DIFFERENCES IN INTERCOMPREHENSION – FRENCH VERSUS ENGLISH (CASE STUDY CONCLUSION)

Alina Balagiu
Associate Professor PhD, 'Mircea cel Batran' Naval Academy, Constanta

Abstract:The paper aims to make a parallel between the degrees of understanding the same text of two different groups. The first group is formed of 24 people who answered 10 questions in English and the second group is formed of 39 people who answered the same questions in French. The text was written into Romanian to prove the existence of reading comprehension. Each set of answers was analyzed in separate papers asparts of the same Case Study on intercomprehension. We started from the supposition that English speaking people should understand less from a Romanian text than French speaking people due to the fact that Romanian is a Romance language.

Keywords: reading comprehension, Romanian, French, English second language

1. Method of research

Intercomprehension and multilingualism are subjects of more and more studies as long as people of all ages are moving within Europe and worldwide. Learning languages has become a priority for everybody, but especially for students and graduates who have to either learn in a foreign country or work in a multicultural environment. People become more aware by and interested in the culture of the place where they learn or work and to satisfy their interest they need to develop communication skills with natives or with representatives of different nationalities. Starting from the idea that intercomprehension is a useful tool in oral and written communication we have studied the subject in several articles based on the results of a case study. The last two articles depicted the characteristics of reading comprehension as part of intercomprehension. The first paper considered understanding within Romance languages, taking as examples Romanian and French, and the next one taking into account the characteristics of Romanian text comprehension by second language English speakers.

As we have mentioned in the previous article, there were 39 respondents involved in the case study who considered French as their second language, 24 respondents involved in the study who gave their answers or translations into English. Only a small percentage of these people are native, there is one person from UK and seven respondents from France, the others know English, respectively French, as a second language.

The people involved in the case study were supposed to read ten Romanian questions and, according to what they could understand, answer the questions in English or French. The instructions given to the respondents involved in the study are:

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)

"Read the following questions, underline the words you can understand and write the translation or give short answers in the following languages: English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German." (Balagiu, 2017)

2. Analysis of answers

We divided the answers into four sections that could be identified in the charts. The first column on the chart is represented by the people who gave an answer to the question, or proved understanding by translating the whole sentence. The second column on the chart is represented by people who understood just a part of the sentence and translated accordingly. The third column shows the number of respondents who understood and translated between one and three words. The fourth column or section represents the participants who did not understand anything or misunderstood one or several words.

1.The first question "Cu ce mijloc de transport vii la şcoală?" (What means of transport do you use to come to school?) was understood by most of the respondents regardless of the group they were part of. The proof lies in the fact that there was any person to give no answer. According to the figures in the chart both the group of English speakers (75%) and that of French speakers (82%) had a high percentage of answers or translations. Also, all the respondents understood "mijloc de transport", collocation that gives the main meaning of the sentence.
The differences can be observed from the chart regarding the percentage of people who translated part of the sentence or just one word. While in the French group 18% partly translated the sentence, the English group had only 8.33% of respondents who understood more than one word. Out of these there was only one person who recognized the word "şcoală" (school). In the French group the same word was recognized by everybody.

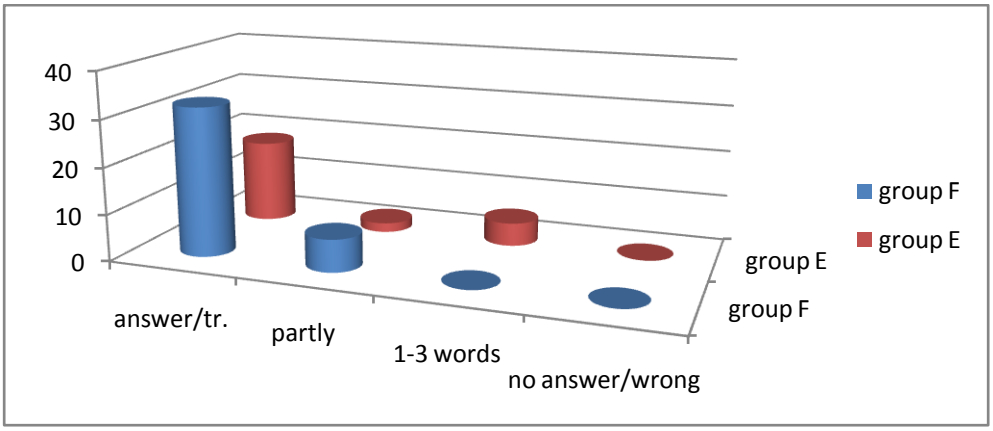


Figure 1 the first sentence

2. The second question, "Eşti căsătorit(ă), necăsătorit(ă) sau divorţat(ă)?" (Are you married, single or divorced?),was understood by 13 people from each group, meaning that as percentage the English group with 54.14% prevailed the French one that had only 33.33%.another difference is the percentage of people who had no clue about the meaning of the sentence 46.15% for the French speakers and 20.83 for the English speakers. The most familiar word for the French speaking respondents was "divorţat(ă)" recognized by 22 people, while for the

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)

English speakers all the three participles were underlined as being familiar, although they were not translated correctly.
The common fact for the two groups is that nobody translated the sentence partially, proving that the meaning was conveyed almost integrally.

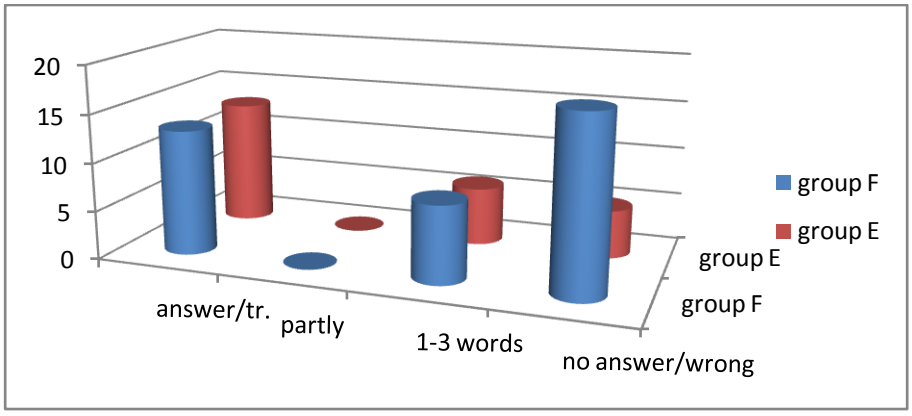


Figure 2 the second sentence

3. The third question is "Care este culoarea ta preferată?" (What is your favourite colour?).
As a common place for the two groups we cane note that the percentage of people who did not understand anything was about the same, 13% for the French speaking group and 16% for the English speaking group. Also about the same percentage (60%) of respondents proved that they understood the question by translating or giving an appropriate answer. Most people understood at least one of the two key-words "culoarea" and "preferată".
The differences can be found in the percentage of people who translated one to three words, whose number is bigger for the French speakers.

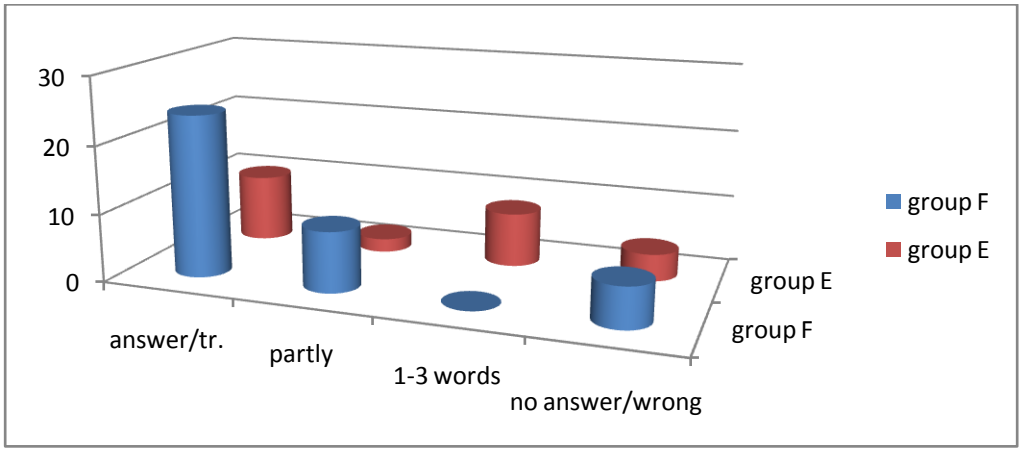


Figure 3 the third sentence

4. The fourth question, "Preferi să mergi la teatru, la operă, la balet sau la cinematograf?" (Do you prefer going to the theatre, opera, ballet or cinema?), was mainly understood by everybody, if we take into consideration the overall percentage of 98.5% for both groups.
Identifying at least one noun in the series of four was decisive in grasping the meaning of the sentence.

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)

In comparison to the French group, in the English one nobody recognized the verb "să mergi", which made the difference in translating part of the sentence or just a couple of words.

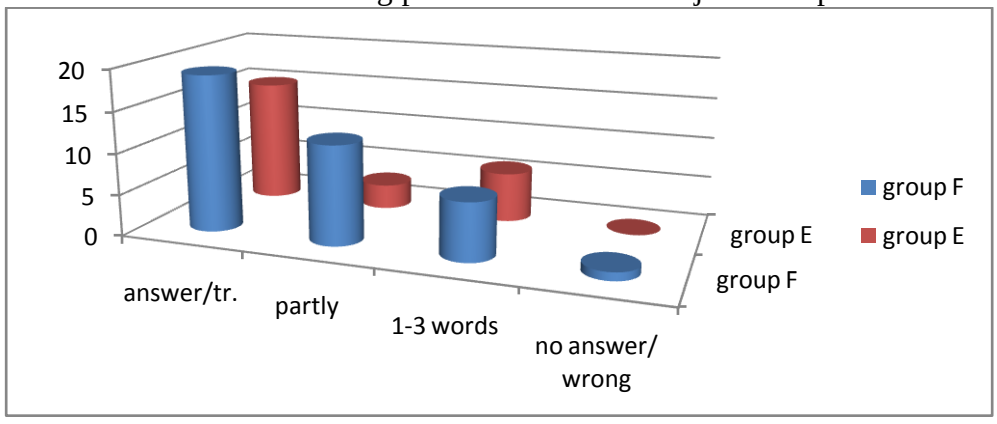


Figure 4the fourthsentence

5. The fifth question is "Duminica stai acasă sau mergi la plimbare?" (Do you stay at home or go for a walk on Sunday?). As we can see from the chart the differences in percentages are not striking between the two groups. Most people could not understand the meaning of the sentence, probably due to the fact that the words do not have a familiar form because they are not international words. As common fact both groups translated mainly the first half of the sentence. Unexpectedly, the percentage (16.66%) of people from the English group who understood the question is higher than the percentage (10.25%) of respondents from the French group.

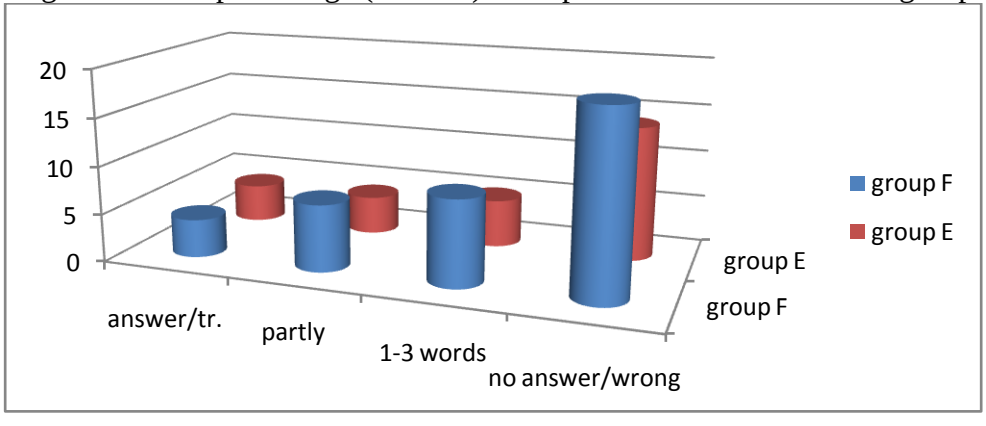


Figure 5 the fifth sentence

6. The sixth question is "Bei ceai, cafea sau lapte dimineaţa?" (Do you drink tea, coffee or milk in the morning?). The respondents from both groups had difficulties in understanding the overall significance of this question.

While the English respondents had more difficulties in translating the sentence or giving an answer with 8.33% of the total, the French group had twice more people in this situation, according to their number, with 15.33%. The differences can also be noticed for those who could not understand at least a word and are in percentage 20.83% for the English group and 35.89% for the French group. The figures are unexpected for a sentence having the key-word the international word **coffee**.

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)

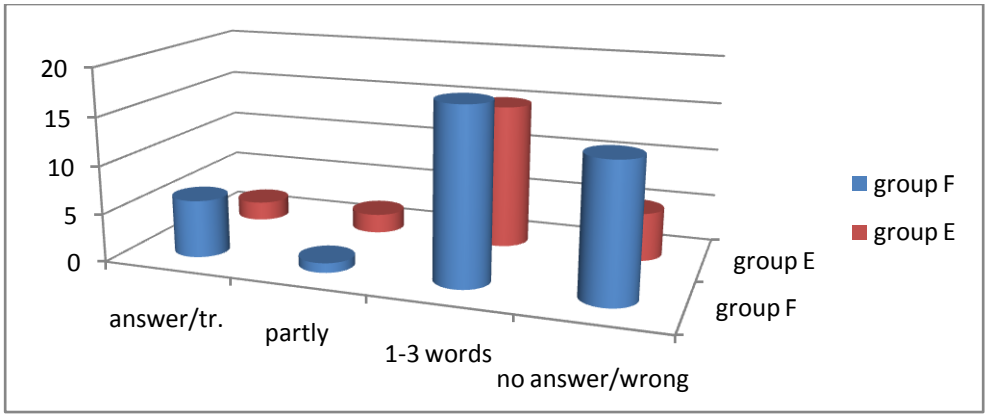


Figure 6 the sixth sentence

7. In the case of the seventh question "Te uiţi la reclame la televizor?" (Do you watch advertisements on TV?), the common traits are represented by the reduced number of people who could not understand the sentence at all and the great number of respondents who understood the noun "televizor" that is one the key-words for this question.
All the other aspects of understanding are different, as we could expect, including the fact that more French speakers also understand the verb "te uiţi", which is another key-word.

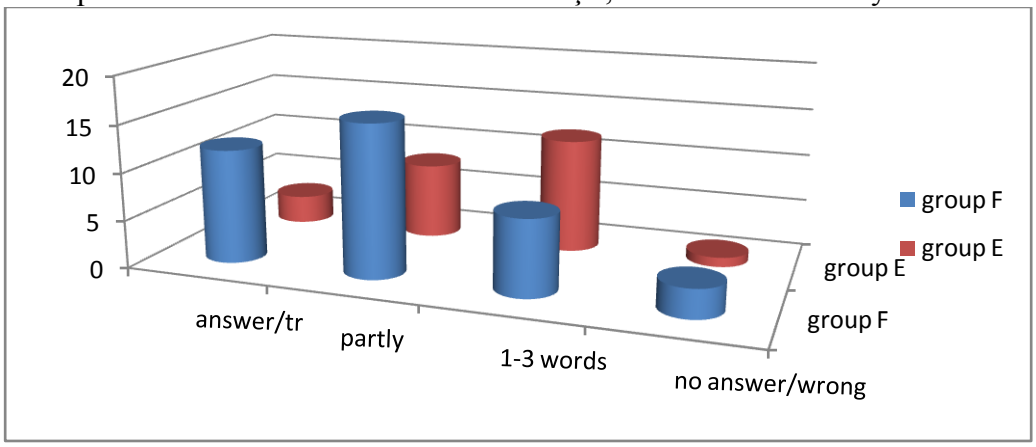


Figure 7 the seventh sentence

8. The eighth question is "Unde mergi în concediu, la munte sau la mare?" (Where do you go on holiday in the mountains or at the seaside?). The two groups have in common the poor understanding of the whole meaning and the fact that no one could translate partially the question.
The differences, as they can be seen from the diagram, consist in the degree of recognizing the noun "mare", which was higher for the French group (41%) due to the fact that the Romanian word was borrowed from French. Only 25% of the English speakers understood the word, representing quite a high percentage, however, taking into account the difference in form between the Romanian and the English word.

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)

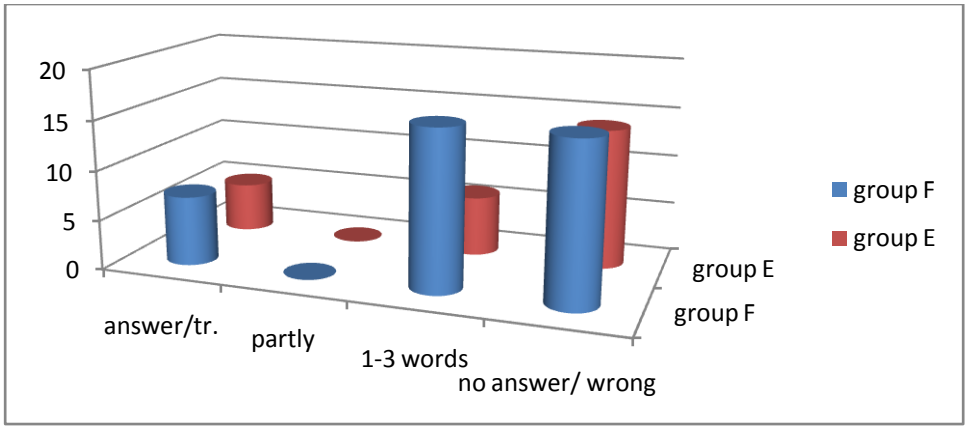


Figure 8 the eighth sentence

9. The ninth question "Care este hobby-ul tău?" (What is your hobby?) has from our point of view a predictable chart. It was understood by almost all the respondents regardless the group due to the word "hobby" that is internationally recognized, which lead to the conclusion that the key-word helped the participants in translating other words too.
Five people from the French group perceived the question wrongly and gave the translation "Quelle est sa profession?" (What is your occupation?), in comparison to the English group where there was no misunderstanding.

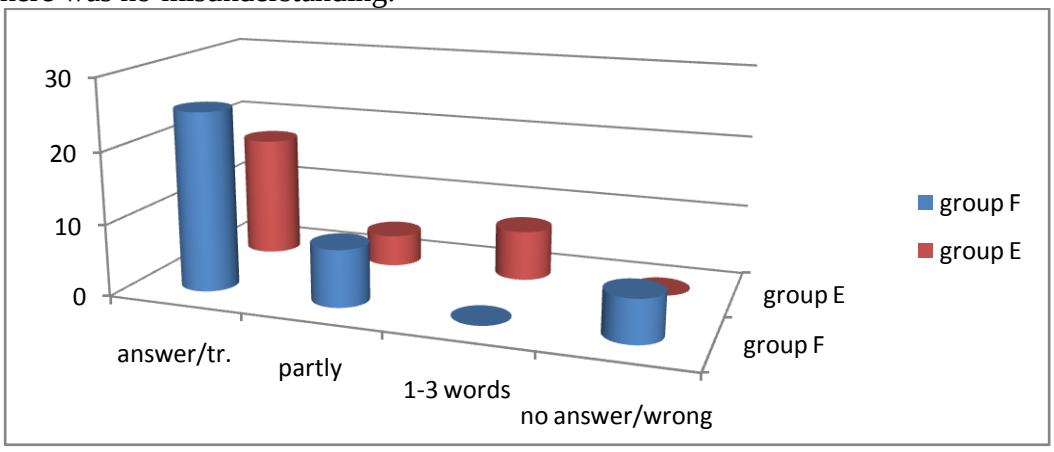


Figure 9 the ninth sentence

10.The tenth sentence, "Ce crezi că e mai uşor să înveţi într-o limbă străină, să scrii sau să vorbeşti?" (What do you think is easier to do in a foreign language, to write or to speak?), proved to be very difficult for all our respondents. A great number of people had no clue about the meaning, in figures that is over 80% from each group.
A small percentage of the English group (12.5%) made an attempt to translate the first part of the question even though the vocabulary is totally different, and they succeeded to understand the question is about asking opinion.

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)

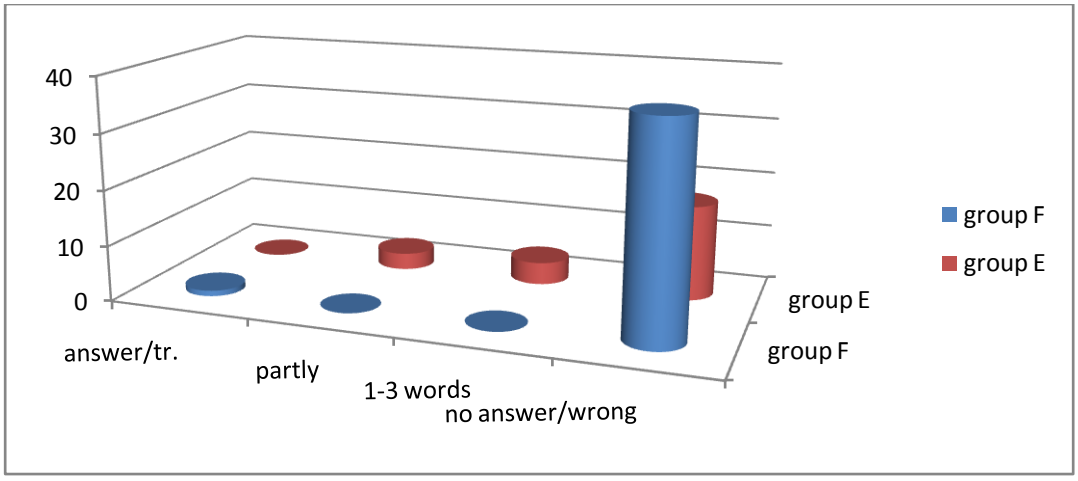


Figure 10 the tenth sentence

3. Conclusions

We assumed at the beginning of the study that the French group would understand more than the English group due to the similar vocabulary shared by the Romance languages. However, during the analysis of the answers in parallel between the two groups we get to the conclusion that the differences are not striking. The comprehension of Romanian words and phrases was based for both groups on common traits.

1. The recognition of key-words in each sentence facilitate guessing the overall meaning for the English group while for the French one the common words made the comprehension easier. An example is the first sentence where there are two such key-words: "transport" and "şcoală". The first one was easily recognized as having the same form in English and French, while the second word was mainly recognized by the French speakers and inferred from the context by 75% of respondents who translated the sentence or gave an adequate answer. The same phenomenon can be noticed in the second sentence where there are three key-words "căsătorit(ă)", "necăsătorit(ă)", "divorţat(ă)". The only word that was perceived as recognizable was "divorţat(ă)", word that has about the same form in French and English, while the other two words giving clues for the sentence were not recognized, but guessed from the context.

2. One of the most important factors in reading comprehension is the similar form of the word, even if the Romanian word is written with specific diacritics. Many words were misunderstood both by French and English respondents because they had forms similar to other French or English words. Some examples are hilarious: the Romanian noun "plimbare" (walk) was assimilated to the English noun *plumber*, "necăsătorit(ă)" (unmarried) was translated as *necessary*, the adverb "mai" (more) was translated as *May* (the month), "învеţi" (learn) was assimilated to the verb *invite*, and the list can continue. The same mistranslations could be noticed at the French speakers but not as frequent as at the English group.

3. The main difference between the answers of the two groups was remarked at the sentence seven. The meaning of the seventh question rests in the key-words "reclame" and "televizor" which were clearly understood by most of the French respondents given the resemblance to the French words "réclame" and "téléviseur". The recognition of these nouns made the French respondents identify the verb "a se uita" which would have been impossible to understand but for the context. We are dealing here with a short sentence containing two easily recognizable words, which convey the whole meaning.

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)

The English respondents on the other hand, although recognized the word that gave the clue of the sentence, could not get to the meaning of the question because they did not understand the verb. In this case the oral intercomprehension would not function, as the reading comprehension did not function, because the whole message was not understood.

We have been committed to find differences between the French and the English groups in understanding the Romanian sentences. However, the similarities in reading comprehension proved to be more than distinctions. A typical example is the last question "Ce crezi că e mai uşor să înveţi într-o limbă străină, să scrii sau să vorbeşti?" (What do you think is easier to do in a foreign language, to write or to speak?). If we just look at the two versions, the English and the Romanian one we can notice that there is no formal or visual similarity between the words forming the sentences. Consequently we would expect the question to be understood by the French speakers because many words have a somehow similar form or have the same origin. The percentage of people speaking French who had no clue about the meaning of the sentence was greater than those of people speaking English.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Characteristics of Romanian Text Comprehension by Second Language English Speakers (Case Study), The Proceedings of the International Conference Globalization, Intercultural Dialogue and National Identity, Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, e-ISBN: 978-606-8624-01-3, Volume no. 4, 2017, p. 73.

BDD-V4548 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:58 UTC)