'aller chercher quelque chose pour elles.

- Bonne idée, mon ami. J'ai besoin de donner quelque chose de fantastique à ma petite amie, Dragon. Mais que pouvons-nous acheter ?

- Je ne sais pas. Allons chez Gingy. Il sait toujours quoi faire.

Alors, Shrek et Donkey vont chez Gingy. Quand ils arrivent, ils entrent dans la maison et regardent Gingy. Shrek lui dit :

- Nous voulons ton opinion. Nous voulons acheter quelque chose pour nos petites amies. Est-ce que tu as une idée pour nous ?

- D'abord, je dois savoir une chose. Qu'est-ce que vos petites amies aiment ?

Donkey lui répond :

- Dragon aime les parfums.

Shrek et Donkey décident de chercher du parfum pour leurs petites amies. Ni l'un ni l'autre n'a aucune idée sur les différentes sortes de parfum. Alors, Gingy cherche sur l'Internet pour des parfums à Far Far Away. Il trouve que Pinocho a un magasin avec une grande collection de parfums. Les amis sont contents parce qu'ils savent où vit Pinocho. Alors, ils vont au magasin de Pinocho. Ils y arrivent en cinq minutes. Shrek dit à Pinocho :

- Je suis Shrek et voici mon ami Donkey. Nous cherchons des parfums pour nos petites amies.

- Avec plaisir. Je m'appelle Pinocho. Le parfum dépend de la petite amie.

- Ma petite amie est une ogresse.

- Et ma petite amie est un dragon.

- Je suis vraiment désolé. Nous avons des parfums pour gorilles, dinosaures et même pour les licornes, mais je n'ai aucun parfum pour les ogresses ou les dragons.

Les amis sortent du magasin, très tristes. Pinocho leur dit :

- Ne soyez pas tristes. Vous avez de très belles petites amies.

- Après avoir parlé, Pinocho avait une très grosse tête.

Pour Shrek et Donkey, c'est très important d'acheter le parfum idéal pour leurs petites amies. Maintenant, ils savent que ce n'est pas si simple de trouver des choses pour les filles.

- Nous pouvons aller parler à Cendrillon. Elle est l'amie de nos petites amies. Elle peut nous donner une idée de l'endroit où nous pouvons trouver des parfums.

Alors, ils vont au palais de Cendrillon. Elle a un parfum pour les ogresses et pour les dragons et elle les donne à Shrek et Donkey. Ils les apportent à leurs petites amies et ils sont tous contents.

## 11 Shrek Quiz

1. Shrek veut
  - a. acheter quelque chose.
  - b. vivre quelque part d'autre.
  - c. une petite amie.
  - d. savent pas ce qu'ils peuvent acheter.
2. Shrek et Donkey ne
  - a. un ami.
  - b. sont pas de bons amis.
  - c. veulent pas chercher de choses.
  - d. ont pas de petites amies.
3. Ils vont chez Gingy parce que Gingy
  - a. est très intelligent.
  - b. a des parfums.
  - c. a des choses spéciales.
  - d. a toujours de bonnes idées.
4. Gingy
  - a. donne une chose fantastique à Shrek et Donkey.
  - b. leur pose une question.
  - c. sait beaucoup de choses sur les parfums.
  - d. semble être un bon ami de Pinocchio.
5. Ils cherchent un parfum parce que
  - a. toutes les filles aiment les parfums.
  - b. fiona aime les parfums.
  - c. la petite amie de Donkey aime les parfums.
  - d. Gingy leur recommande un parfum.
6. Ils savent que Pinocho a des parfums parce que
  - a. il est un ami.
  - b. tout le monde le sait.
  - c. ils ont cherché sur l'internet.
  - d. il vit avec Gingi.
7. Pinocho donne a Shrek et Donkey
  - a. un parfum pour gorilles et dinosaures.
  - b. aucun parfum.
  - c. une idée.
  - d. de belles petites amies.
8. Pinocho a une grosse tête parce que
  - a. il est triste pour Shrek et Donkey.
  - b. il pense qu'il a le parfum idéal.
  - c. il ne sait pas où vit Cendrillon.
  - d. il ne pense pas réellement que les petites amies sont belles.
9. À la fin, Shrek pense que trouver quelque chose pour une fille
  - a. est simple.
  - b. n'est pas simple.
  - c. est stupide.
  - d. est une mauvaise idée.
10. Cendrillon
  - a. vit avec les petites amies.
  - b. sait où il y a des parfums.
  - c. donne des parfums à Shrek et Donkey.
  - d. apporte les parfums aux petites amies.