I CAN SPEAK FRENCH!

Increasing the Oral Proficiency of French Second Language Learners

Research Compendium

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Building Oral Proficiency: Listening and Speaking

"Learning to speak in a second language is often judged to be the most vital of the language skills."

Garabati & Mady, 2015, p. 1763

Research on second language teaching and learning confirms that oral proficiency is a crucial component of communicative competence. The ability to listen and speak effectively in a target language opens up a range of interactive possibilities for learners.

Within the wealth of research in this field, considerations for how to build FSL students' oral proficiency fall under three main themes:

A. Developing students' *listening comprehension* and *spoken fluency*

B. Developing students' *linguistic, sociolinguistic,* and *pragmatic* competences, as well as their *metacognitive* skills and strategies

C. Developing the *social* and *emotional* aspects of communication

This compendium of research findings uses these three themes to articulate ten essential considerations for building oral proficiency in French second language learners. The considerations reflect the findings of cutting-edge research. Under each of the three themes, considerations address specific areas of focus for building oral proficiency, connect with relevant research, and provide valuable background for FSL educators.

Teachers are invited to use the *Research Compendium* as a companion to *Strategies and Instructional Practices*. Together, these components can strengthen instruction and learning in FSL classrooms.

A. Developing students' listening comprehension and spoken fluency

To become orally proficient in French, students need to be able to understand and interpret incoming messages and to formulate and deliver their intended message. To accomplish this, they need to build the following abilities:

- **Listening comprehension**—the ability to understand French in its spoken form, including the authentic speech of francophones.

- **Oral fluency**—the ability to express their ideas in French in a natural, effortless, and increasingly confident manner on a wide range of topics in a wide range of contexts.

To develop these abilities, students also need to build the accuracy and complexity of their oral French:

- **Accuracy**—the ability to use and understand grammatical structures and vocabulary items correctly and effectively to express or interpret an idea.

- **Complexity**—the ability to use and understand a variety of language structures (simple/short sentences and longer/more complex ones) and vocabulary items (common/frequent words or expressions and specialized/less frequent ones).

Encouraging students to express themselves, even when they are unsure of accuracy, is an important step in building oral proficiency. Accuracy and complexity come with time and effort.

Consideration 1

Prioritize communication of the message through frequent, authentic learning tasks and experiences

Offer students multiple chances for spontaneous use of and exposure to the language

To develop the ability to spontaneously use French to communicate orally, students need frequent and authentic real-world opportunities to engage in oral communication in their second language. [1] Learning tasks that prioritize communication of the message in the back-and-forth nature of oral interaction and that invite students to draw on their personal experience are highly effective in fostering oral production. [1] [2] Students themselves prefer learning tasks that resemble situations in the real world. [3]

Learning tasks that focus on authentic, real-world oral communication are key [4] because (as the 'neurolinguistic approach' used in intensive French makes clear) knowing grammatical rules and vocabulary items does not automatically translate into an ability to communicate. [5]

Learn more

Netten, J., & Germain, C. (2012). A new paradigm for the learning of a second or foreign language: The neurolinguistic approach.

Consideration 2

*Provide some repetition of tasks to further strengthen fluency,
paying attention to language complexity and accuracy*

Repeating a task in similar contexts (e.g., asking the same question more than once to a variety of interlocutors, reading a short poem out loud more than once and in a variety of groupings or settings) helps students build oral fluency (e.g., speed and flow) and prioritizes a focus on meaning. [1] Additional repetitions in more varied contexts encourage students to shift their attention from meaning to form. This encourages students to focus on both complexity (e.g., a variety of grammatical structures and vocabulary items) and accuracy (e.g., reducing the number of errors). [2] [3]

Repetition is also effective when the task includes the teacher or peers providing students with a reformulation (e.g., expressing the same idea using more accurate or appropriate vocabulary and grammar). [4] This gives students the chance to compare their own use of French with that of their teacher or peers and encourages them to improve their original version. [5]

Learn more
Sample, E., & Michel, M. (2014). An exploratory study into trade-off effects of complexity, accuracy, and fluency on young learners' oral task repetition.

Consideration 3

Incorporate explicit teaching of listening strategies

To become effective listeners, students need to be explicitly taught multiple listening strategies, including:

- **prediction** (e.g., anticipating types of information and vocabulary)

- **selective attention** (e.g., focusing on specific information or vocabulary items)

- **monitoring** (e.g., continually checking and refining their understanding) [1] [2]

Listening strategies draw on two sources of knowledge:

- **linguistic** (e.g., the ability to recognize vocabulary items and their meaning)

- **non-linguistic** (e.g., students' prior knowledge of the world and their understanding of the topic, context, and purpose of the communication)

When students draw on both sources of knowledge, they enrich their listening comprehension. In instances where students are missing one of these two sources of knowledge, the other source can help compensate and make comprehension possible (e.g., knowledge of the context can aid students in understanding the meaning of an unfamiliar vocabulary item). [3]

Learn more
Graham, S., Santos, D., & Vanderplank, R. (2010). Strategy clusters and sources of knowledge in French L2 listening comprehension.

B. Developing students' linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences, as well as their metacognitive skills and strategies

To become orally proficient in French, students need to develop the following competences:

- **Linguistic competence**—the ability to accurately use (in speaking) and interpret (in listening) grammatical rules, a rich range of vocabulary, and clear pronunciation.

- **Sociolinguistic competence**—the ability while speaking to adjust the formality of their French according to the conventions and rules of politeness that are appropriate to the context and to their language partner (e.g., according to the age or social position of the person with whom they are interacting). It also includes the ability while listening to interpret these same kinds of adjustments being made by their language partner.

- **Pragmatic competence**—the ability to use their French to perform (in speaking) and interpret (in listening) various actions such as greeting, thanking, or complimenting someone, as well as sharing information, narrating a story, or telling a joke in ways that are culturally appropriate. This involves not only knowing what kind of language to use but also how to structure the expression of their ideas for these various purposes.

Acquiring **metacognitive** skills and strategies can help students develop oral proficiency more efficiently:

- **Metacognitive skills and strategies**—the ability to think about and control their thought processes. This includes their ability to plan, follow, and adjust their learning strategies. It also includes the ability to use their awareness of their cognitive processes to develop strategies that will improve their listening comprehension and speaking fluency.

Consideration 4

Reinforce students' linguistic competence by embedding in context the explicit teaching of grammar (e.g., accuracy) and vocabulary (e.g., size and depth)

To become proficient speakers and listeners, students need to develop their knowledge both of grammar (e.g., the ability to accurately use French forms) and of vocabulary (e.g., the ability to use diverse and precise French words). [1]

Embedding the teaching of grammar within oral communication in a specific context enables teachers to better help students learn to express meaning, using grammatically accurate language. [2] Through tasks such as role plays that encourage students to use grammar in specific situations of oral communication (e.g., asking for directions), teachers can observe how students both understand and use grammatical structures.

Embedding the teaching of vocabulary in context helps learners better retain and access the vocabulary items they learn.[3] Using various contexts enables teachers to determine whether students are developing vocabulary that is rich both in size (e.g., the number of words students know) and in depth (e.g., the understanding of a word's multiple meanings, its spelling, its pronunciation). Encouraging students to expand their vocabulary in French by including some less-frequent or specialized items can increase their speaking fluency [4] and listening comprehension. [5]

Learn more
Rueb, A., Cardoso, W., & Grimshaw, J. (2016). Developing oral interaction skills with a digital information gap activity game.

Consideration 5

Reinforce students' sociolinguistic competence by practising the use of conventions appropriate to the formality of the situation (e.g., a job interview versus a conversation with a friend)

An important aspect of oral proficiency is the ability to use language that is appropriate to the formality of the social context (e.g., where, why, and with whom communication takes place). Such 'sociolinguistic competence' includes knowing when to use formal or informal language, as well as when to use a local variety of French (e.g., regional vernaculars). [1] [2]

One way to help students develop their sociolinguistic competence is to expose them to a variety of authentic materials in the classroom. [2] Students can:

- be made aware of specific formal and informal variants (e.g., *tu* versus *vous*)

- be encouraged to observe and analyze when these conventions are used in authentic communication

- practise using them in a variety of social situations in which they assume a variety of social roles [3] [4]

A way to help students become familiar with informal varieties of French is to provide them with opportunities to interact with peers and others in French outside of the classroom (e.g., through online exchanges or community activities). [5]

Learn more
Ritchie, M. (2011). Developing sociolinguistic competence through intercultural online exchange.

Consideration 6

Reinforce students' pragmatic competence by practising in context the actions of everyday communication (e.g., requesting, apologizing, greeting)

Oral proficiency includes the ability to use French for the actions of everyday communication in ways that are culturally appropriate to the social context (e.g., where, why, and with whom communication takes place). [1] Such pragmatic competence draws on two types of knowledge: [2] [3]

- knowing when certain communicative actions (e.g., greeting, thanking, apologizing) are appropriate (or necessary) or discouraged in specific Francophone communities

- knowing which linguistic expressions are usually used in specific contexts to perform these actions (e.g., *Je suis désolé, navré, Excuse[z]-moi, Pardon*)

Students' ability to identify which linguistic expressions are most appropriate to the situation increases with their knowledge of and exposure to various social settings and with their awareness of what aspects of the context are most relevant (e.g., the age or social position of the speaker). [4]

To help students develop their pragmatic competence, in-class instruction should: [3] [5]

- expose students to authentic examples of a range of communicative actions in a variety of social contexts (e.g., sample exchanges from audiovisual materials)

- direct students' attention to both the nature of the social context and the linguistic expressions that they hear speakers using

- provide opportunities for students to practise performing a range of actions in a variety of social contexts while adjusting their language accordingly

To reinforce and apply what they learn in the classroom, students should be encouraged to interact in French outside of the classroom and observe how French is used differently according to the social context. [3]

Learn more

Dewaele, J. M., & Wourm, N. (2002). L'acquisition de la compétence sociopragmatique en langue étrangère.

Consideration 7

Reinforce students' metacognitive reflections, particularly on their own oral proficiency focussing on goal-setting for improvement

Metacognition involves students in 'thinking about their thinking.' Metacognitive awareness involves students in taking control of their own learning process by developing their:

- **Knowledge of cognition**—knowing about themselves as learners, knowing about learning strategies, and understanding when and why to use particular strategies.

- **Ability to regulate cognition**—planning their learning (e.g., by selecting learning strategies that are best suited to achieving particular learning goals they have set for themselves), monitoring their learning (e.g., by observing the progress they are making towards their goals), and evaluating their learning (e.g., by identifying their own areas of strength and their own opportunities for improvement). [2]

The ability of students to observe and evaluate their oral production and listening comprehension during interaction is a crucial part of developing oral proficiency. [1] For example, teachers can encourage students to notice how clearly they speak and set their own goals to improve this aspect of their oral production. Teachers can provide scaffolds for students as they identify and reflect on what strategies they use to compensate when they do not understand a word while listening.

Supporting students as they set their own goals for improving their oral proficiency encourages them to take responsibility for their progress and the results. Such scaffolding can help students learn to set achievable goals, monitor their progress, and revise their plan according to their needs. [3]

Learn more
Valetopoulos, F. (2012). Quand les apprenants doivent observer leurs stratégies métacognitives: une analyse de corpus.

C. Developing the social and emotional aspects of communication

To become orally proficient in French, students need to develop the ability to manage the social and emotional aspects of communication. Willingness to communicate, confidence, personal motivation, and a positive attitude towards learning French help students develop oral proficiency more effectively:

- **Willingness to communicate**—refers to students' desire and intention to engage in an oral interaction with a partner in French.

- **Confidence**—refers to students' level of comfort in using their French speaking and listening skills for communication. Contexts that enhance students' perceptions of their French abilities boost confidence and increase their willingness to communicate in French.

- **Motivation**—refers both to students' various internal (and therefore stronger) reasons for learning French, (e.g., personal enjoyment, interest, or needs) and their external reasons, (e.g., pressure to obtain a credential or earn praise for mastering a skill).

- **Attitude towards (learning) French**—refers to students' degree of openness to and interest in the French language and culture, as well as their interest in engaging in interactions with others, including francophones.

Consideration 8

Develop students' willingness to communicate in French with a variety of partners (e.g., peers, francophones)

One way to develop students' willingness to communicate in French is to provide them with opportunities to interact with a variety of peer and Francophone partners. Such interaction should be for various purposes requiring spontaneous communication, [1] including collaboration in language-related problem-solving tasks. [2]

Students' willingness to communicate depends on their own assessment of their oral proficiency and any anxiety they may feel about communicating in French. [3] These two factors fluctuate in relation to both internal factors (e.g., age, personality, previous experience) [1] and external factors (e.g., partners, context, topic, and authenticity of the communication). [1] [3] As combinations of these factors change from situation to situation, students' degree of willingness to communicate can change, sometimes quite rapidly. [4]

Learn more
Mady, C., & Arnott, S. (2010). Exploring the "Situation" of Situational Willingness to Communicate: A Volunteer Youth Exchange Perspective.

Consideration 9

Strengthen students' confidence and facilitate positive self-assessments of their FSL abilities

Promoting students' confidence in their spoken French is an important part of supporting their development of oral proficiency. [1] An effective way to help students build confidence in French is to create a safe, relaxed, and supportive learning environment in the classroom (e.g., make clear the structure and the goal of communicative tasks, assign pair or group work, encourage students to take risks, and avoid excessive correction). [2] [3]

It is important for teachers to be aware that their students may be anxious about being judged for their inability to adequately express themselves or for not understanding fully the message of others in French. This could cause students to demonstrate negative attitudes and avoid participation in communicative tasks [3] and create an obstacle for them in developing their speaking and listening skills. [2]

Focussing on and making students aware of what they can do (e.g., using "Can Do/Je peux" statements in self-assessment) is one way to help students develop a positive view of their oral French abilities. [4] [5]

Learn more

Rehner, K. (2014). French as a second language (FSL): Student proficiency and confidence pilot project 2013-2014—Synopsis of findings.

Consideration 10

Enhance students' motivation and positive attitude towards learning French

Enhancing students' motivation and positive attitude towards French is an important step in keeping them engaged in their language learning journey. [1] Opportunities to engage with their peers in interactive tasks that encourage risk-taking (e.g., arts or drama-based tasks), reduce students' anxiety about communicating in French and encourage students to share their feelings and learn about each other. [2] [3] Expressing and reflecting on their emotions, developing empathy for their peers, as well as experiencing positive emotions, such as a sense of pride in their accomplishments, helps students strengthen their motivation to learn and speak French. [2] [4]

An important way to increase students' positive attitude towards learning French is to provide them with opportunities to broaden their knowledge of francophone communities and cultures (e.g., explore various art forms in French, such as songs, movies, and books). [5]

Learn more
Rovers, A. C. (2013). Teaching Core French through the Arts.

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