

## **TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSING ORAL PRODUCTION IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. A GENERAL APPROACH**

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***Abstract:** We learn to speak all the time. In our own language, firstly, and then in other languages, as well. Foreign language learning implies more and more the development of speaking skill, skills that are carefully and extensively taught and which are evaluated with equal attention and equally comprehensively by all educational systems whose object of activity is providing and assessing knowledge in and about a foreign language. One of the most delicate issues regarding the assessment process and procedure of an oral production in a foreign language is the assessment's faithfulness. Should the examining and the assessing be the exclusive responsibility of the native speaker expert or it can be done by non-native assessor's with equal correctness and, why not, correctitude? Does the preparation for such tests create the desired balance between pre-test knowledge and post-test application of that knowledge? The effort of the teachers, the test-takes, and that of the assessors is all channeled towards their being able to give a unanimously positive answer to these questions.*

***Keywords:** foreign language, assessment, evaluator, test-taker, oral production, oral examination.*

***"You hear voices using foreign words, words that you wish to understand. You listen and learn. Then you get the courage to address them yourself. A door was opened to you and you, in turn, open a door to someone else. Other voices, other rooms."***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language learning is one of the most studied, researched on educational activities since the mastery of a language other than the mother tongue represents already a clear requirement stipulated by language policies worldwide for becoming part of the universal communicative community. Noteworthy here is the fact that whenever the issue of learning a foreign language is brought up, people automatically express their wish to learn to

'speak' it. As if the major benefit of learning a language, its priority by definition is, first and foremost, to be able to handle it effectively in *oral* communication. Or, is it not so indeed? Don't we all ask when meeting a stranger with whom we wish to start a dialogue: "Do you *speak* this or that language?" Of course, the implication is deeper, but still, speaking *that* language there and then seems to be our mutual priority. For immediate communicative purposes, purposes that are present in proportion of 90% in our social intercourse. The experience of learning and, implicitly that of teaching a foreign language shows us that due to various cognitive and emotional reasons people learn to read a new language easier than they learn to speak or to write it correctly. Apparently, we are more capable of detangling a written text than we are of 'decoding' the message that we receive orally, let alone *producing our own message* in such a way that our interlocutor could understand it appropriately. Also, extemporaneity and the fast exchange of communicative sequences are sine qua non conditions in oral communication, which, when we engage in a conversation in a foreign language, may become extra concern if not downright an impediment. Which often is the case.

Our main justification is that when we speak we may not succeed to live up to our interlocutor's expectations in terms of language mastery and so we enter a vicious circle: we are unwilling or even refuse to speak for fear we will not be an adequate partner of conversation. So, one reason for wanting to learn a foreign language is to be able to interact verbally with other people. To speak the language other people speak. And by *speaking* we mean having a *complete mastery* of the language, including writing. When referring to the acquisition of a foreign language, one of the most comprehensive approach is rendered by the term *education* would be most appropriate to apply here – education in a foreign language *in all its complexity* – this due to the entire edifice that is built in the process, a process that develops according to a well-organised multi-layered scheme. (Alderson & Beretta, 1992). The beginner in foreign language learning is usually inclined to think that what they learn will mostly benefit them in terms of grammar competence (Palmer in *Evaluating Second Language Education*, 147), which is not incorrect. Grammatical competence is the basis of the overall language mastery, speaking including.

Speaking and writing in a foreign language are both achieved painstakingly and the acquisition of the skill in either case implies considerable effort and time. However, when we speak, even though we are aware that *verba volant* – a really reassuring thought for the non-native speaker, who may hide behind the excuse that she can be *understood* still – we must produce a text promptly and equally promptly we are 'evaluated' for what we have produced. When we write, however, we are somewhat more privileged in that we have time to think things over, to review and correct our text, to shape it into a form

that we ultimately feel satisfied about. Which doesn't happen in spontaneous spoken interactions.

Oral production in a foreign language is a domain that has been much researched on especially lately when the importance of language learning seems to have increased considerably. The mushrooming of language schools gives rise to competition, each offering attractive learning programs and promising full satisfaction. Usually, they encourage the learner towards a holistic approach and acquisition of the foreign language and lay equal weight to all the skills implied. Which is correct. Also, the skills should be practiced simultaneously for better results. Correct again. Learning recipes are as many as teachers and learners are free to choose the method that best applies to their style and needs. The best are those that confront the learner with specific goals and motivate them to reach them by offering a language certificate. Such certificates represent valuable documents since they are mandatory requirements in case of job application, promotion, or emigration. The programme relies on the rhythmicity of the courses that are taught over a relatively short period of time. Language schools adapted to intensive course programmes, pay special attention to speaking and the learner is encouraged to speak from the very beginning. Due to the sustained pace of teaching, the homogeneity and the non-competitive spirit of the group, the learner no longer shuns speaking, however insecure they may feel in the beginning. Apart from the knowledge they offer, this type of courses are vastly motivating for the learner.

### *Can speaking skills be faithfully assessed and correctly tested?*

The long practice of examiners that are strictly specialized in evaluating oral production in candidates whose mother tongue is other than the one under evaluation has demonstrated that this part of the general exam – which, with few exceptions, involves all the four skills – has proved to be the most stressful for the candidate and the most brain racking for the evaluator.

So where does the difficulty of such an exam lie?

Being a test which, despite the candidate's thorough preparation, both informational and psychological, is by definition impromptu, several contextual factors, predominantly the emotional factor (anxiety), are at play.

The face-to-face examination, where the examiner's role is to evaluate and grade our performance, grade that will ultimately appear as a quality mark on our certificate, rendering it acceptable or not for further enterprises, is not a very comfortable one. For some candidates, however, only the beginning is difficult since they succeed in loosening up as the interview moves on. Well prepared candidates easily gain control over the situation and manage their

emotions constructively. Others, less prepared, remain tense up to the end of the interview.

On the other hand, the examiner must provide optimal test-taking conditions. They must be professionally and psychologically fit for the task. A good examinee is neutral, not too formal and rigid but not too affable either, but kind and encouraging. A good examiner will always ‘emanate’ the confidence that will help the candidate to release their tension and fears and to perform disinhibited. This may be one of the reasons why human examiners have not yet been replaced entirely by machines. And examiners, beside the many skills they should have, are trained to be good listeners, in the sense that they are familiar with the candidate’s limitations and, very importantly, they consider the test taker’s capacity to utter the words intelligibly, for example in case of speech difficulties. Hence, the synchronization of the speaker and the listener, which ultimately ensures the success of the communicative act required by the conditions of this exam.

Just like the examiner, the assessor needs special training in that they must be expert users of the language themselves, to know very well the assessing criteria and to apply them closely. Their activity, just like that of the examiner’s, must be well-timed also since any examination in its entirety takes place against time.

The recurring issue that still gives food for thought to the expert panels is whether the examination and the assessment should be the exclusive responsibility of native speakers. If it wouldn’t be appropriate to appoint groups of native speaker assessors and examiners to perform this kind of examination worldwide at conventionally-appointed times?

However, practice shows that due to objective circumstances this idea remains so far a goal to be probably fulfilled, conditions permitting. Instead, and until further modifications, well-prepared non-native examining and assessing staff are performing this activity with adequacy and professionalism. Their job, in this sense, though, is probably more difficult when it comes to oral production assessment, where, once again, the tendency to subjectivity due to the emotional component of the educational process may interfere in a detrimental way. With good training and rest assured, the performance of this task can be successfully optimised.

### ***Teaching and learning oral production***

When teaching oral production, students should be helped to realise that the foreign language in which they are expected to perform needs to be appropriated in terms of its specificity, that is, students should be guided in such a way as to acquire the ability to think in that foreign language and only use the mother tongue as support or reference when comprehension problems arise. In

short, the students will be helped to act naturally when using the language in general, all the more when speaking. This seems to be for many a hard nut to crack, especially when this is presented to them by the teacher as an 'instruction'.

Many say that this requires time and learners, irrespective of their age, are as a rule rather impatient.

Another hard task the teacher confronts with is to get students to understand that when they learn a language they certainly do not learn words alone but structures, which involve phonetical aspects, for proper pronunciation, and grammar, for language precision. They need to be aware that if they do not have a good grasp of the language arithmetic, its grammar, things will not have the expected outcome. Mechanical acquisition is acceptable but real awareness that leads to a good mastery of the learning material is essential.

Thornbury refers to the fact that words generate stories, they create unique contexts which facilitate and condition the words' correct understanding. So, speaking certainly does not mean only uttering words in a language but knowing the whole paraphernalia the use of words implies. (Thornbury, 12)

Therefore, in order to teach speaking effectively, the teacher should make the learner aware of the correct configuration of the language, of the use of words in certain contexts (collocation), the proper connection between ideas (cohesion), of the value of fluency, of correct pronunciation, the specific 'melody' of the language (the suprasegmentals), which stand proof of a good mastery of the language.

Other important factors for meaning conveyance in oral production are stress and pauses. The comprehensibility of any oral delivery is determined by the right positioning of stress in the utterance. Apart from the conventional rules of placing stress, namely when the speaker wishes to emphasize a certain idea, and which are common to all languages, every language has its particularities pertaining to stress placement on various words or on parts of words (syllables).

The correct use of pauses influences the good reception of the speaker's message by the hearer and instead of affecting fluency in a negative way, it sustains and enhances it.

Progress in foreign language acquisition is conditioned by the learner's awareness of these aspects too and success in oral communication is ensured by their correct rendering in speech.

In conversation, speakers are expected to understand what they are told as well as to be able to reply comprehensibly. Intelligibility also involves good pronunciation, one that is close to that of a native speaker's. Accurate pronunciation is a determining factor in the achievement of coherence. This is indicative of the speaker's solid knowledge of the language in which she is being tested.

Language learning is holistic, namely a nation who speaks a language imprints in it its entire existence, from spirituality to geographical positioning, and every single element plays an equally important role in the process of acquisition. When one wants to learn a foreign language, one will have to learn about the nation who speaks it and to internalize its way of being, its mentality and behavior.

Verbal communication, speaking, or oral production, can take on two aspects:

Speaking for the public (public speaking), for either oratory purposes or for demonstrations. In these cases the speaker-presenter already knows the material to be delivered to the audience and spontaneity is only secondary if not absent altogether.

The second type is conversation, which involves a dialogic exchange of communicative segments by two or more conversants. In this case ideas are formulated very fast, on the spur of the moment. If the linguistic material employed in conversation is not sustained by suitable knowledge of the rules that govern the language, the pertinence of the dialogue (its fluency and meaningfulness) can be seriously affected.

The oral production that is tested in examinations is of the second type. Testees are required to engage in dialogues on a specific topic mentioned by the tester (reference to a visual support, or a free dialogue with a partner or the examiner). Therefore, when testing oral productions, the tester should evaluate the testee's *dexterity* to use the language correctly in ad hoc conversation contexts.

When the test taker is less proficient in conversation, she will try to resort to various subterfuges meant to dissimulate their lack of knowledge, such as body language or acting. In test-taking, this does not substitute for good knowledge and ultimately everybody realizes that.

It happens quite often, sometimes even during the examination, that students realise their poor performance, and so they usually come up with the excuse that even native speakers misuse the language. The mistakes they make are mostly of grammar, sometimes of vocabulary too, and yet they are still understood. Indeed, they are understood, but that is not enough. A learner's goal is to learn a language correctly and be appreciated as efficient and not just 'tolerated' for being merely intelligible. She needs to have higher aspirations in terms of language mastery, namely to be communicatively productive.

Students often start a foreign language course with a lot of enthusiasm and require that conversation be used extensively in class. Nevertheless, when asked to start a conversation on a given topic or even on one at free choice, they hesitate and finally give up. A vicious circle is created: we want to learn to speak a language but we procrastinate our engagement in speaking sine die because we are afraid to make mistakes and to be ridiculed by our colleagues.

Good means of efficient speaking skills acquisition are debate and critical discussions on a given topic. Their merit is that they are challenging and involve thorough preparation, which includes the study of the language in its complexity and depth. The debater or the discussant will try to amass as many information as possible about the proposed topic and this challenge will make her want to render this knowledge load as correctly as possible from a linguistic point of view. The learner of a foreign language will benefit immensely from such practice. Debates and discussions are also longer than, for instance role plays or dialogue simulations, and the effort involved is rewarded accordingly.

A motivating element for the learner of a foreign language is the fact that her knowledge and mastery of that language will be tested. A learner of a foreign language most often undergoes testation in order to receive the official confirmation of her as user of that language. The native speaker has no time limit to correct her mistakes whereas the learner of that language as foreign language usually learns a language because she needs a certification, which, in turn, is a requirement for professional realization, something a native speaker does not need to obtain in similar conditions. The obtaining of the certificate is time-conditioned and the duration for preparation is compressed.

To be able to speak, one should activate all her skills: understanding what other people say (listening), of a printed text (reading) and the ability to put down ideas she has either read, heard or conceive herself independent of a source (writing.) (Thornbury, 118)

The overall preparation of any language learner is heavily impacted by speaking, so much so that when anyone learns to speak a language other than her mother tongue, she will be able to use the language at an acceptable level within all its other compartments as well, listening, reading, and writing: “through talk a language can be acquired.” (Thornbury, 124)

### **Assessing spoken production**

The assessment of spoken productions in examinations due to its transiency, its temporariness would be very difficult and would rest heavily on the assessor’s subjectivity, whether she is aware of this subjectivity or not. Ever since oral examinations started to be recorded, assessor’s task has been more objective. However, in oral examinations, the interaction between the examinee and the examiner or between two candidates follows a more or less guided line of conversation in that the exam sheet contains the questions the examinee is supposed to answer. There are cases when the candidate has the sheet in front of her but there are also cases when the candidate has no written requirements to consult for guidance. In the first case, things are somewhat easier for the examinee for even though she is asked to answer right away she still has a

couple of seconds to *premeditate* her reply. In the second, the candidate will have to rely on her understanding and reaction speed. Actually, this is where the proof of the candidate's true (language) knowledge lies and where the testing and evaluation of that knowledge load aim at. When assessing such an exam, the assessor takes into consideration these aspects too.

As previously mentioned here, the interviewer-examiner and the evaluator-assessor need to be specially prepared for the evaluation and assessment procedures and process. In this respect, they need to know precisely how to conduct the examination, respectively how to appraise the test-taker's performance.

Their training is to select, create and to evaluate tests, in our case oral tests. In brief, this implies knowledge of basic aspects pertaining to the apposite application of this part of the global language testing.

The assessor but also the examiner need to know very well how to apply appropriately the criteria of competence measurement and evaluation.

They both need to be able to "design, develop, evaluate and use language tests in ways that are appropriate for a given purpose, context and groups of test takers." (Bachman&Palmer, 9)

Last but not least, the objective of foreign language teaching and ultimately of the testing of that foreign language is to create a perfect balance between the pre-test and the post-test language knowledge performance.

Preparation for a test is usually a painstaking enterprise for the trio involved in it: learner-examinee, examiner and assessor. It is an extensive and an intensively activity. The learner and future test-taker will have to amass a high amount of information in a relatively short period of time. The question that remains pending in this case is to what extent that information will be put to use eventually, in 'real', specific, contextualized situation, that is, in circumstances other than examinations. (Idem, 10) How much of what the former test-taker has learned will be able to recall later in life and how many opportunities will be offered to her to apply that knowledge and, very importantly, to maintain them fresh in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the importance of this type of communication, speaking in foreign language classes should represent a priority for teacher and learner alike. The test taker will already know that for she has already reached the awareness of its significance among all the skills involved in language acquisition. Actually, speaking is inclusive, all inclusive, since it encompasses the rest of the skills too, skills without which a good mastery of a foreign language would not be possible. Most of the teaching is done through speaking. This is the teacher's responsibility in the preliminary stages of class instruction

mainly to show the students how it is done and thus to motivate them to get actively involved. In this way, the learner will start making commitments and will work towards gaining confidence to engage in speaking. However much modern didactic theories advocate the shift of the class work from the teacher to the student, speaking including, teaching means ‘showing’ other what to do and how to do it correctly and for this the teacher may need to intervene regularly. This is valid for speaking classes too. The teacher will offer support permanently, correcting and explaining, yet without monopolising the discussion space. The first classes will be the teacher’s responsibility as far as the amount of speaking is concerned and gradually the learners will be implicated more and more until they will come to do most of the speaking in class. Thus, the teaching-learning process means instruction and correction but also self-instruction and self-correction.

Due to the fact that speaking is such a comprehensive activity area, since it involves social-cultural aspects as well, the student who learns to speak in a foreign language will come to secure contextual information too, namely information about the countries where the language is spoken and about the people who speak that language. Today, due to the increase of population movement from one place to another, language study builds on cultural and, more and more, on multicultural ground. This the student will be expected to know in order to be able to *speak* a language about it.

Thus, when testing a foreign language in terms of its oral production, the evaluator-examiner will pay attention to the fulfilment of a whole range of conditions by the test taker. This makes the task of the evaluator of an oral test in a foreign language all the more engaging and at the same time complex and definitely difficult.

Teacher, learner, examiner, evaluator and test-taker, they all work together, each with their well-defined role and in their precise segment in foreign language acquisition, towards the enforcement/implementation and the development/perfecting of competences of the future expert user of that language.

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