

## DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING SPEAKING ACTIVITIES IN THE FRENCH CLASS FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *The scientific and technical progress of the last decades has opened a new stage of development of the higher education in order to provide the specialists of tomorrow. The need for language skills in a foreign language is unquestionable today. Acquiring the oral code of the French language by Romanian students (punctuation, accent, intonation, pronunciation) is very important in the process of learning the French language, especially since there are difficulties arising from the Latin relatedness of the two languages.*

**Keywords:** *linguistic competences, speaking, discourse, oral code, corrective phonetics, pronunciation, intonation*

### 1. Introduction

The opportunity to learn a foreign language, created by the social, political and economic conditions that have made Romania a member country of the European Union, is the basis of opening multiple possibilities to study, so that high school graduates can choose from the multitude of specializations offered by universities in the country or in Europe and decide whether to exercise their profession in their country, or in another country, opting for the best variant. For a successful professional career, students from faculties with a different background than the philological one should be stimulated and supported in acquiring linguistic skills and practice, as that would be the shortest path for a good cooperation between specialists from different countries in pursuit of a common goal. Nowadays, there can never be a good specialist who does not master at least one international language at the level of current use or who is not able to appropriately use the specialized vocabulary of the respective language.

In terms of teaching methods and strategies, the foreign language teacher faces a number of difficulties when it comes to working with students who do not have a

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philological specialty. The capacity to communicate in a foreign language, to use the various registers of a language appropriately in different situations, the flexibility and adaptability when working in teams, these are all the outcome of communication and networking competences, which foreign language teachers, trained as philologists, aim at building.

A major objective of the foreign language class for economics students is to consider the students' learning needs, especially with regard to speaking skills, which, on account of their generally modest language acquisition prior to university studies, are generally not satisfactory either as regards the specialized vocabulary or the grammar structures. The two generic factors of success in this respect are, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, fluency and accuracy, i.e. the ability to formulate ideas and express thoughts accurately, without changing the sentences and their meaning, according to one's level of knowledge at a given moment.

## **2. The most common errors in speaking activities in the French class for business students**

From general linguistics it is known that there is an external contribution to each language, which is made by one or several languages to its formation, development and evolution. Romania, due to its long-standing historical relations, declared itself French-speaking, as a result of a constant admiration for French spiritual and material values. Moreover, modern Romania was built in accordance with the French model in terms of education, political achievements and of technical and artistic progress. The French influence has for a long time modelled Romanian thought and sensitivity, a fact which has been identified in all Romanian spiritual manifestations: namely political or legislative matters, literary or administrative manifestations, in social life or in art. We live in a world of visual, gestural, auditory messages but messages of a linguistic nature are enhanced by different meanings. It often happens that the same message has, similarly to a medal, an obverse and a reverse.

In spite of the similarities between the grammar of the Romanian language and that of the French language, students come across many difficulties in assimilating knowledge among which mention can be made of the kinds of nouns that are difficult to grasp because there is no neuter gender; moreover there are no constant equivalences between the Romanian masculine and feminine genders and the ones in French. Furthermore, the French verbal tenses are also perceived as challenging.

As regards the oral message, difficulties arise from additional informative elements which are not accessible to the written message: intonation, pauses, the verbal flow, intensity accents – which are extremely important for the receiver's understanding of the message. In order to eliminate the confusion between the graphic message and its

pronunciation, learning and using the phonetic alphabet is necessary in order to solve the fundamental problem of the correctness of reading and the relation between sound and spelling. At this point we are not going to analyze the pronunciation of the French language according to the regions where it is spoken, nor the various tendencies of native speakers to "downsize" their speaking effort, due to the fact that one of the fundamental objectives of teaching a foreign language is to guide the student towards an accurate acquisition of the literary language structures. Therefore, we consider that systematic orthoepy exercises are welcome at any level of language learning. It is a well-known fact that French spelling is most often based on etymology, but the latter cannot be viewed as a guide (for example, the different pronunciation of *x* in words such as: *exact* [gz], *sixième* [z], *six* [s], *texte* [ks], etc.). The problem of the letter *h* must be considered: the sound should never be pronounced in French even when aspirated: *héro*, *habiller*, *habitant*, *habitude*, *handicap*, *hôtellerie* etc. In the latter case, however, it does not allow for any connection or elision before it. The silent and unstable *e* illustrates, by its very name, the difficulties it raises in pronunciation. It is easily recognized due to its spelling, thus being by far the most frequently used in the written language (with a frequency of 10.06%) as compared to the spoken one (4.9%). Its pronunciation is mandatory (in the interrogative pronoun *que*, for example) or optional (e.g. at the end of a group: *Elle est blanche*. Or inside a group: *cheval de course*) (Girard 1995, 153).

At the phonetic level, the difficulty for the Romanian speaker is represented by the nasal vowels (ă, õ, nasal ε, nasal oe) and by the oral ones that do not correspond to Romanian ε, ø, œ, ɔ, γ, as well as by the reading of the final consonants, which in French are read in only a few words. The sounds γ and ø are pronounced incorrectly in words such as *sur*, *mur*, *feu*, *deux*. The unstable, silent ə is yet another difficulty for business students. The teacher must make phonetic corrections in neighbouring sound groups, such as: i.g. *je/j'ai*; *je fais/j'ai fait*; *mange-le/mange-les*; *se/ses*; *ceux/ces*; *deux/de*; */de/des*; *jeu/jet*; *feu/fait*, *pur/pour*; *sur/sous*; *rue/roue* and in consonantal groups such as *oncle/ongle*; *longue/longe*. The group of letters [gn] is quite difficult to pronounce by the students, because the sound is an *n* which is softened by the vowel *i* (Léon, 1964).

The oral links between words are another step in the practice of teaching French to business students. The connection is made by pronouncing the usually silent final consonant of a word when that word is integrated into a group and when the respective final consonant comes into contact with the vowel that the following word starts with. Thus we can differentiate between the pronunciation of such sentences as: e.g. *Il est un charmant enfant*. vs. *Il est un enfant charmant*. Sometimes it is difficult to specify the linking cases, but it must be taken into account that it is an additional sign of cohesion between neighbouring units and that it can only be done within an accent group: i.g. *Ces grands enfants en beaux habits ne sont pas si grands, ils ont seulement neuf ans*.

Regarding the difficulty of teaching speaking skills in French, we consider that the correct pronunciation of a sentence is dictated by certain prerequisites and that the pronounced groups do not correspond to the graphical division into words. It is a matter of accentuation. The accent called "intensity accent" consists in stressing, in a word with multiple syllables, a syllable more than others, thus investing more energy in its pronunciation and increasing the duration of its uttering (Morel, 1991) French has an accent of intensity which is fixed and always placed on the same last articulated syllable: e.g. *amateur, professeur, trafic, patriotisme, autoturisme* (this accent most often causes an extension of the vowel that corresponds to it). The accent sometimes coincides with a pause that allows speakers to take a breath - pauses determine what we call "breath groups", the most important being the one that separates two sentences. The normal accent may sometimes be accompanied by another which is used by the speaker in two special cases: either to render an emotion (the important word is then detached by stressing the first syllable - *C'est une parole cruelle!, C'est un incident effrayant!*) or in order to highlight an essential syllable for the accurate understanding of the message: *Il ne faut pas confondre enerver et innerver.*

Intonation represents another difficulty in teaching French to students who do not have a philological background; the teacher must draw attention to the sound of the rising (for questions) or falling (for orders) intonation. If the case of the sentence *Elle est venue*, according to the adopted intonation, the listener will recognize a simple statement or a question: *Elle est venue.* (the voice progressively rises and slightly falls when reaching the last syllable); *Elle est venue?* (the voice rises continuously and remains in suspense) *Venez ici!* (the voice starts from quite a high point and does not cease to fall). In the normal assertive sentence, a kind of balance is established: both the ascending intonation and the descending intonation are used towards the end. In longer sentences, the voice goes up regularly for a while and then gradually descends until it regains its original level. *Pour l'économiste, la concurrence apparaît à la fois comme cette force, plus ou moins omniprésente, et comme la règle de fonctionnement de certaines sociétés qui voient en elle un mécanisme efficace rendant possible la vie en commun.* We must emphasize that this melodic line varies depending on the speaker and on the type of text (especially if it is a literary text). The paragraph is an indication of an over-segmentation of intonation, which ensures its demarcation and cohesion. The cohesion between paragraphs is announced by the decrease of intensity at the end of the sentence (Léon, 1986).

Another issue related to the difficulties of teaching speaking is the speaker's hesitations. In order to allow the speaker to highlight and make their hesitations manifest, French language has three types of markers. First, the elongation of the final syllable by maintaining the same intensity level, as a marker of continuity, often accompanies a change of point of view and serves as a camouflage for the operation of finding the speaker's idea. Then, the hesitation marker "euh" is a kind of phantom lexeme that serves as a link to what follows. The repetition of the word, which is widely

used in French, ensures the consistent continuity of speech. As for the break, it only has an impact when associated with one of the hesitation markers. Its initial effect is that of dismissing or concluding the preceding segment. In French, oral expression entails the use of certain words that are difficult to define, but they regulate the statement (*quoi, tu vois, hein, écoute*), others modulate the referent qualification (*enfin, disons, je sais pas*), others restrict the field of reference that circumscribes the object of discourse (*question, pour, genre, sur, point de vue*), others display the argumentation process (*et, et puis, donc, alors*).

The errors discussed above are not necessarily errors which are specific to economics students as they have been encountered, in one form or another, throughout the teaching experience of several teachers of French. In order to prevent the above mentioned situations from happening, a recommended working method for teachers would be to address these difficulties and even to devise speaking activities meant to check the extent of their understanding. Dialogues play an important role in the communicative phase of the teaching/learning process of French language. When used during teaching classes, they have the purpose of conveying correct pronunciation and of improving speaking skills by memorizing the basic structures and by practicing an array of selected grammatical structures. When opting for this teaching method, the lecturer can choose daily life or professional situations (placing students in contexts such as travelling, requesting something, participating in the recruitment of personnel in a company, etc.); the teacher can also ask questions regarding the meanings of words (highlighting its antonyms, synonyms, word families, expressions, etc.). Moreover, students may be asked to make logical additions, paraphrase certain statements or to carry out improvisations.

### **3. Conclusion**

In order to establish the thematic, grammatical and communicative contents, the French language teachers must first identify and evaluate the linguistic needs of their students as future specialists in economics, according to specific professional situations. It is very important to focus on communicative situations and implicitly on spoken language. In this case, a selection of speaking exercises can be used to highlight possible errors, generally accepted as being the most frequently encountered. In the linguistic progression envisaged in teaching, the lecturer will have to find opportunities to practise certain already acquired terms or elements of communication in such a way as to emphasize their specific features and to warn students about possible confusions, chiefly relying on their own teaching experience. In this pedagogical approach that involves the analysis of each statement from a grammatical, syntactic and semantic point of view, a parallel approach to the possible difficulties that arise in speaking is required.

During the teaching process, it is important to build the students' knowledge on the functioning of the oral code, as the problems which have been concisely mentioned above, are just a few guidelines of the difficulties that are likely to be encountered during the course and they can be only viewed as modest benchmarks for the process of teaching French as effectively as possible.

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