

THE SUBTLE ART OF INTENTIONAL IMPROVISATION: TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH PRACTICE AT UNIVERSITY PARIS NANTERRE

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Dana Vučković

University of Oxford

ORCID iD: Dana Vučković

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7631-4536>

Abstract. *This paper explores the trials, tribulations, and triumphs I faced, as a first-time lecturer in the English language and literature, when using a range of teaching methods to develop English oral proficiency with first-year students at University Paris Nanterre (France). It focuses on the challenges faced when applying methodologies proposed by the faculty and the interdisciplinary approaches that successfully encouraged students to leave their comfort zones and confront their linguistic trepidations. I argue that acquiring the skill of 'spontaneous speech' at the B1 and B2 levels should not be assumed as something adopted solely through vocabulary exercises promoting 'native-like' pronunciation. Rather, it is through technical, cognitive and interpersonal training that students gain self-confidence, refine their written and oral comprehension skills and open themselves up to the transformative power of body-language. To justify this argument, I compare students' performances in two English oral classes. After discussing French students' overall reluctance to speak English, analyzing the course syllabi and identifying the advantages and disadvantages of task-based speaking activities, I argue against 'language immersion' as I found it counterproductive in a French classroom setting. Finally, I show how students' hostility towards the oral exam is transformed into a newfound appreciation for multilingualism and multiculturalism.*

Key words: *EFL, Oral practice, Culture, Improvisation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the fundamental role oral communication plays in second language acquisition, the lack of emphasis placed on interactive speaking activities in ESL university classrooms in France impedes students from confidently expressing themselves in spoken English. Acquiring the sought-after skill of 'spontaneous speech' at the B1 and B2 levels—according to the Common

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Corresponding author: Dana Vučković
University of Oxford
E-mail: dana.vuckovic@bnc.ox.ac.uk

European Union Framework— should not be assumed as something that can be solely adopted through vocabulary exercises promoting ‘native-like’ pronunciation. Rather, through technical, cognitive, and interpersonal training, students are prompted to gain self-confidence, refine their written and oral comprehension skills, and open themselves up to the vulnerability and transformative power of body language. Gilakjani argues that ‘in spite of its importance, the teaching of oral speech and pronunciation has been neglected by teachers in the field of English language teaching’ (Gilakjani 2011, 2). Drawing upon practical experiences, I will compare students’ achievements and underperformances in two classes I taught in the 2022–2023 school year at the University of Paris Nanterre: English Oral Practice I and II. I will briefly begin by prefacing French students’ overall reluctance to speak English both within and outside of the classroom. Next, I will delve into the courses’ syllabi and identify the advantages and disadvantages of task-based speaking activities. Comparing these differences will underline what scholars call the ‘discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs on the focused areas of oral communication and pronunciation and the stated curriculum specifications’ (Shah, Othman, and Senom 2017, 193). Thirdly, I will aim to debunk second language acquisition methods conventionally deemed as successful, notably ‘language immersion’ and explain its counterproductivity in a French classroom setting. Lastly, I will go over the structure and aftermath of the final oral exams, arguing how students’ hostility toward the exam can be transformed into a newfound appreciation for multilingualism and multiculturalism.

2. FRENCH STUDENTS’ RELUCTANCE TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH

The University of Paris Nanterre, commonly referred to as Nanterre University, is a publicly funded university located in the western suburbs of Paris. Established in 1970, the university is the alma mater of current French President, Emmanuel Macron. Renowned for its academic excellence, Nanterre University fosters a vibrant research community in the fields of political and social sciences, law, and languages. Thanks to the university’s subsidized rates, students pay low to zero tuition fees which, although in theory sounds attractive for universal accessibility, becomes a drawback for students’ overall motivation to study and receive higher grades. This is especially true in countries such as France where ‘academic culture is more precocious and more radical’, replacing ‘the aristocratic ideal of the ‘honnête homme’ with a bourgeois model emphasizing scholastic merit.’ (Van Zanten 2014, 331). In French high schools, most students take English classes, however, there continues to be a negative stereotype surrounding French speakers’ poor to non-existent English-speaking skills. This is primarily because English classes in France focus on grammar and memory-based tasks, thereby hindering students from breaking the language barrier and confronting their mistakes in a proactive manner:

In the French system of education, 85 % of the students learn English as their first second language (Truchot 1994, 21). French pupils normally start learning English in collège (middle school). It is estimated that 40 % of these continue to do a “BAC” (which corresponds to A-levels) and have another 3 years of English teaching. Even if this is the case, the classes are often overloaded with up to 35 pupils in each class, the teaching is only 3 hours per week, and it is often very theoretical (Truchot 1994, 22). It is suggested that only a minority of French speak English relatively well, and that this minority consists of young people from socially privileged backgrounds (Bakke 2004, 49).

Due to the lack of emphasis placed on oral speech, French students are extremely reluctant to speak up in class as they are afraid that their accent will sound funny, that they will make mistakes and that they will be heavily judged for them. In France, it is especially problematic as ‘bad pronunciation habits are not easily corrected’ (Gilakjani, and Sabouri 2016, 195). Accordingly, learners who always mispronounce a series of phonemes create a lot of problems for the speakers of other languages to understand. This can be very disappointing for French speakers who otherwise have good grammar and lexis knowledge but have difficulties in understanding and being understood by English speakers.

Moreover, the French fight in vain for their language, especially since the fall of the monarchy in 1789. At this time, the French language became the ‘unifying symbol to inspire nationalism of the new Republic’ (Bakke 2004, 37–38). Consequently, the nation takes a certain pride in speaking and mastering the complexities of the French language. This makes it even more difficult for native French speakers to fully immerse themselves in a foreign language, especially when they are surrounded by familiar signs and customary habits such as ‘la bise’, a common greeting where French people exchange kisses on the cheek.

2.1. Methodology Challenges

For English Oral Practice I, course coordinators did not provide lecturers with a defined syllabus. Instead, they wanted lecturers to incorporate vocabulary games and roleplay exercises to encourage students to speak English in a spontaneous way. By not having a syllabus, it was up to the lecturers to introduce spontaneity and improvisation in their teaching methods. Lecturers had the freedom to design the course as they best saw fit, but it was difficult to know where to begin. Although games were a good icebreaker, notably having one student face the others while they guess the word written behind them on the whiteboard, games cannot take up the entirety of a 1.5-hour class. That being said, my method was to work in reverse, which consisted of designing the course based on the outline of the final oral exam. It involved students working in pairs and selecting one out of the following three scenarios: a roleplay dialogue, a short debate, and a storytelling exercise prompted by visual images. Considering that students were at the A2 and B1 levels, I combined and reconfigured exercises that were already used in class to prepare them for the final exam. Many of these included: group discussions or debates around lighter topics such as baguette vs. red wine or more serious subjects involving the rise of artificial intelligence. By establishing end goals at the start of the term, I was able to better cater towards the students’ needs and build lesson plans that helped them gain more self-confidence in their oral speaking abilities.

What failed in this class, however, was trying to get students to memorize academic and non-academic vocabulary sheets for each lesson. As argued by Ally Zhou, ‘an increase in the amount of academic vocabulary should contribute to writing improvement. Yet, the extensive knowledge of academic vocabulary needed to be successful makes learning and teaching a daunting task.’ (Zhou 2009, 35) Course coordinators suggested that lecturers use videos and vocabulary lists to help students familiarize themselves with formal academic language, as well idiomatic expressions, and colloquial terms. In my classroom experience, I found that trying to force students to memorize outdated expressions such as ‘to cost an arm and a leg’ with little to no context was an unsuccessful way of introducing new vocabulary into the class. Instead, I favoured what Zhou calls an ‘incidental and intentional form of learning vocabulary.’ (Zhou 2009, 35) The method consists of introducing

new words via an acquisition process that is less task-oriented and more focused on complimentary learning. To do this, I focused on group work and encouraged students to work on exercises where they had to play the role of detective and guess the correct expression based on contextual understanding. This way, they not only focused on selecting the correct expression, but also on understanding the realistic contexts in which certain expressions are used by native English speakers. Moreover, I played contemporary pop songs students enjoyed listening on a day-to-day basis and asked them to identify words, expressions, or slang terms they wished to better understand and use more frequently. Giving students the freedom to work in pairs and listen to music they can relate to allows them to open up to lecturers and classmates, thereby making the learning process less intimidating and overwhelming.

In the second English class – English Oral Practice II – students were at a B2 and C1 level. Therefore, they were already expected to be familiar with vocabulary terms that would allow them to easily roleplay with given prompts, have basic debates and create stories at a faster and more fluid rate. Accordingly, the focus was placed less on vocabulary and more on making students become more confident in their improvisational skills. For this class, the course coordinator was much more specific in the outline and had a definitive end goal: the students had to present a one-page speech that they would annotate, so that they could read it in a nonchalant and spontaneous way. Although it may seem counterintuitive to associate improvisation with annotation, students were asked to mark down moments in the speech where they would make eye contact, improvise for thirty seconds, and use body language, such as hand gestures. In other words, they would annotate the speech in a way that mimicked their actual speech patterns, thereby helping them read and present what was once a foreign speech in a more personal way. Consequently, it encourages students to gain a set of sub-skills that emphasize ‘the learning objectives of imitating native speakers as well as the development of learners’ communicative competence’ (Hinkel 2010, 113).

This task was created to make students better understand themselves as learners, writers, and speakers. By preparing them with speeches at the start of the semester, students could track their progress and determine how and whether their speech patterns evolved. This allowed them to acquire English-speaking skills in a more holistic way and understand that learning a language does not solely involve regurgitating the vocabulary learnt in class, but also incorporating it into their gesticulations, eye contact and overall body posture. Like English Oral Practice I, this course also favoured group work and encouraged students to step out of their comfort zones. Thanks to the more elaborate course structure of English Oral Practice II, I felt more confident in teaching the class and incorporating new activities that were complimentary to the ones already designed by the course coordinator. It cannot be denied that a syllabus-free class gives lecturers the creative freedom to create a safe, inspiring environment filled with games, discussion groups and linguistic challenges. However, it can be overwhelming for new lecturers to take on ambitious pedagogical tasks that satisfy both the course coordinators’ expectations and the students’ oral communication fluency.

Although both courses motivated students to get into groups and do exercises around roleplaying and improvisation, group activities did not always prove to be the most effective method of encouraging students to speak in English. In fact, once students picked one or two group members at the beginning of the semester, they would remain with the same individuals throughout the entirety of the term, thereby making them extremely reluctant to change groups and speak to new students. For that reason, it was important to

decondition the students to change partners every week so that they could overcome their boundaries and present their skills to other group members.

While changing groups encouraged students to overcome their social inhibitions, they were still reluctant to speak in English with their classmates. As a result, each time I circulated in the classroom, I often heard students conversing in French. As our goal as lecturers was to fully immerse students in the English language, we had to constantly remind them to speak in English, which often resulted in discourteous comments such as: ‘But, Madame, why would we speak in English when we are in France?’. No matter what method was adopted to immerse students in an English-speaking environment, whether it be through in-person dialogues, videos, podcasts, games or roleplaying, students still resorted to speaking in French simply because it was easier for them and felt more natural. I continually reminded students that making mistakes is the first step in not only breaking the language barrier, but also in actively learning the target language instead of passively listening to it from lecturers or other secondary media. In other words, students who listen and actively engage in conversations can ‘participate effectively in communicative interaction and make sense of the incoming messages’ (Hong 2016, 18).

Another challenge involved students’ overwhelming levels of anxiety and stress when it came to their final presentations. Although lecturers are often confronted with students’ higher level of stage fright, it was extremely challenging to motivate first-year students to present in front of others. These repercussions are likely due to the impact of the pandemic and the substantial increase in online classes where students could turn their cameras off and avoid any form of social interaction. Furthermore, many of the students ‘did not have a comfortable learning atmosphere at home and were forced to engage in household chores during the lockdown, bringing about negative impacts on their studies and leaving them depressed and despondent’ (Mishra, Gupta, and Shree 2020, 3). Accordingly, many of them lost their motivation to study, making the e-learning process even more tedious. As this was an underlying obstacle for other lecturers, course coordinators suggested that students record their presentations on their phones and send them via email. This drastically lowered their anxiety levels and made them feel more at ease in the comfort of their own homes. However, it was a counterproductive solution as it gave students the time to rehearse, film, and refilm themselves until they were satisfied with the final product. Consequently, it made their final presentations the complete antithesis of spontaneous speech acquisition.

In addition to rehearsed presentations, students struggled with the annotative work in English Oral Practice II, often complaining that an oral speech class should not have writing involved. Moreover, it felt awkward for them to annotate a speech and indicate when and where they would enunciate certain words or incorporate body language. As a result, their presentations became a lot more theatrical and performative instead of spontaneous and well-balanced.

2.2. Teaching Approaches to Overcome Methodology Challenges

2.2.1. Incorporate the Students’ Requests into Lesson Preparation

It is important that lecturers humanize their role as instructors and that students see them as authoritative, but still approachable figures. As they become more acquainted with one another, lecturers could ask students what they would want to learn and eventually incorporate their suggestions in upcoming lesson plans. For example, a student asked if LGBTQ+ rights could be discussed during a class which focused on gender identity. I asked

students to do research on the evolution of LGBTQ+ rights in France and to discuss how members of the LGBTQ+ community are perceived and treated in France and other Francophone countries. By incorporating the subject of Francophone culture, students felt a sense of familiarity and therefore more inclined to discuss the topic in English. Another way to include students' voices into the conversation involves the use of surveys at the start and end of each semester. By asking students what their expectations were going into the class and how they felt toward the end of the semester, lecturers gain clearer insight into students' expectations and learn to step back from their roles as instructors and unlearn certain techniques that were less successful in the classroom.

2.2.2. Adapting to Familiarity and Expanding from It

As themes of Francophone culture were incorporated into students' conversational practices, they also took part in numerous debates to enhance their rhetoric skills. The nation's educational system prides itself on its 'commitment to liberty, equality, justice, and reason.' (Berenson, Duclert and Prochasson 2011, 298) This is primarily achieved through government policy making, cultural discourse and constructive debates, the latter of which are 'currently used in many classrooms all over France where English is being taught in language classes.' (O'Mahoney 2015, 144) The French are known to enjoy debating, whether it be in political chambers, the classroom or even at the dinner table. From an early age, French children are taught to enrich their knowledge and understand the dialectic nature of a debate. By using an activity that students are already comfortable doing in their native language, they became more intrigued to try it in a new language and win the debate. Moreover, it 'prepares students at all levels in the communication skills they need for professional, public and personal life.' (O'Mahoney 2015, 145) When it came to the debate topics, it was extremely helpful to select subjects that were more current and relatable to students. For example: should smoking marijuana be legal or illegal? As the French are notorious for smoking, they were keen to discuss the pros and cons of the smoking culture in their country.

2.2.3. Reiterating the Importance of Oral Language Skills

Students often felt that oral language classes were trivial for their language learning journey, especially due to the low frequency of university evaluations. In oral language classes, students were only graded on two assessments: classroom participation and the final exam. This differs from other science-based courses which involved weekly assessments. Despite the lower number of evaluations, it is crucial for students to incorporate oral speech into their lives. Devoting an entire lesson to explaining the relevance of oral language classes could change students' perspectives and help them better understand the plethora of opportunities gained from learning another language: from travelling abroad, to applying for more fulfilling jobs and making friends from the entire world. Therefore, it is indispensable to explain the relevance of English-speaking skills to students by describing real-life situations. Whether it involves listening to instructions at work, following conversations with colleagues, or engaging in social interactions, oral comprehension skills are vital for navigating everyday situations in an English-speaking environment. In other words, oral speech is fundamental in ESL classrooms because it enhances communication skills, fosters cultural understanding, and facilitates accurate assessment of language proficiency.

2.3. Applying Tips to the Final Oral Exams

Applying these tips helped me structure the ‘dreaded’ oral exams in a more accessible and approachable way. By working backwards and focusing on the courses’ end goals, students were made aware of the expectations of the oral exams at the start of the semester. This was achieved by explaining and reviewing the grading rubric so that they could clearly understand how to study effectively and better set their expectations. While the oral exam for English oral practice II was catered toward diminishing student stress levels and asking them to record their speeches, the English oral practice I exams were done in-person. Students worked in pairs and were asked to select one out of three prompts. As these activities were already practiced in class—debates, roleplaying, and storytelling via images— I took the liberty in personalizing the prompts to make it more catered toward their interests and French background. For the debate section, some of the questions focused on whether grading be abolished at Nanterre University or whether social media is detrimental to university students’ mental health. Students could for the most part easily identify and relate to these questions as they are overwhelmed with challenging exams and most often tied to social media applications. As for the image and roleplaying prompts, I encouraged students to describe images or improvise a 5-minute dialogue surrounding the theme of travel. This topic was extremely prevalent throughout the entire semester as many of the students will be embarking on an exchange to non-Francophone countries in the third year of their studies. Not only did talking about familiar subjects ease students into the conversation in a less stressful way, but it also motivated them to talk about their future plans to travel the world and study abroad.

3. CONCLUSION

Despite lecturers’ efforts in actively engaging with their students, it is impossible to satisfy every student’s needs. Lesson plans will not always work and oftentimes, it is the exercises that spontaneously come to lecturers’ minds that turn out to be some of the most fruitful. Integrating diverse listening and oral speaking activities into ESL instruction can help learners develop robust oral comprehension skills essential for their linguistic and socio-cultural integration into English-speaking communities. While English Oral Practice II had a more structured syllabus, the design and delivery of the final oral exam went against the course objectives and encouraged students to focus more on their performative and rehearsed English skills rather than on their authentic, spontaneous selves. Although English Oral Practice I did not have a structured syllabus and resulted in a more tedious approach to familiarizing lecturers with students’ needs, they could better prepare students for the final oral exam. Even though these two different courses had the same objective – spontaneous speech— their varying structures encourage lecturers to rebuild language courses in a stress-free, adaptable, and relatable environment. In doing so, they can create a more holistic language learning space that focuses not only on speech and pronunciation, but also on body language, spontaneity, and self-confidence.

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SUPTILNA UMETNOST NAMERNE IMPROVIZACIJE: NASTAVA USMENE VEŽBE ENGLESKOG NA UNIVERZITETU U PARIZU NANTER

U ovom radu, bavim se izazovima, problemima i trijumfima sa kojima sam se susretala kao predavač engleskog jezika i književnosti bez prethodnog iskustva, prilikom korišćenja različitih nastavnih metoda za unapređenje usmenog engleskog jezika sa studentima prve godine na univerzitetu Nanter u Parizu, u Francuskoj. Posebno su istaknuta iskušenja na koja sam nailazila prilikom primene metodologija propisanih od strane fakulteta, i interdisciplinarnih pristupa koji su uspešno podstakli studente da izađu iz zone komfora i suoče se sa svojim jezičkim strepnjama. Zastupam stanovište da sticanje veštine „spontanog govora“ na nivoima B1 i B2 ne treba smatrati nečim što se razvija isključivo kroz vežbanje vokabulara i izgovora „sličnog izvornim govornicima“, već kroz tehničku, kognitivnu i interpersonalnu obuku, kojom studenti stižu samopouzdanje, usavršavaju veštine pismenog i usmenog razumevanja i otvaraju se za transformativnu moć govora tela. Kako bih obrazložila ovu tezu, uporedila sam performanse studenata na dva časa engleskog usmenog izražavanja. Nakon diskusije o nevoljnosti francuskih studenata da govore engleski, analize nastavnih planova kurseva i prednosti i nedostataka govornih aktivnosti, zalažem se protiv „uranjenja u jezik“ jer smatram da je to kontraproduktivno u okviru francuske učionice. Na kraju, pokazujem kako se neprijatnost studenata prema usmenom ispitu pretvorila u novootkriveno poštovanje multilingvizma i multikulturalizma.

Ključne reči: *Engleski kao strani jezik, govorne vežbe, kultura, improvizacija*