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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8137963>

THE CHALLENGES OF ASSESSING ORAL EXPRESSION SKILLS IN ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE OF STUDY

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language means, first of all, knowing how to speak it, knowing how to use it to communicate in different situations in everyday life. A foreign language is, above all, a means of interaction with others. Therefore, the assessment of oral expression skills plays an essential role in the development of students' communication skills.

We chose to develop this subject in this paper for two main reasons: the first is purely subjective and it results from a reality observed during the experience we had during the RFL courses, as an RFL lecturer who faced the sensitive situation of assessment of students' oral performances. And the second reason is objective and it refers to the difficulty of evaluating oral production. So, the purpose of this paper is to provide an answer to the question: How do we evaluate the oral productions of learners studying RFL?

We propose two solutions that we have verified during our experience, namely: designing grids to evaluate the oral productions of RFL learners and establishing specific criteria to evaluate students' oral performances.

This paper will focus on the presentation of the different forms of oral assessment, its difficulties, as well as the assessment grid that we propose for the assessment of this skill. This mini-research might be of interest because it could inspire teachers to give more importance to the assessment of oral production, which will also have an impact on learners, making them more motivated and aware of their learning process.

Keywords: RFL, assessment, oral expression, assessment grid

1 INTRODUCTION

Oral production, also called oral expression or oral communication, is a skill that consists of expressing oneself in various communicative situations. This means the establishment of an interactive relationship between a sender and a

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recipient, which requires listening and understanding of what the interlocutor is saying.

This skill is complex, and several components are called upon at the same time in its acquisition, such as: the linguistics (phonetics, lexical, morphosyntactic) as the compliance with syntactic, lexical and grammatical rules makes possible to create accessible messages, but also discursive (in terms of types of speech, articulation of ideas), referring to the organization of the message according to speech acts as the communication has to adapt to the age, the role or the status of the interlocutors. There are at the same time socio-cultural components because communicating orally consists, not only of formulating sentences, but also of taking into account the communication rituals appropriated to communication situations (the way of contacting someone, of greeting each other, of speaking in front of one's equal or one's superior). And all together with strategic components since in oral expression, calm, gestures, mimes, facial expressions, looks, pauses, silences are very significant. As a matter of fact, physical expression is an element of oral expression that also facilitates comprehension.

The acquisition of this skill requires training, the learners are able to express themselves only according to what they know, to what they have acquired. And the oral production skill might be exercised individually or in interaction (conversation or debate situation).

2 THE COMPONENTS OF ORAL EXPRESSION

According to Christine Tagliante ([1] 1994: 100) the components of oral expression are: the background (what we say) and the form (the way of saying it). It is important to take into account these two items and to reflect on them.

The background consists of ideas (given information, chosen arguments, personal opinions and expressed feelings), oral illustrations (which concretize the ideas), structuring (the way that one organizes the presentation of one's ideas), language (linguistic correctness and socio-cultural adequacy of what it is said).

The form consists of the general attitude (gestures made while speaking, smiles), voice (volume, articulation, flow and intonation), looks, pauses and silences.

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3 THE CONTEXT OF ORAL PRODUCTION

Depending on the given communication situation, one can express individually or in interaction.

3.1 The interactive activities

The interactive activities are usually spontaneous. And we can identify the following types of interactive activities

- The dialog / the conversation which is a free exchange of remarks between two or more persons, based on a given communication situation (e.g., dialogue between a salesperson and his/her client, an employee and his/her boss, etc.).
- The discussion is a form of conversation that is not necessarily familiar; the tone depends on the object of the communication as well as on the status of the interlocutors (e.g., a student and his/her teacher, a patient and a doctor, etc.).
- The debate that is a discussion on a given topic between people with different opinions (e.g., a discussion between girls and boys on the dangers of tobacco, alcohol, violence, gender equality, etc.).
- The role-play is a scene acted out by two or three learners according to a scenario which they have briefly thought of and not the recitation of a memorized dialogue. We can start with a story told, a text read in advance, etc.

It is an activity to be preferred, at least at the beginning of learning (A1, A2). Learners are distributed by the teacher functional scenarios, they are given the situation (the place, the action), the roles (the different characters), the objective to be achieved (to ask for information, to make a purchase, to make an invitation, etc.)

3.2 The non-interactive activities

The non-interactive activities require detailed preparation and memorization of a text or its outline. We can identify non-interactive activities such as:

- A report made on an event (a meeting, a football match, an accident, etc.).

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- The oral summary of various types of texts (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, etc.).
- The dramatization of texts (role play, recitation).
- The restitution of a story they lived, a studied text, or from an authentic document (identity card, birth certificate, marriage certificate, etc.).

Even if the classroom situation is artificial, the motivation must favour the desire to communicate.

4 ORAL PRODUCTION SUPPORTS

The support materials used for oral production lessons are generally short texts, small situations or illustrations that depict a communication situation related to the learners' experience.

5 THE STAGES OF AN ORAL PRODUCTION CLASS

In general, any oral production follows three stages:

5.1 The pre-activity

During this phase, the teacher presents and explains to the students the task that is asked of them and how to carry it out. Depending on the type of activity, the learners can work individually or in groups.

5.2 The activity

This is the most important phase of oral production and it can be organized in two phases, meaning the preparation phase when the teacher helps the learners to collect ideas and develop a speaking plan. Through questions, he leads the learners to find the tools necessary for expressing into words. If it is a work in groups, the teacher passes in each of them to help the learners. Discussions or exchanges within the groups must be in Romanian and, moreover, this is the perfect time for shy learners to practice and overcome fear to speak up.

The second phase of this stage is the production phase when the learners take turns speaking. During this time, the teacher notes the errors in

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pronunciation, morphosyntax, gaps in coherence, attitude or gestures, with the aim of a later on remediation. During the production, the teacher must beware of any correction that could hinder the continuity of the discourse.

5.3 The post-activity

Each presentation is followed by a discussion during which the rest of the class give their opinion on the way the presentation was made and propose variants of presenting that can lead to another presentation.

After the reactions of the learners, the teacher intervenes to summarize and correct certain errors. These errors target discursive aspects as well as language facts (grammar, vocabulary, phonetics) and some errors require further remediation.

This general approach to an oral production lesson should be adapted according to the type of the activity (role play, dialogue etc.). Oral expression activities must be targeted at everyday life situations to promote creativity and allow the development of real communication (storytelling, describing, arguing etc.).

The teacher must adopt an attitude likely to encourage the learners to dare to express themselves even if they make mistakes; the teacher does not penalize errors, but values them, that is to say, he/she takes the opportunity to correct them.

6 THE ASSESSMENT OF ORAL PRODUCTION

Evaluating oral production is not an easy task because it involves several components. Courtillon ([2] 2003: 48) noted that there are three aspects that oral production involves:

- a. Linguistic: phonetic aspects (phonemes and linguistic intonation); lexical aspects; and grammatical or morphosyntactic (the place of the elements in the sentence, the verb endings, the gender of nouns, presence of articles, prepositions, etc.).
- b. Pragmatic (ability to convey information appropriately): the fluidity (the words are chained at a certain speed according to a correct intonation pattern); the registers which must be stable and adapted to the situation; the

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sequencing (the ability to fill in the blanks, to reformulate, if necessary, to understand the interlocutor and to respond appropriately).

c. Expressive: the expressive intonation (pauses, accents of insistence); the use of images or figures of speech (making the speech more lively, effective); the posture and gestures which must be natural and facilitate the perception of the message.

Desmons et al ([3] 2005: 32) offer two types of assessments:

a. The immediate assessment. It is an evaluation tool used during exchanges. The teacher intervenes in the course of the lesson in the form of repetition or reformulation.

There are four verbal methods of evaluation (the gesture without the word can replace the verbal):

(1) the direct positive evaluation: The learner's statement is repeated as it is, generally accompanied by *yes, fine, I agree*, etc.

(2) the indirect positive evaluation: This is the repetition of the learner's statement without any marks of satisfaction from the teacher.

(3) the indirect negative evaluation: The teacher repeats the faulty statement of the learner by correcting it, but without judgment or negative remark.

(4) the direct negative evaluation: This is the same as the previous one to which we add comments and the morpheme *no*.

b. The deferred assessment. This is a post-production evaluation tool which avoids interrupting the speaker, which would be the most disastrous way to do it.

The teacher could use two types of tools: the recording of all or of a part of a lesson (the teacher retake easily any part that he/she has chosen to evaluate) or the role play according to the objectives set (the teacher, using an evaluation grid, measures the skills of the learners).

7 MODEL OF ORAL PRODUCTION FOR THE LEVEL B1 ACCORDING TO THE CECRL

ORAL PRODUCTION - 25 points

The document of the learner

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The test takes place in three consecutive parts. It lasts between 10 and 15 minutes. For the third part only, you have 10 minutes of preparation. This preparation takes place before the test itself.

Guided dialogue (2 to 3 minutes)

Talk about yourself, your activities, your interests. Talk about your past, your present and your projects. The test takes place like of an interview with the teacher who will initiate the dialogue with a question.

Interaction exercise (3 to 4 minutes)

You draw lots for two subjects among those presented to you by the teacher. After choosing one, you play the role given to you.

Expression of a point of view (5 to 7 minutes)

You draw lots for two documents from among those presented to you by the teacher. After choosing one, you identify the theme raised by the document and present your opinion in a personal presentation of approximately three minutes. The teacher may ask you some questions.

ORAL PRODUCTION TEST -25 points

The teacher's document

This oral expression test has 3 consecutive parts. The total duration is 10 to 15 minutes. Before the start of the test, the student has 10 minutes of preparation for the 3rd part.

Exercise 1 – Guided dialogue

General presentation (2 to 3 minutes)

The student should talk about himself/herself, his/her activities, his/her interests, his/her past, his/her present and his/her projects.

This exercise is intended to make the student feel comfortable talking about himself/herself. It takes place like an interaction of an informal dialogue. It is up to the teacher to initiate the dialogue with a question such as: Hello... Can you introduce yourself, tell me about yourself, your family...?

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The teacher will continue the interview on topics such as: Do you have plans for your next holidays? What are your main qualities? And defaults? What are your hobbies?

Exercise 2 – Interaction exercise (3 to 4 minutes)

The choice of the candidate after drawing lots of two topics:

Topic n°1 (3 to 4 minutes)

You are on vacation in Romania and you take the train to visit a friend. The controller comes to check your ticket. You did not pay the correct fare. You discuss with the controller in order to not pay a fine. (The teacher plays the role of the controller.)

Topic n° 2 (3 to 4 minutes)

A friend calls you on the phone because he/she wants to visit your home region. This friend wants to find out from you and get as much practical and cultural information as possible for his/her trip. (The teacher plays the role of the friend.)

Exercise 3 – Expression of a point of view

Preparation: 10 minutes

At the choice of the candidate after drawing lots of two topics:

Task: You will identify the theme raised by the document below and you will present your opinion in a short presentation of about 3 minutes. The teacher might ask you some questions.

Topic n°1

A fragment from the article „Cum am putea contribui pentru combaterea poluării?” Source: <https://www.high-health.info/aer/poluarea/combaterea-poluarii.htm>

Topic n° 2

A fragment from the article „e-book Citim în format electronic!” Source: <https://www.bookaholic.ro/category/carti-electronice-e-book>

ASSESSMENT GRID

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1st part – Guided dialogue

| | | | | | |
|--|---|-----|---|-----|---|
| Can talk about himself/herself with some confidence, giving information, reasons and explanations relating to his/her interests, projects and actions. | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | 2 |
| Can approach an exchange on a familiar subject without preparation with some confidence. | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | | |

2nd part – Interaction exercise

| | | | | | |
|--|---|-----|---|-----|---|
| Can face unprepared situations, even a little unusual in everyday life (respect for the situation and sociolinguistic codes). | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | | |
| Can adapt speech acts to the situation. | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | 2 |
| Can respond to questions from the interlocutor (verify and confirm information, comment on the point of view of others, etc.). | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | 2 |

3rd part – Expression of a point of view

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|
| Can present in a simple and direct way the subject to be developed. | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | | | |
| Can present and explain with some precision the main points of a personal reflection. | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | 2 | 2,5 |
| Can link a series of items into a speech clear enough to be followed without difficulty most of the time. | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | | |

For all 3 parts of the oral production

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Lexical level (extent and mastery) | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|

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| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|
| <p>The learner has a sufficient vocabulary to express himself/herself on current subjects, if necessary, with the help of periphrases; serious errors still occur when it comes to expressing a more complex thought/idea.</p> | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | 2 | 2,5 | 3 | 3,5 | 4 | | |
| <p>Morphosyntax The learner masters simple sentence structure and the most common complex sentences. He/she demonstrates good control despite clear influences from the mother tongue.</p> | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | 2 | 2,5 | 3 | 3,5 | 4 | 4,5 | 5 |
| <p>Mastery of the phonological system The learner can speak without help despite some phrasing problems and occasional pauses. The pronunciation is clear and intelligible despite occasional errors.</p> | 0 | 0,5 | 1 | 1,5 | 2 | 2,5 | 3 | | | | |

8 CONCLUSIONS

The goal of learning a foreign language is to communicate, either in writing or orally. Therefore, the learner must understand the components that communication involves such as linguistic, discursive, referential and socio-cultural. On the other hand, the learner must know the three aspects that are involved in oral production as linguistic, pragmatic and expressive.

Regarding the role of the teacher in the RFL class, he/she must know how to motivate and encourage his/her learners to speak in a way that is comfortable and appropriate to the communication situation by creating a productive atmosphere.

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