

Cues to Teaching Oral Expression

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This talk comes as a continuation and an illustration to what I presented this morning in my discussion on ***LA LICENCE DE LANGUES EN ALGERIE: des questions et quelques éléments de réponse***. I shall concentrate on one aspect of teaching; namely, the teaching of Oral Expression.

It is clear that in a conversation class, the teacher will have to deal with basically two types of learners. At one end of the spectrum, we have extrovert learners who, right from the start, manifest a gist for conversation and oral interaction with peers and with the teacher. At the other end, we get introvert learners who may have a substantial capacity to produce speech but who fail to do so because of psychological hampering or a fear to make mistakes in public. It is often said that introvert learners are good at written expression while extrovert learners are keen on oral expression. In both cases, the learner comes with a certain fear or anxiety for oral expression.

There are various ways and techniques to overcome the issue of anxiety that accompanies the learner in a class of oral expression. These vary from pair work/group work to Q&A sessions, project presentation, self evaluation and the like. They often encourage the learner to have more confidence in his oral production of the foreign language and they allow him to reduce anxiety and get familiar with oral practice. We shall deal

in this workshop with self-evaluation and its support document: the evaluation sheet. These will be presented under the banner of a learner-centred approach and pedagogy.

Oral proficiency cannot be achieved, we believe, without effective communicative activities. Drills and pattern practice constitute but one minor step to achieve this proficiency. Their use out of context decreases learners' motivation after a while. The learners seem to like them at first glance, mainly when they are presented under the form of dialogues. One such case may be the re-enforcement of the present simple tense forms and yes/no questions which are introduced in a game-like activity as shown below:

Student A is given an action which is composed of a subject and a verb in the infinitive. That is a performer and an action, as in Baker / bake. Student B is given a different performer with a different action. The pattern practice takes the form of a dialogue, like this:

Student A.: What does a baker do? (Bake)

Student B: He bakes bread.

Student B: Yes, but what does a teacher do? (Teach)

Student A: He teaches.

Then the two students change the performer and they keep the action which was given to them. This is done in order to produce negative forms and trigger off yes / no answers.

Student A: Does a teacher bake?

Student B: No, he doesn't.

Student A: Does a baker teach?

Student A: No, he doesn't.

The dialogue gets more difficult and trickier when students A and B use the plural then come back to the singular forms. They may use actions that involve pronouns such as He / She/ it, etc.

Transitional expressions may be introduced as well. Like this:

Student A: I see. Do bakers bake?

Student B: Yes, they do.

Student B : humm!!! Does a teacher teach?

Student A: Yes, he does

Such dialogues seem to motivate the students as they create a kind of competitiveness in class in terms of who is going to make the first mistake, who is going to back-fire as in the case of *Does a teacher teaches? etc. It also pushes them to produce oral English as one step to achieving oral proficiency.

The learners may even ask their peers for challenges as in “I want to challenge you. Do you accept my challenge?” “Yes, I do”, or “No, I don’t”. If the second learner says “No, I don’t”, this is often indicative of fear in him that he is going to make mistakes or that he feels he is not prepared yet for the challenge. This, off hand, allows the teacher to detect potential introvert from potentially extrovert learners. Such dialogues are open-ended. One may also check vocabulary along with grammar to see if the learners make a difference between ‘a cook’ and ‘a cooker’, or between ‘to push’ and ‘to pull’, etc. These dialogues are used to “push the learners to talk”. Nevertheless, I don’t think they are powerful enough to achieve oral proficiency.

Other activities which we think lead our learners to talk may be in fact frustrating for them. One such activity appears in the oral presentation of a research project. Here again, those students who invested a lot in preparing the project are not necessarily those who are going to score better. For one reason or another, they fail to face the class, to talk in front of an audience, or they fail to reach their goal although they thought they were well prepared for the task. The worst case being that of students who simply learnt their presentation by heart¹.

Describing pictures, events, etc, seems childish to some students. This is what I have noticed all along my own teaching experience in oral expression. Similarly, discussing a video documentary, and even if such a documentary involves pros and cons, and it requires from the learner his viewpoint on the issue at stake, he/she often says that it is a time consuming activity that does not always lead to the expected outcome, i.e. make him/her talk in class.

These tentative activities can, by the end of the day, lead to the establishment of a low-threatening learning environment. This depends obviously on how the teacher introduces them and how the learners respond to them.

Learners should be led to accept the fact that making errors in grammar, vocabulary, stress and pronunciation, provided their message is not total nonsense, is a necessary step in achieving oral

¹ . May be with the Project Pedagogy, which will be introduced as from September 2003 under the Competency Based Approach (The New Reform in Teaching in Algeria), we shall have, in the future, less inhibited students as they will be trained under the Project Pedagogy to present a group project in class.

proficiency. They must be trained to paraphrase for a word or expression they do not know or they do not remember. Generally speaking, good learners accept to take risks and make mistakes. Poor learners often find refuge in the use idiomatic expressions that may be used out of context, that they translate almost literally from Arabic and French, or they resort to a language that appears to them as appropriate. This often hampers their oral production of English.

As a facilitator of learning, the teacher can find ways to make the learner aware of his/her mistakes, to compare his performance with that of other learners in class, and even to discuss these mistakes with peers. A supportive learning atmosphere with the teacher as a co-communicator, advisor, guide and supervisor of the oral activity under way generally encourages the learner to step forward and express himself orally. One way that leads him/her to evaluate his/her performance is the student's evaluation sheet. This is simply presented under the form of a table with a column for names and columns for grammar, vocabulary, stress, pronunciation, intonation, progress, etc., as seen below:

STUDENT'S EVALUATION SHEET

NAME	GRAMMAR		VOC	STRESS	PRON	INT	Progress
	Minor	Serious					

In column 1, the learner writes his name as well as the names of his classmates who make the same mistake (s). Column 2 is divided into serious grammar mistakes, i.e., mistakes that affect meaning and understanding, and minor mistakes or mistakes that do not actually affect the meaning of the sentence(s) he/she produce(s) in class. Column 3 includes mistakes in vocabulary, such as the confusion between ‘cook’ and ‘cooker’, ‘push’ and ‘pull’, ‘Arab’ and ‘arabic’, gallicisms as in ‘really’ understood to mean ‘réellement’, or ‘actually’ which is equated to ‘actuellement’ in French. Here again, if there are two or more learners who make the same mistakes their names should appear in the students’ individual evaluation sheet. Column 4 includes mistakes in stress misplacement as in *['amrika] for [ə'merikə] (America); *['ʒapən] for [dʒə'pæ:n] (Japan), or *['divlop] for [di'vələp] (develop), etc.

Column 5 is for mistakes in pronunciation. These constitute the bulk of the idiosyncracies in their oral

production of English. We shall leave aside typical mistakes due to a second degree imala in Arabic as in *[sikənd] for [sekənd] (second), *[bEd] for [bed] (bed), *[tiknikal] for [ˈteknikəl] (technical), *[arjaz] for [ɛəriəz] (areas). We shall not also consider the nasalization of the letters (a, i, o) to [ã, ĩ, õ] respectively due the influence of French as in *['advãtɛʒ] for [ədˈvA:ntidʒ] (advantage), *['ĩfluãs] for ['ĩfluəns] (influence), or *['mõdei] for ['mɒndi] (Monday). These are common to most learners.

We shall concentrate instead on pronunciation mistakes that are most recurrent in individual learners (see sample below).

Finally Column 6 represents mistakes in intonation which may include the wrong pitch, tone, etc. or it may be just flat intonation (neutral). These are often mistakes that combine with mistakes in structure and form, as in ‘*you eat?’ for ‘Would you like some?’ or ‘*give, give me the book’ for ‘May I have the book, please?’ etc.

Other columns for other types of mistakes may be added to the evaluation sheet in question. This is left to the judgment of the teacher in class. One such column may include hesitation (Hes). In this column, the teacher is going to check whether the student makes long pauses because of difficulties in finding the right words or the right structure for the message he wants to transmit, whether he is able to use transitional expressions, or whether he is able to paraphrase in order to re-organize his thoughts and reformulate his ideas. Another column may include the ideas that the learner develops and how

he organizes them. These may also be taken into consideration.

The evaluation sheets below are samples of mistakes made by 2nd year and 3rd year students.

Sample 1 (2nd Year)

NAME Student	GRAMMAR Minor Serious	VOC	STRESS	PRON	INT
S1	I am agree / were been She do / have going Advices / he can uses	watch / see my / mine to do/to make	‘express si’tuation pro’gram	no / now nineteen / ninety think/thing	Flat
S2	I am agree / he can uses	watch / see	mo’dule	tree / three	Flat
S3	Advices / have going	my / mine	‘continue	think/thing	
S4	She do / he can uses	teach / learn	pro’gram	sixteen / sixty	
S5	I am agree / have going	tell / say /talk	‘express	taught/ thought	Flat

Sample 2 (3rd Year)

NAME Student	GRAMMAR Minor Serious	VOC	STRESS	PRON	INT
S1	Well/good can worked Bad/badly could / can	sell / sale talk / say/tell	e’fo:t pro’dukt	kā:pis / liv↔d grit (great)	Flat
S2	Basis / bases had study Both / Each tenses	tell / say teach / learn	‘marj↔d div’lop	kliv↔r / natiral tird (third)	Flat
S3	Basis / bases had study	hear / listen	pro’dukt	wip↔n / spiΣ↔li	Flat
S4	Bad/badly could / can	hit / hurt	e’fo:t	kā:pis / liv↔d	Flat
S5	Well /good can worked	teach / learn	div’lop	kliv↔r / natiral	Flat

The learners may be evaluated in a summative way. The teacher will work with pluses and minuses. A plus is half a point while a minus is one point. Suppose a learner makes 20 mistakes during an oral test of 15 minutes, he is left with 00 out of 20. If he uses correct grammatical

structures, an adequate vocabulary, good stress patterns, etc, he is going to score pluses, of course. If he gets 10 pluses in all columns, that makes 5 points. His score would then be 05 out of 20.

Now, if he is good enough, he'll make say 15 mistakes. This leaves him with 5 out of 20. If he scores 15 pluses, that makes 7.5 which is added to the 5 points he's already got to end up with a 12.5 out of 20, his final score.

This way of doing things reduces the teacher's subjectivity in giving grades in an oral test. It allows, at the same time, the student to ask for a double correction if he feels he has not been tested objectively. It also allows the teacher (with his own scoring sheet) to keep track of his learners' progress in oral expression.

Sample 3 (Scoring Sheet)

NAME Student	GRAMMAR		VOC	STRESS	PRON	INT	GRAD E
	Minor	Serious					
S1	- - -	- -	- + +	- + - + -	+ - +	+ - +	13 / 20
S2	- - - -	- -	+ - -	+ + - -	- + -	+ - +	10 / 20
S3	- - -	- - - -	- - +	- - - +	- + + -	- -	06 / 20