

**Enhancing oral communication in the Algerian university –CEIL-
according to the CEFR framework**

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Abstract

This article discusses the challenges of teaching oral communication to foreign language learners from diverse backgrounds, and suggests strategies for effective instruction based on the CEFR framework. The article highlights the importance of oral communication skills in language learning and the challenges that arise when teaching students from diverse backgrounds. These challenges include differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds, different levels of motivation and self-confidence, and differences in learning styles. To address these challenges, the article proposes several strategies based on the CEFR framework. These strategies include providing opportunities for learners to interact in the target language in authentic situations, using task-based/action based instruction to promote communication and language use, and provide feedback and opportunities for self-reflection to encourage the learner autonomy and self-correction.

Keywords: Oral communication, didactics, CEFR, CEIL, AOA.

Introduction

The Language Teaching Center (CEIL) at Algiers 1 University has developed an innovative approach to teaching oral communication skills to students from

diverse backgrounds, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This article provides a detailed account of this approach and its effectiveness in increasing students' confidence in speaking the target language.

The CEFR offers a comprehensive framework for teaching oral communication skills, focusing on real-life situations that students may encounter in everyday life. It provides a rating system for understanding speech and addressing audiences, with categories for oral production divided into two specialized genres: addressing audiences and public announcements. The framework also identifies three macro-functions: interpersonal, transactional, and evaluative.

At CEIL, the focus is on teaching more formal discourse, primarily in professional or academic settings, based on key notions operationalized in the CEFR's "Addressing audiences" scale. To achieve this, a range of activities and tasks are provided to learners, guided by clear standards and expectations.

The article offers valuable insights into the types of activities and tasks that can be used to teach oral communication skills effectively. It also emphasizes the importance of setting clear standards and expectations for learners to ensure they achieve the desired outcomes.

Overall, this article presents a useful and practical approach to teaching oral communication skills, providing valuable guidance for educators and learners alike.

Oral Didactics

Despite its importance, oral instruction is often overlooked in educational strategies and didactics, with writing being prioritized instead. While oral instruction is often viewed as a spontaneous practice, it typically lacks specific learning objectives and content, and it is rarely the subject of disciplinary action in schools. However, with the advent of the communicative approach, active methods, competency-based approach, and action-based approach, speaking has recently been recognized as a distinct skill in its own right, separate from writing. This marks a significant shift in the way educators approach teaching and learning, and highlight the importance of developing strong oral communication skills in students.

According to Halté and Rispaïl (2005), oral communication has traditionally been neglected in the classroom, neither viewed as didactic nor pedagogical. Today, however, there is a growing recognition of the importance of oral proficiency, even as concerns about how to effectively teach it remain ambiguous. Lafontaine (2001, 2003) suggests that teaching oral communication requires a focus on different language registers and their practical applications in everyday life. In essence, it is crucial to underscore the significance of speaking from the outset of language acquisition and to accord it the same level of importance as writing. Nonetheless, despite achieving intermediate proficiency in English, learners from various disciplines at the CEIL still encounter difficulties expressing themselves orally.

Maurer (2001:69) raises an important aspect of the problem faced by the didactics of oral communication in schools. He emphasizes the need for schools to establish a connection between school knowledge and social knowledge, which is crucial for the effective use of oral communication. It is important to note that language is primarily learned for communication in society, and learners naturally bring their social practices into the school setting. Therefore, the development of oral communication skills in schools must be linked to the broader social context.

Nonnon (2000:75) further emphasizes that the demand for oral communication skills is not only about improving language proficiency but also about regulating communication and exchanges between individuals, groups, and cultural communities. This is essential for the effective functioning of the school community and ensuring optimal learning conditions for all students. In this regard, the didactics of oral communication is aimed at enabling learners to use their existing language skills effectively in different communication situations while also enriching their language skills.

Overall, the didactics of oral communication in schools must take into account the social context in which language is used and facilitate effective communication and interactions between individuals and groups, which is essential for the successful functioning of the school community and optimal learning outcomes.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) offers a comprehensive framework for teaching and assessing language proficiency, specifically in oral communication skills. CEFR's methodological approach emphasizes teaching learners how to communicate effectively in real-life situations, such as meetings, seminars, conferences, and lectures.

The CEFR provides rating scales for "understanding speech between others" and "understanding as a member of a live audience." These scales assess how well an audience can comprehend a speaker who is addressing them in various contexts. The categories for oral production are further divided into two specialized genres: "Addressing audiences" and "Public announcements," with three macro-functions (interpersonal, transactional, and evaluative) that learners can use to hone their communication skills.

As part of the "Addressing audiences" scale, giving an oral presentation in a class, meeting, or public setting is a critical component of the CEFR's oral communication assessment. Therefore, it is essential that the CEFR places a strong emphasis on teaching learners how to engage in formal discourse, particularly in professional or academic settings. The CEILs (Centers for Language Education and Research) should prioritize teaching key notions that are operationalized in this scale to students from various disciplines to improve their oral communication abilities.

Oral Comprehension:

Oral comprehension involves the ability to understand spoken language in real-time, whether in face-to-face communication or in remote and recorded forms. It encompasses various modalities, including audio-vocal and visuo-gestural cues. This skill includes different forms of one-way comprehension, except for "Understanding an Interlocutor" as a participant in interaction, which falls under the category of interaction. The metaphor of concentric rings plays a significant role in how one approaches oral comprehension, as they transition from being a participant in a conversation to an overhearer or bystander, to a member of a live audience, and finally to an audience at a distance through media. There are scales available to measure one's ability to understand speech between others as

an overhearer, as well as their ability to comprehend as a member of a live audience.

Understanding as a member of a live audience

This rating system evaluates how effectively a speaker or signer communicates with an audience in various settings such as meetings, seminars, conferences, lectures, guided tours, weddings, and other events. Understanding the speaker as a member of the audience is generally easier than comprehending a conversation between other people. This is partly because a monologue tends to be more structured, allowing listeners to skip confusing parts and follow the narrative. Additionally, the speaker or signer often employs a neutral tone and clear projection to enhance the audience's comprehension. The rating system measures several key factors, including the pace of delivery, the degree of simplification, the audience's familiarity with the topic, the coherence of the argument, the identification of essential points, and so on (CEFR Illustrative Descriptor Scales, p. 49).

Addressing Audiences

Giving an oral presentation in a class, meeting, or public setting is part of this scale. Although being properly prepared, talks are not typically read word-for-word or sign-for-sign. Today, it's common practice to use visual aids like PowerPoint, although it's not necessary. This is also included in the descriptors because it is typical to answer questions after a presentation informally with a brief monologue. The following are some of the key concepts operationalized in the scale:

A well-structured presentation on a complex subject delivered to an audience that isn't familiar with it; a brief, rehearsed statement; a planned, straightforward presentation on a well-known issue in their profession;

Consideration: there is no comment at A levels, but from B1 onwards the transition goes from being clear enough to be followed without difficulty the majority of the time to flexible talk structure and audience adaptation;

Ability to deal with questions, which includes being able to answer simple questions with a little assistance, take a succession of follow-up questions fluently and impulsively, and deal with challenging and even hostile

questioning. (The CEFR Illustrative Descriptor Scales: communicative language activities and strategies P. 61)

Moreover, teachers deal with speaking activities in oral production such as: reading a written text aloud, speaking from notes, or from a written text or visual aids (diagrams, pictures, charts, etc.); acting out a rehearsed role; speaking spontaneously; etc.

Oral Interaction

The term "oral interaction" refers to verbal communication as well as real-time, face-to-face signing. The scales are once again divided into the "interpersonal," "transactional," and "evaluative" macro-functions, with a few specialized genres added on. "Understanding an interlocutor" is the first scale in the list. The person with whom one is directly chatting in a dialogue is referred to as the "interlocutor" in a rather technical sense. As previously stated, a set of concentric circles serves as the metaphor for the oral comprehension scales. We are in the center of the circles right here: The user or learner engages in active dialogue with the interlocutor; then come the other scales:

Interpersonal: "Conversation," evaluative: "Informal discussion (meetings)," "Goal-oriented collaboration," and transactional: "Information exchange," "Getting goods and services," "Interviewing and being interviewed," and "Using telecommunications" (The CEFR Illustrative Descriptor Scales: communicative language activities and strategies, P. 71)

Formal Discussion (meetings)

This rating system is focused on more formal discourse, primarily in a professional or academic setting. The following are additional key notions that are operationalized in the scale but are also extremely comparable to those in informal discussion:

Topics and meeting type: Ability to follow the discussion, from needing repetition and clarification to grasping ideas given priority and maintaining attention throughout lively argument; from dialogues on practical problems to discussion of abstract, difficult, new themes;

ability to participate: from the need to practice and obtain assistance with formulation to questioning, assessing, and critiquing others' contributions and successfully articulating one's own perspective

Translating a written text

It is by no means unusual in daily personal and professional life for someone to translate a written word into voice or sign. It is the act of impromptu translating into speech a written text, frequently a notification, letter, email, or other communication. The following are some of the key concepts operationalized in the scale: retaining the key details and subtleties while giving a rough, approximate translation (higher levels).

Finally, learning conceives speaking as a performance, that is to say a unique oral, with a significant subjective investment, in the sense that the creative dimension takes precedence over the routine and repetitive aspect of the oral production. The teaching is entirely tended towards the representations during the various stages of the eloquence competitions. Oral proficiency therefore serves social integration in a privileged way. We find the relationship that is established between this practice of oral and the evolution of the missions of the university and CEIL particularly including a professional concern.

The oral communication practiced and taught at CEIL is permeable to this influence which is to integrate a vocational integration function into its training offer, as is precisely shown by the introduction of a form of eloquence, partly diverted from its civic and deliberative scope, to convey values of self-promotion in view of professional integration

Action-Oriented Approach (AOA)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages includes the action-oriented approach (AOA) as one of its pillars (CEFR). The communicative approach and theories like the socio-constructivist and complexity theories are all incorporated into the AOA as it builds upon various viewpoints. Piccardo & North published the AOA theoretical framework in 2019. The CEFR's methodological approach is that language instruction should be focused on teaching students how to act in circumstances they may encounter in everyday life.

The unique concept that the user or learner is a "social agent," or more simply, someone who acts with purpose to complete tasks (Bandura, 2001), is at the core of the Action-Oriented Approach (AOA). This marked a significant transition in language education, switching it from being a linear process primarily focused on language structures to one structured around completing real-life, collaborative tasks with a primary focus that is not language (Council of Europe, 2020). With the AOA, users and learners not only study the language but also live it.

Using the concept of "social agents" to describe users and learners places them at the center of the learning process. It entails getting them involved in the learning process directly and letting them use all of their skills to complete the assignment. Additionally, it necessitates an understanding of the social aspects of language usage, where meaning is produced in collaboration with the user, and the interaction between the social and individual components of learning (Council of Europe, 2020).

The action-oriented methodology of the CEFR marks a change from curricula that are built around pre-selected notions and functions or on a linear progression through language structures to curricula that are based on needs analysis, geared toward practical tasks, and built around carefully chosen notions and functions. This encourages a "proficiency" view driven by "can do" adjectives as opposed to a "deficiency" perspective concentrating on what the learners still need to learn. The goal is to create curricula and courses that are organized around practical tasks, based on real-world communicative demands, and supported by "can do" descriptors that make learning objectives clear to students. Essentially, the CEFR is a tool that helps educators construct curricula, courses, and exams by starting with what users and learners of the language must be able to do. The supply of a thorough descriptive scheme with corresponding content specifications published separately for various languages, as well as illustrative "can do" descriptor scales for as many areas of the system as proves practical (CEFR 2001 Chapters 4 and 5).

Applying the Action-Oriented Approach

As mentioned earlier, the AOA encourages users and learners to take action to accomplish tasks. The CEFR, on the other hand, advocates for language

instruction that prepares students to communicate effectively in real-life situations, express themselves appropriately, behave properly in everyday circumstances, and perform a wide range of tasks. To evaluate their progress, the CEFR proposes assessing their real-world communication skills across a continuum of proficiency levels (A1-C2). It's worth noting that the term "criterion" in "criterion-referenced assessment" originally referred to these real-world communication skills that serve as benchmarks for evaluating a learner's performance.

The co-construction of meaning (through interaction) is at the heart of both the teaching and learning processes according to the CEFR descriptive scheme and the action-oriented approach. For the classroom, this obviously has consequences. This interaction will occur between the teacher and the learner(s) on occasion, but it will also occasionally take the form of a collaborative relationship between the learners themselves. The precise ratio of learner collaboration and teacher-centered education in small groups is likely to depend on the situation, the pedagogical tradition in place, and the level of skill of the students involved. The reality of today's increasingly multicultural society allows for the production of meaning across languages and draws on the multilingual and multicultural repertoires of users and learners. (CEFR for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment P.29)

Teachers serve as coaches in the Action-Oriented Approach AOA, helping students use all of their available resources to finish the project. With the AOA, the instructor and learners have total control.

Hunter et al state "Learners are viewed as -social actors- participating in genuine, relevant learning experiences in the actual world. Learners process authentic, real-life texts and experiences. There are conditions and constraints. There is collaboration. Learners draw on and develop all of their resources. Learners make decisions, thinking and acting strategically. Action is purposeful, with real-life application. There is a final product or artifact (Hunter et al., 2019 cited in Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers).

Conclusion

Our goal is to encourage students in EFL classes to use a variety of materials when speaking. This objective aligns with the Common European Framework

of Reference's understanding of language as a tool for real-world tasks, and emphasizes the importance of the learner as a "social actor."

To achieve this, we have considered the principles of the action-oriented approach and identified pedagogic strategies that will help students from different disciplines in the CEIL strengthen their oral production and interaction abilities. Our speaking exercises are designed to foster interaction in the classroom and encourage learners to share ideas and information while using proper grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation. Ultimately, our aim is to help learners sound as natural as possible so that they can convey meaning effectively.

We recognize that oral communication involves critical thought and decision-making about language, co-participants, audience, and other factors. As such, our approach is designed to help students develop these skills while improving their language proficiency.

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