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Developing Oral Proficiency in the Business French Class

by Barbara Lomas Rusterholz

BUSINESS FRENCH OUGHT TO be a five-skills course. To function effectively in the business world one should be able to write clear memos and letters, read the economic press, understand what others say, be able to speak to them, and have some understanding of the cultural background of one's business partners. This article focuses on the development of the speaking skill in the context of the Business French course.

Much has been written about adapting general foreign language classroom practices to help students achieve oral proficiency as defined in the ACTFL guidelines (Bragger, Heilenman and Kaplan, Hirsch, Kaplan, Magnan). There have also been numerous articles in recent years on the design of courses in Business French. Some of these are general descriptions of courses offered at various institutions (Finel-Honigman, Strand). Others offer specific strategies for teaching a particular skill such as business correspondence (Herman, Le Goff), culture (Dugan) or reading (Rusterholz). Two articles in *The French Review* have dealt with the relationship between the examinations of the Paris Chamber of Commerce and the ACTFL guidelines (Bowling, Cummins). This article examines more specifically the relationship between the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Guidelines and the speaking component of a Business French course, with particular attention to the kinds of speaking skills useful in the business environment and to classroom activities that foster those skills.

We all ask our students to speak in class, but often—as was the case in this writer's class in previous years—speaking consists primarily of answering questions about the readings, with some occasional small group problem-solving exercises. Students are somehow expected to have learned before entering the course how to say the things they need to say in those situations. Since students in the course described below need only have completed fourth-semester French, such an expectation was quite unrealistic. A glance at the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Guidelines will show that the skills needed to conduct problem-solving exercises are for the most part superior level skills: expressing supported opinion, hypothesizing, dealing with unfamiliar situations.

The first task, then, was to determine just what the level of oral proficiency was for each student at the beginning of the course. Oral proficiency interviews were administered, and the students all fell between Interme-

diate Low and Advanced High, with the vast majority somewhere in the Intermediate range. Therefore, it was decided that oral classroom activities would begin at the Intermediate level and progress through the Advanced level, probing into the Superior level only at the end of the semester.

Selecting functions

Starting from the list of oral functions drawn up by Gunterman and Phillips (11), and in consultation with students who had completed internships in businesses in France, the following twelve functions were selected to be explicitly developed in the course of the semester:

- 1) Greeting and taking leave
- 2) Inviting, accepting and refusing invitations
- 3) Expressing opinions (intermediate level)
- 4) Small talk
- 5) Using the telephone
- 6) Asking people to do things; Asking permission
- 7) Describing and defining
- 8) Seeking and reporting facts and figures
- 9) Expressing and accepting praise and criticism
- 10) Giving directions and instructions
- 11) Expressing opinions (advanced-superior level)
- 12) Forseeing consequences

The order in which the functions were presented is based primarily on a progression through the levels of the ACTFL oral proficiency scale, although topics being covered in the Business French textbook were also taken into consideration. Students were not expected to progress from the Intermediate to the Superior level in the course of one semester. Hirsch has demonstrated the difficulty of having students advance even one step on the oral proficiency scale during the course of a semester devoted entirely to conversation (15). Yet, as Heilenman and Kaplan state: "instruction at each level should not simply be oriented toward full control of the structure, functions, and context of one level, but should aim at partial control as well as conceptual control of higher levels" (62). The above progression is intended to acknowledge the starting point of the weaker students while moving ahead to challenge the more able students, giving both groups a chance to develop at least partial control of the higher levels as the semester advances.

Organization of the course

The class met twice a week for seventy-five minutes. Each Wednesday fifteen to twenty minutes were reserved for presenting the vocabulary and expressions necessary for the "oral function of the week." Students then met in groups of six or seven with a native French teaching assistant for an

extra thirty minutes each week of intensive *travaux pratiques* on the oral skills presented that week. The students had two oral exams with the instructor in addition to the initial oral proficiency interview.

In addition to the work on the oral functions selected for each week, students engaged in other oral activities during the semester. These activities included:

1) Dialogue memorization. Small groups of students presented scenes from *Rencontres culturelles* each week (Devno). Halfway through the semester they also wrote and produced television commercials in French.

2) Oral presentations. Twice during the semester students reported to the class on articles they had read in *L'Express*, *L'Expansion* or *Le Monde*.

3) Games requiring oral participation. These games included the "Jeu d'initiation à l'entreprise" (a board game created by 3M France) and the *Jeu-test* "Si j'étais ministre" taken from *L'Expansion* (Gurviez).

Textbooks

No conversation text was used for this course. Lists of useful expressions were distributed to students each week, drawing on personal experience as well as a variety of existing textbooks, included in the references at the end of this article. Two texts are worth of special mention: 1) Marlene Nusbaum and Liliane Verdier's *Parlez sans peur!* would be suitable for adoption as a companion to a basic business French text because of its special emphasis on social register. Each chapter makes a clear distinction between "Entre amis" and "Avec les inconnus," and the very creative exercises can be adapted to business situations. 2) Michel Danilo, Odile Chale, and Pierre Morel's *Le Français commercial* is a compact paperback from the instructors at the Paris Chamber of Commerce *Stage pédagogique du français des affaires* that includes a list of expressions for a different conversational function in each of its twenty-seven chapters. While it may be a little too dense for use as a primary Business French text with American students, its emphasis on language development in a business context makes it an appealing supplementary text.

Description of selected conversation units

1) Greetings, introductions and leave-taking

This function might appear too elementary to warrant inclusion in a 300-level course. However, students tend to forget—if they ever knew—the importance of *register* in greetings. Twenty years ago Americans who had studied French in school would probably have used too much formality in their dealings with native speakers. Conversely, in the 1980s, with first-year textbooks as well as more advanced conversation texts emphasizing casual conversation among friends, students run the risk of offending people in a business situation due to inadequate control of the formal register.

Thus in this first unit one needs to emphasize the use of the *titre de civilité* in greetings and to give students practice in switching registers according to the situation. Extra-linguistic features of greetings such as handshakes and kissing can also be pointed out.

Having studied the appropriate expressions, students were asked to enact spontaneously situations such as the following:

- You have just arrived for a job interview and must introduce yourself to the receptionist.
- The receptionist introduces you to the interviewer. Greet him/her appropriately.
- Your employer has invited you to his/her home for dinner. You are introduced to various family members. Greet each one appropriately.
- A fellow employee invites you and your spouse to dinner. Make the appropriate introductions.
- You arrive at the office one morning after working there for several months. Greet your colleagues. (Emphasize the individual greeting to each person, with handshake.)
- Say good-bye to the people in situations b through e.

Other basic social situations such as invitations, telephone conversations, and small talk can be treated in a similar manner, adapting conversation text material to the business situation.

3) Expressing opinions (intermediate level)

Those familiar with the ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines may find the above heading to be a contradiction in terms, since expressing opinions is considered to be a superior level task. However, *supporting* one's opinion is the superior level task. Even intermediate level speakers can be provided with simple linguistic means to present their opinions and respond to the opinions of others. At this point in the course, we highlighted the following expressions:

To express your opinion

Moi, je pense . . .

Moi, je crois . . .

Moi, je trouve . . .

Je ne pense pas . . .

Je ne crois pas . . .

Je ne trouve pas . . .

A mon avis . . .

To react to another's opinion

Moi aussi . . . (si vous êtes d'accord)

Pas moi . . . (si vous n'êtes pas d'accord)

Moi non plus . . . (si vous êtes d'accord)

Moi si . . . (si vous n'êtes pas d'accord)

Je suis d'accord . . .

Je ne suis pas d'accord . . .

When this function was introduced, students were studying the French political system. As a concluding activity, they were given copies of "Si j'étais ministre" to which I refer above. This "Jeu-test" presents ten problematic economic situations and asks the reader to choose between a number of possible solutions, each of which represents a different politico-economic

point of view. Students read the article before coming to class and chose one solution for each situation. In class they were asked in each case to sit in a particular part of the room according to the solution they had chosen. Following each (literal) "prise de position," the groups debated the relative merits of the various solutions. The debate was surprisingly impassioned despite limited linguistic ability, and the students used effectively the expressions they had been taught. Near the end of the semester this activity was repeated, and students were pleased to discover that they were better able to support their opinions.

6) Asking people to do things; asking permission

These two functions were mentioned by students who had worked as interns in businesses in France as being particularly difficult. One needs the linguistic means to approach people with whom one has professional but not personal relationships, often to get their attention when they are busy with something else. Review of the use of the *titre de civilité* is therefore appropriate: "Pardon, Monsieur." "Excusez-moi de vous déranger, Madame." It is also useful to check students' control of certain grammatical structures involved in making requests. The following matching exercise is designed to teach useful phrases while checking for grammatical coherence. The task is to combine the sentence fragments in a way that is both logical and grammatical.

Pourriez-vous

Puis-je vous demander

Est-ce que nous avons le droit

Est-ce que je pourrais

Si cela ne vous dérange pas, je
voudrais

Vous ne voudriez pas

que vous téléphoniez à X.

de fumer dans le bureau?

m'apporter le dossier X?

porter ce message à Mme X?

de chercher ce document?

prendre un jour de congé?

In the following role-playing situations the person to whom the request is addressed must be able to respond both affirmatively and negatively to the request:

- Ask your secretary to type an urgent letter for you.
- Ask your employer for permission to leave an hour early to take your son to the doctor.
- Ask your supervisor to help you with a task on the computer.
- Ask a co-worker who knows German to help you interpret a document.
- Ask your secretary to look up the address of the *Société Lafitte*.
- Ask your co-workers if they mind if you open the window.

8) Seeking and reporting facts and figures

Since most students do not work on numbers after their first semester

of language study, control of this aspect of the language is generally very weak in the third year. Some time is therefore devoted simply to drilling the class in reading and comprehending large numbers. An entertaining way to work on an otherwise dry task is with a tailor-made bingo game in which the five columns progress from three-digit numbers on the left to seven-digit numbers on the right. Students work in small groups and take turns being the caller to obtain practice in both reading and listening to the numbers.

Another important skill in the business environment is summarizing the information in a graph. The class scanned "Les Français raffolent de produits électroniques" from the *Journal français d'Amérique* and came up with the following list of vocabulary for expressing increase and decrease: *être en pleine expansion, être en hausse, accroître, monter en flèche, légère croissance, doubler, tripler, progresser, remonter, croître, accuser une baisse, souffrir de la diminution, diminuer, enregistrer un recul, réduire, baisse, être en baisse, être en perte de vitesse*. Each student was then given a graph from *L'Expansion* and asked to report orally the information it contained, using the expressions listed above.

12) Forseeing consequences: hypothesizing

If students are fortunate enough to be placed in a position of responsibility where they will participate in the decision-making process, being able to verbalize possible consequences of various courses of action is a critical skill. Although the grammatical structures necessary for this function are generally taught at the end of the first year or at the beginning of the second year, they are certainly not mastered at that stage. According to the ACTFL guidelines, hypothesizing is a superior level skill.

After a review of the sequence of tenses in *si* clauses, students return to "Jeu d'initiation à l'entreprise" which they had played early in the semester. In this game, each team of players had to make a series of decisions which had both foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences. Each team now reviews the decisions it made earlier and formulates the consequences:

- 1) as if they were making the decision for the first time ("Si nous embauchons des manœuvres, nous ferons des économies dans les salaires.");
- 2) in retrospect, to express how they could have avoided certain negative consequences ("Si nous avons embauché des ouvriers hautement qualifiés, nous aurions évité les frais de formation plus tard.")

A second activity for this unit involves completing hypothetical statements. The instructor can prepare the *si* clauses or ask the students to prepare lists to share with the class. The following types of leads stimulate a variety of responses and help review concepts discussed during the semester:

- Si toutes les industries étaient privatisées . . .
- Si je voulais exporter en France . . .
- Si les Socialistes n'avaient pas perdu les élections législatives en 1986 . . .

- Si Mitterrand n'avait pas été réélu en 1988 . . .
- Si les barrières économiques tombent en Europe en 1992 . . .

Testing

Since, as mentioned earlier, students cannot be expected to progress significantly on the ACTFL oral proficiency scale in the course of a semester, it was not considered appropriate to give a post-test in the OPI format. However, oral achievement tests were administered twice during the semester. In the first instance students were examined individually. They drew at random two situations similar to those studied in class. The instructor played the role of the native French person in each situation. Students were graded on general fluency as well as accuracy and use of vocabulary and expressions practiced in class.

For the second test, pairs of students prepared in advance selected topics for debate. They were encouraged to research the topics in the press and in reference works such as *Franco-scopie*. At the time of the test, each pair of students drew a topic at random and argued opposite sides of the question for ten to fifteen minutes. They were expected to support their opinions with concrete data and to use appropriate language for presenting and rebutting opinions.

The first oral exam was more successful than the second. It was clear that most of the students had not attained the superior level and had difficulty sustaining a conversation requiring "supported opinion." In the future, a final oral exam might be more effective and satisfying for the students if it were pitched closer to the advanced level, with a built-in opportunity to probe at the superior level when the student's performance warranted it.

The above suggestions for incorporating oral proficiency activities into the Business French course are offered within the framework of a five-skills course. Developing oral skills is only one component of the course, but one that perhaps has not been addressed sufficiently in Business French textbooks published in this country. The ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines are a useful tool for structuring the oral component of a Business French course, provided one remembers that students cannot be expected to progress very far on the scale during one semester. The Business French class also provides an ideal framework for applying the notional-functional syllabus since the business context provides a constant "notion," while a standard list of functions can be readily adapted to that context. The students in this course gained confidence in their ability to speak French and indicated that they enjoyed the realistic situations in which they were asked to apply their knowledge.

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CALL and the Profession: The Current State

by Louis J. Iandoli

COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (CALL), a field of major importance, is in immense change and transition.¹ It has garnered considerable critical attention in reviews and columns in language journals. Associations have been formed and a number of books have been written on the subject.

The computer's sudden popularity in language teaching has led to widespread demands by administrators and parents that language teachers begin using computers in the classroom. This in turn has led to the fear among some teachers that they will be replaced by modern technology and to the well-founded worry that schools will spend millions of dollars on technological innovations for the teaching of foreign languages without consulting the teacher and pedagogy experts (see Cuban 1986). The result, if this outcome occurs, is obvious: we will have another, more expensive, version of the language laboratory that will be briefly popular and then fall into disuse, relegated to school basements.

Computers and interactive video (IAV: video controlled through a computer keyboard) can offer new perspectives and opportunities which we cannot afford to turn down or misuse. In order for the profession to benefit from modern technology, we need a clear and well-organized perspective on the potential of computers in language learning and an awareness of the present limitations of the medium. A review of technology and teaching in this century can help us learn from previous experience as modern technologies are proposed for our field. The effectiveness of computers in language learning needs to be addressed. Effectiveness cannot be determined by a mere "feeling" that CALL is "good for our students." We need to have input into the pedagogical purpose and implementation of CALL hardware and software to insure that it fits into our specific curriculum. Such integration will depend both on the available software and the *present* methodologies of language teaching which enable us to meet course objectives. For example, it would be self-destructive for the language profession to limit itself to behaviorist, audiolingual computer drills in the 1990s if the need is for communicative language use in the real world of personal interaction (Smith 3). Finally, as language teachers, we must determine exactly what to do to assure the best outcome for the use of technology in language teaching in the light of studies of CALL's effectiveness.