

Full Length Research Paper

The importance of games in teaching foreign languages to children

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In teaching French as a foreign language, there is a constant development from traditional methods to action-oriented approaches. This development has arisen as a result of students' needs and of innovations in technology. Particularly in the last decade, there has been increasing interest in teaching foreign languages to children. Because of this increasing interest, much is expected from teachers in particular. The educators who will teach a foreign language to children should be trained with a system that children learn languages in a way physically and mentally different than adults do. In this study, it was emphasized that French as a foreign language should be taught to children using games, which are classroom activities. A field study in teaching foreign languages was conducted with first-year students who were in their secondary stage of primary education, aged from 10 to 11 and learning A1 level French.

Key words: Game, Teaching Foreign Language to Children, French as a Foreign Language, Method, Activity.

INTRODUCTION

Studying of the evolution of teaching methods, we can observe that changes arise according to learners' breakthroughs, needs and purposes. Hence, each method is developed to fill a gap left by a previous method, and each has its own procedures and tools for how to teach and learn a foreign language. This evolution of methods also holds true for the teaching and learning of French as a Foreign Language (FFL). Cuq and Gruca (2005:209) take the following approach: "...significant studies have played a very important role in the didactics of languages and have served as operational models for the elaboration of new programmes and methods". As we can determine from this proposition, the didactics of FFL will continue to evolve, and new methods will be developed in the future.

As far as Turkey is concerned, in the field of teaching and learning foreign languages, the country has always attempted to follow and adopt new methods. To this end,

during the teaching and learning of foreign languages, teachers do their best to conform to the methods that they have learned, and they very carefully follow the instructions to ensure better results. However, teachers sometimes have difficulty applying the methods that they have learnt during their training, and this is mostly due to the multiple choice test that they must pass to enter a university. The multiple choice test (MCT) is an evaluative tool through which the learner is asked to select and recognize the right answer among suggested answers, without producing the former (Cuq, 2003:211). The benefit of the MCT resides in ensuring an objective marking process, especially when large numbers of candidates are concerned such as the case in Turkey, but on the other hand, it favors memorization and does not assess expressive and reproductive capacities.

Indeed, if we succeed in changing the assessment system, the teaching and learning of foreign languages

will be positively affected because “assessment is, above all, a formality that stands in the continuum of teaching and that contributes greatly to the acquisition of a foreign language. Assessment should not be a goal but an instrument” (Cuq and Gruca, 2005:219). If learners are required to pass the ÖSYM (Center for the Evaluation and Placement of Students to University) test, they will always have to learn foreign languages according to traditional methods because this test does not evaluate the four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. This test is closed-ended and consists solely of multiple-choice items, with no assessment of oral and written expression or oral comprehension. It is possible to pass the test by simply knowing some grammar, having a large vocabulary, knowing how to translate and being able to understand the texts enough to answer the questions. Thus, the teaching and learning of the language are conducted to fit the needs of such testing. Hence, the ÖSYM is currently working an imminent change true to the European Framework of Reference for Languages regarding the testing system and once this is done, assessing the four skills of language will become possible.

Particularly in the field of teaching younger learners, in his book *The Teaching of Children in Language Class*, Vanthier (2009:17) states that it is important to take into account the age, needs, psychomotor, cognitive, affective and linguistic development of learners aged below twelve. Indeed, teaching a language to children requires a strong knowledge of language teaching methods as well as a good understanding of children. That is why one must not lose sight of the different stages of the child's psycho-cognitive development. Piaget (cited in Vanthier, 2009:17), with respect to the child's development, explains our life's stages as such: «We first are newly born (the first month of life), then we are a baby (until more or less 2 years old), then little children (until 5 to 6 years old), then children (until 11 to 12 years old), then pre-teenagers (until 13 to 14 years old), then teenagers (until 17 to 20 years old), and finally we are adults». Basing ourselves on the above-cited definitions, we observe that the child's development distinctively influences his/her cognitive capacities which we must carefully handle while teaching/learning a foreign language.

To make FFL teaching and learning in classrooms more pleasing, we suggest that teachers, especially those who teach younger audiences, use play during their classes. With respect to that, we will use examples to first determine what is meant by playing and then to establish what role and function it has in FFL classes. Here is Bruner's view (cited in Vanthier, 2009:47) on the matter: «Because it presents both repetitive and innovative structures, it is through playing that the child have accesses to language. Through the individual motivation that it generates, it can provide a take-off point.

Playing is a linguistic experimentation platform”. On this matter, we will first try to see what playing is, then, through examples, its role and function in the FFL classes.

What is playing?

When we check the dictionary for the meaning of the term "playing", we see that it is derived from the Latin word "jocus", which signifies "joking, fooling around". Similarly, Robert (2003) defines it as a "physical or mental activity purely gratuitous, which has, in the mind of the person who indulges in it, no other purpose than the pleasure it gives".

From these definitions, at first sight, playing is perceived as an activity that children perform for the sake of simple pleasure to which they devote the majority of their time. However, we must not be fooled by this reality, for as Kergomard puts it (cited in Brougère 1995:148) in his book *Pre-school Education at School*, "Playing is the child's work, it is his profession, his life". It is a component that plays a major role in the child's physical and mental growth. Playing constitutes the heart of children's learning, and it prepares them for life. Therefore, through games, children can imitate adults' behaviors, learn to work and collaborate as part of a team, learn to manage stress, and learn to familiarize with social norms.

Winnicott (1972), in his book *The Child and the Outside World: Studies in developing relationships*, explains that children play for pleasure, to control their anxiety, to multiply their experiences and to create social ties. According to Brougère, playing is the first and foremost "...a value rather than a research theme" (2005: 36). Hence, we can understand that playing is a vital activity for children.

When we study playing closely, we see that researchers have tried to classify it. For examples Bühler divides play into five groups: a) Functional games (or sensory-motor), b) Fictional or illusional games, c) Receptive games (looking at images, listening to tales, etc.), d) Building games, and e) Collective games" (cited in Piaget, 1964:135).

Conversely, Piaget (1964) suggests a genetic classification with an evolution in 3 steps: exercise games, symbolic games and games with rules at age 5 or 6 or so. Regarding game rules, in his book *The Equilibration of Cognitive Structures: The Central Problem of Intellectual Development*, Piaget classifies these into four groups: the motor and individual stage (0 to 2/5 year), at this stage the child enjoys playing alone; the egocentric stage (2/5 to 7/8 year), the child is aware of the rules but struggles to accept their necessity; the stage of rising cooperation (7/8 year), the child's purpose is to win the game whilst the rules seem vague; and finally, the stage of rule codification (11/12 year), the child is aware of the rules and can modify them (cited in Vanthier, 2009:18).

After taking a glimpse at the stages of game rules among children and their classification, we will study the effects that these games might have on learning.

For many teachers, playing is the raw material of learning because children learn by playing. Playing motivates children's learning and shows the extent to which their language skills improve through play. According to Brougère (1995:66), "Playing is a medium, a format to seduce the child; we must refrain from discouraging him/her with studies that are unsuited for his/her age: This softer way of communicating studies will make the latter look like a game and not work. For at this age, it is necessary to fool them with seductive carrots since they yet cannot understand the benefits, the prestige and the pleasure that studies may provide them in their future. The child is not able to foresee the benefits that studies, learning to read and write, speaking a foreign language represent for him/her. Therefore he/she must be given the impression that he/she is playing".

Play in the teaching and learning of a foreign language

In the field of teaching and learning foreign languages, play has been considered a teaching tool since 1990 and has been practiced in the form of playful activities in language classrooms. As FFL trainers and teachers, we strongly suggest the use of play, especially in early education because it allows learners to learn by playing. According to Bruner (cited in Vanthier, 2009:47), it is through playing that the child has access to language and to being motivated because: «When you have playing in class, there is obviously a creation space. In the game, not all is set from the beginning: haphazard, strategy, imagination and emotions intervene. Word games, role playing, creativity games, board games, cooperative or competitive games, in each type of game, the "I" is involved. From there on, words are not simply mechanically repeated because when playing becomes saying, they reflect a genuine communication intention and creation on the part of the child.

Regarding the teaching of young audiences, Bernard Mallet (cited in Cuq and Gruca, 2005:356) affirms that "the methodology of teaching children must above all be preoccupied by the emotional aspect and the role that the foreign language may play in the building of the child's identity. Therefore, it is advisable to create a model that would present itself in the shape of a fictional communication and representation space destined to fill the gap of a lacking real space. This fictional space will have as essential characteristic being playful, so as to say of being an activity where a non-conventional situation (real but absent) is replaced by a conventional situation (playful but present), which validity is based upon the rules of the game, the formers determining limits of function and modalities. Truly, playing is favorable for all kind of imaginary investment of reality" In this way, as

mentioned earlier, play during the teaching and learning of a foreign language may allow learners to move away from their emotions and fears due to the playful activities in the classroom. Following Cuq and Gruca (2005), in teaching and learning foreign languages, we can classify games into four groups: linguistic games (including grammatical, morphologic, lexical, phonetic), creativity games (which are based on the creation and imagination of the learner, such as riddles and anagrams), cultural games (which refer to culture and the learners' knowledge, such as baccalauréat games) and theatre-oriented games (including role-playing, simulation and dramatization).

Based on these observations, we can determine that play is an invaluable tool during the acquisition of a foreign language because it allows learners to manipulate the language, to easily complete their linguistic knowledge most of the time without having to resort to any material, and to give them the chance to acquire a social skill. Here is how Weiss (2002:9) considers play: "Indeed, the nearly spontaneous expression during a game, a creativity exercise, a sketch or a role-playing game allows the student to show that he/she is capable of mobilizing vocabulary and structures of the method used in class in a different, new and creative way. Playful activities create maybe the most authentic situation where language is put to use in class and they allow students to take a giant leap in their learning process".

Purpose of the study

The main aims of the present study are as follows:

- To determine the effect of foreign language teaching via playing on the child's level of learning.
- To determine the effect of foreign language teaching via playing on the durability of acquired knowledge.

METHOD

The present study has been carried out through the researcher's conducting of foreign language classes by employing two different methods. In this aspect, the present study has been designed as a half experimental pattern. During the process, the effects of traditional and play-led classes on the learning process have been assessed via the comparison of test results.

Participants

The research has been carried out on sixteen 5th graders aged between age 10 to 11 years studying at the Batı Koleji Primary School in Ankara, during the 2012 to 2013 school year. The participants had 40 × 2 = 80 min of optional FFL class each week, and they were at level A1.

Data collection tools

Research data have been collected from test results emerging at

Table 1. Quiz scores over 10 and class averages.

| Learners | Quiz 1 | Quiz 2 | Quiz 3/A | Quiz 3/B |
|-----------------|--------|--------|----------|----------|
| A | 10 | 10 | 8 | - |
| B | 8 | 10 | 6 | - |
| C | 8 | 10 | 6 | - |
| D | 8 | 10 | 2 | - |
| E | 8 | 8 | 8 | - |
| F | 8 | 10 | 4 | - |
| G | 6 | 8 | 6 | - |
| H | 6 | 8 | 6 | - |
| I | 4 | 6 | - | 8 |
| J | 4 | 8 | - | 10 |
| K | 4 | 6 | - | 6 |
| L | 4 | 8 | - | 10 |
| M | 4 | 6 | - | 4 |
| N | 4 | 8 | - | 10 |
| O | 2 | 8 | - | 8 |
| P | 0 | 4 | - | 2 |
| Average over 10 | 5.5 | 8 | 5.75 | 7.25 |

the end of both traditionally and play-led classes. To analyze the effects of play on the growth of language skills in young FFL learners, we used quizzes that we designed after a series of observations. To that aim, we made a total of 240 h of lessons and gave 3 quizzes each day after each 40 min long class. Each quiz was scored out of 10 points and the number of items, on each quiz ranged from 5 to 20 (The quizzes are shown in the Appendix).

Progress of the experience

In this work, we have aimed at demonstrating the influence of playing on the student's motivation to learn a foreign language as well as his/her success. In this perspective we have carried out a research for a maximum of 240 h of lesson during 3 weeks. In that framework, a class of 16 students has been divided into two and we have worked with two groups of eight students each. During the study, the same topics have been taught firstly in a traditional fashion by using notebooks, books and a blackboard, then in a playful fashion using games. At the end of both practices quizzes consisting of 5 to 10 questions were administered and scored out of 10. In order to determine whether teaching has been durable, the quizzes have been repeated in the following weeks.

Over 3 weeks, we observed 16 Turkish learners aged between 10 and 11. They each had $40 \times 2 = 80$ min of optional FFL lessons each week. The purpose was to ensure that learners would acquire level A1 language skills through games.

To conduct our research, we chose two closely related themes. The second theme was divided into two parts so it would have the same level of difficulty because our purpose was to compare the efficacy of the methods. Therefore, in each class, we tried to ensure the assimilation of four sentences. The themes of the classes were thus: Which season is this?, What's the weather like? (I) and what's the weather like? (II).

For "Which season is this?" we tried in traditional fashion to ensure the assimilation of the following sentences by the whole class: It is spring time; It is summer time; It is autumn; It is winter time.

The following week, the second theme of the lesson was "What's the weather like? (I)", and the linguistic objectives were thus: It is

sunny; it is foggy; it is rainy and cold. This lesson was given to the whole class in a way that was particularly intended to introduce play to each stage of learning; this activity took place along with riddles, role-plays, mimes and dramas. After each lesson, relating to that lesson of the day, young learners had to pass tests that were based on 10 points and consisted of 10 min in length. Thus, after the classic lessons, the students were given quizzes 1 and 3/A, and quizzes 2 and 3/B were given via play at each stage of the lesson.

For the final "what's the weather like? (II)" lesson, the linguistic objectives were thus: there are clouds; it is hot; it is snowing and it is windy. For this lesson, we decided to divide the class into two groups according to the pupils' scores on quiz 1. This way, the first group constituted the 8 students who had obtained the highest scores on the first quiz at the end of a classic lesson. For this audience, we decided to make another classic lesson. For the second group, we gave the same lesson but this time used games at each stage of learning. At the end of both lessons, we made all students take the same quiz. Our aim was to certify once again the efficacy of play in teaching and learning a foreign language. Indeed, because of this practice, we could observe the positive effects that play had on learners with difficulties. At the last stage, we strove to learn whether the lessons learned in the classroom had been transferred to the students' memories in the long run. To test this, we devised an oral test. For this part of our research, we left the young learners free under the supervision of their teachers, and we asked them to try to remember and recreate the games without any adult help.

FINDINGS

According to the findings of this work, we discovered that the linguistic skills acquired through games were better and that the test scores were higher. That is, the classroom average of 5.5 with the classic lessons rose 2.5 points, reaching an average of 8 out of 10 with the introduction of play to the lessons (Table 1).

When we examined Quizzes 3/A and 3/B, the positive

Table 2. Comparison of quiz score averages emerged after traditionally and playingly-led teaching.

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | t | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------|----------|-------------|-----------------------|----------|------------------------|
| QUIZ1 | 16 | 5.5000 | 2.68328 | 8.199 | |
| QUIZ2 | 16 | 8.0000 | 1.78885 | 17.889 | .000 |

Table 3. Comparison of quiz score averages of the group taught with traditional and play methods.

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | t | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------|----------|-------------|-----------------------|----------|------------------------|
| QUIZ3 | 8 | 5.7500 | 1.98206 | 8.205 | |
| QUIZ4 | 8 | 7.2500 | 3.01188 | 6.808 | .000 |

effect of play was strong. The learners in the second group, who gained lower scores than the learners in the first group, obtained an average score of only 5.75 whereas, the first group scored an average of 7.25. Thus, the use of play in the FFL class obviously contributed to the learning and success of the students. Hence, with games, mediocre learners could catch up to good students, which encourage us, FFL teachers, to make more use of games during our lessons to achieve better results. Another surprise that we found was that, except for 2 of them, all of the learners remembered the games that we had taught them in class. During learning activities that took place through games, the students' and teachers' cheer, motivation and desire for learning touched us profoundly. Learners thought they were taking a break and playing with their peers, and this allowed them to be more relaxed and less tense throughout the whole lesson. A learner who is devoid of stress and is seduced by playing will learn by having fun. Indeed, it is no surprise that the use of play during foreign language lessons had great success among young learners.

Analysis of Table 2 reveals that based on the results of the t-test carried out after traditionally and playingly-led classes in practice, we see that there is significant difference between quiz score averages to the advantage of playingly-led teaching.

In Table 3 it can be observed that, based on the results of the t-test carried out after the group has been divided into two as one traditionally, the other playingly-taught in practice, we see that there is significant difference between the quiz score averages of the two groups to the advantage of playingly-led teaching.

Conclusion

The present study analysed the effects of teaching by playing on the success of children, a field work has been realised with students aged between 10 and 11 and learning French as a foreign language at level A1 during their first year of the second phase of primary education

at the Private Batı Koleji (Bati School) in Ankara.

Research results show that practices of teaching realised through playing have significantly more effect on the increase of the learning level than practices realised through traditional methods have. This result once again confirms the importance of playing in the learning process. In the limited field study that we did, it has been clearly shown that when playing is actively used children perceive and carry on the lesson as a game, and that consequently, both their attention and participation to class increase. Another point which our study has also demonstrated is that there is a significant difference in the level of success reached after the same topic has been taught under playful methods on the one side, and under traditional ones on the other. Similarly, an experimental study carried out by Gömleksiz (2005) where students have been taught English in a playful fashion in one experimental group and in a traditional fashion in another control group demonstrates that there are statistically significant differences to the advantage of the experimental group between the test scores averages in the knowledge, understanding and practice stages of the students' cognition.

However, we can state that for Turkish young learners "learning a foreign language" still means "learning its grammar", but the objective should be to communicate with the Communicative Approach and to act and interact with the Task-Based Perspective. This objective could be accomplished via playing, especially when a young audience is in question. Particularly during the early teaching of FFL, we must not lose sight of the physical and mental growth of our learners, and we must teach them according to their needs. As Gérard de Vecchi puts it, "To teach, it is indispensable to get to know the other. To learn, one must know oneself and get organized. Is this an evidence? No, it is rather a prerequisite that we often "forget". This could be done through the help of some simple techniques and above all, via the adoption of a certain state of mind" (Vecchi, 2000: 23). Consequently, we strongly suggest that no playful activity that is considered a "stopgap" measure or a "reward" should

be practiced just because learners have behaved well. As Weiss (1983) mentions in his book *Games and Communicative Activities in the Language Class*, games and play should instead be used as a medium and a format for getting better results from a young audience when teaching them a foreign language.

Trainers' active use of playing in their classrooms ensures that children successfully learn a foreign language via entertainment. Contrary to adults' belief, playing is not merely entertainment for the child; it is a "work", for via games, the child gets to know adults' world and he/she prepares for life. He/she also learns about team work, stress management and social norms. From the 90s on, playing has been accepted as a tool in the teaching of foreign language to children. In this context, in the teaching of French too playing should be adopted as a teaching tool. Playing ensures that the child acquires a language without having to have recourse to another tool because it supports the child's creativity and he/she spontaneously consolidates his/her acquisition through games.

As a consequence, we have emphasized the influence that playing has on success when it is used in the teaching of French as foreign language in Turkey. It must be agreed on that playing is not an entertainment tool designed to fill in free times during classes but that it is an entire method in itself to be used in the teaching of a foreign language. In our limited field study, it has been proved that when playing is actively used, children perceive and carry on class as a game, and that as a consequence their active participation to class increases while their attention lasts longer. Again, our study has as well demonstrated that there is a significant difference in the level of success reached after the same topic has been taught under playful methods on the one side, and under traditional ones on the other. While teaching, one must take into account that children are not adults and

that thus, the methods that apply to adults cannot apply to them. Being conscious of that, it must be ensured that playing is improved and disseminated as a foreign language method.

As we learned in this study, children were very happy and motivated during learning activities that included games because in reality, for them they were not FFL lessons but rather continuations of their breaks. Thus, the students felt more at ease, and they were stress-free and seduced by the game; they intended to play, but they also learned at the same time and did not even notice the learning.

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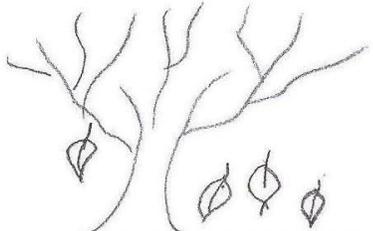
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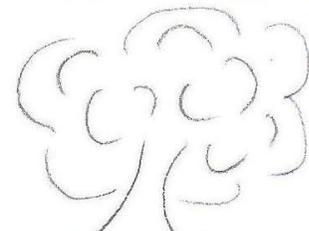
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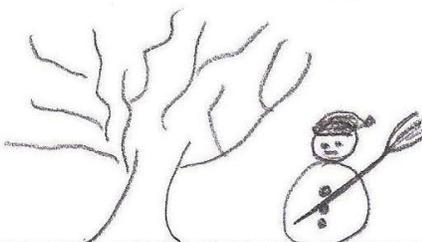
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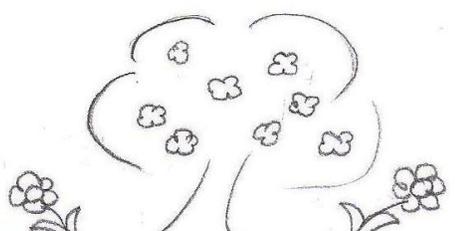
Prénom:

Complétez les phrases. C'est quelle saison?

| | |
|---|------------|
|  | C'est..... |
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|  | C'est..... |
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|  | C'est..... |
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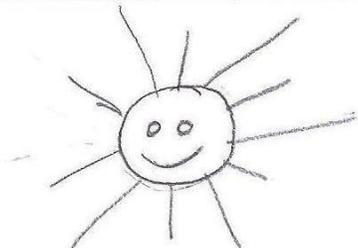
| | |
|---|------------|
|  | C'est..... |
|---|------------|

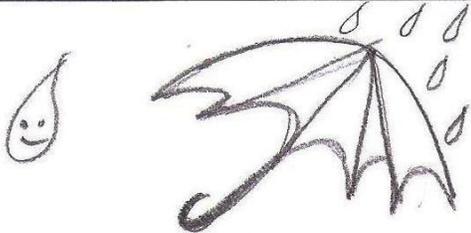
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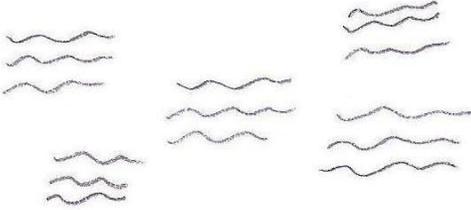
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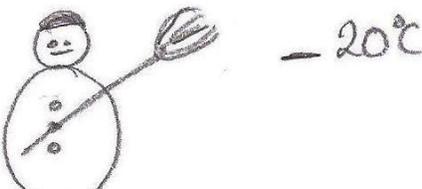
Prénom:

Complétez les phrases. Quel temps fait-il?

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|  | C'est..... |
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|  | C'est..... |
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|---|------------|
|  | C'est..... |
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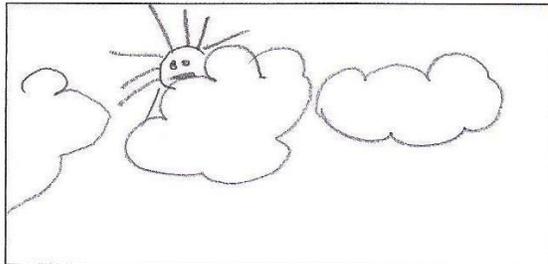
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|  | C'est..... |
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LE QUIZ 3/A-3/B

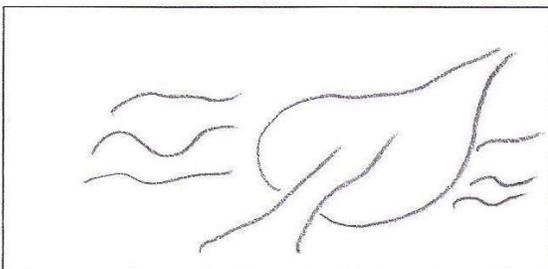
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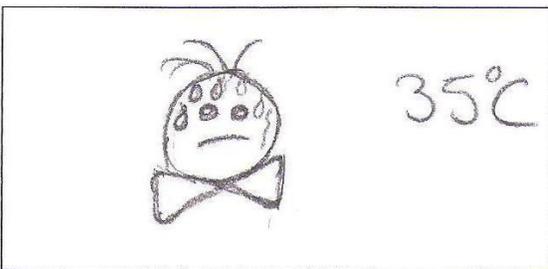
Prénom:

Complétez les phrases. Quel temps fait-il?

| | |
|---|------------|
|  | C'est..... |
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|  | C'est..... |
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|  | C'est..... |
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