Teaching of French in Upper Secondary Education: Improvement of Interactive Speaking Proficiency through Peer Feedback

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Abstract: Ample research is available about how learners acquire a second or a foreign language, how they learn while speaking in interaction and which kinds of tasks provide opportunities for meaningful use of the target language. Less research has been conducted into the manner in which learners learn from each other while speaking together, observing interaction and giving each other feedback on their performances. The present study investigates these aspects in communicative teaching of French as a foreign language in upper secondary education. We designed a curriculum consisting of speaking activities, constructed on the basis of a fixed task format, and a rubric for assessing the performances during the execution of the speaking tasks. Twenty-five students and a teacher of French participated in this project. The students learned French as a foreign language. They performed seven interactive and communicative speaking activities in which they executed the roles of interlocutors and observers. First results indicate that these activities stimulate the students in thinking about and interacting in the target language.

INTRODUCTION

Language teachers experience great difficulties in stimulating their students to speak the target language. In the Netherlands, this is certainly the case for French. Much time and energy are needed from the part of the teachers in order to engage their students in oral language acquisition situations in which the target language is practised. There is much research about how (foreign) languages are learned and how language acquisition is facilitated while speaking in interaction (cf. interaction-hypothesis: Long, 1996) and which kind of tasks provide opportunities for meaningful use of the target language (e.g., Task Based Learning: Willis, 1996). From second language acquisition (SLA-) theories we know that exposure to comprehensible input and negotiation of meaning in interaction are necessary for effective language speaking learning to take place. Less research has been conducted into the manner in which learners learn from each other while speaking together (peer modelling), while observing interaction and giving each other feedback on their performances (student-led or peer feedback). Moreover, cognitive learning theories suggest that thinking about and reflecting on second language learning processes are important facilitators for the improvement of speaking proficiency (Ortega, 2009). In addition, learners need feedback on their performances while learning the language and using it in different situations. All these different perspectives and insights have to be taken into account when teaching and learning a foreign language. In order to investigate these aspects and to collect data on speaking, peer feedback and modelling, we designed an experimental curriculum for learning French as a foreign language (L2 learning setting) with speaking activities aimed at improving the students' interactive proficiency. During the execution of these activities the students performed the roles of interlocutors and observers.

In the following sections, we will first review research on interactive speaking, observational learning and peer feedback in L2 learning settings. Next, we shall illustrate the design of the curriculum by giving examples from the practice of intervention. In order to evaluate the results of these

interventions, we made use of questionnaires, completed by the students, and interviews with the teacher. The research is still ongoing and runs throughout this school year (August 2010 till June 2011), so we are still in the very process of collecting data and have not had the opportunity yet to fully analyze this. We will conclude by giving recommendations on implications and further research.

INTERACTIVE SPEAKING AND PEER FEEDBACK

The main question of many foreign language teachers is how to encourage students to make use of the target language in the classroom. Starting and experienced teachers, often struggle with the daily teaching practice in which students speak in their mother tongue or complain that it is too difficult to use the target language after the teacher's request to speak French, German or Spanish. In general, learners are not used to being taught in the target language. Moreover, Dutch students only have Foreign Language lessons two or three hours a week inside school. They work with textbooks in which the instructions of the tasks are mainly written in Dutch. In addition, the instruction by teachers is not always provided in the target language. As a result, there is little exposure to input within the context of the classrooms. Outside school there is not much exposure either. This picture is totally different for English as a foreign language: young people grow up with the English language; they hear or sing English songs, watch English films, play games and therefore use English in interaction.

Against this background we designed a new curriculum for teaching French in upper secondary education. It is an exploratory study on curriculum development in which the complete process of teaching interactive speaking proficiency in French at an introductory level has been described. This process took place in one project lasting eight months and consists of lessons with specially designed assignments, followed by instruments for evaluating the results. Although using the materials offered by the textbooks in use, we had to change and freshly design these materials in order to make them suitable for our purposes. Or, to put it differently, we started from scratch, while at the same time staying within the current teaching process in that particular classroom that happened to be our experimental class.

In designing our experimental course, we encountered several problems. We could only overcome these problems by explaining and discussing the themes that we considered important for stimulating the use of the target language by students within the context of an experimental curriculum. Therefore we have designed a curriculum in which we focus on the following methodological principles (MPs) that are relevant for teaching foreign languages.

METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPALS (MPs)

1 Some relevant SLA-methodological principles

Methodological principles (MPs) are universally desirable instructional design features, motivated by theory and research findings in SLA, educational psychology, general educational curriculum design, and elsewhere, which show them either to be necessary for SLA or facilitative of it (Long, 2009). MPs specify *what* should be done. One of these MPs is for instance: *promote learning by doing*. From these perspective research findings in SLA it can be concluded that frequency of usage determines acquisition (Ellis, 2002). Another research claim with great practical potential, i.e. is the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Lynch, 1997; Swain 1985): producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning. The idea that learners acquire language through interaction is supported by Long's (1985, 1996) so-called Interaction Hypothesis. During interaction interlocutors must provide each other with comprehensible input in order to convey meaning. Long's hypothesis sets out to define how learners provide each other with input that is mutually intelligible.

Another MP formulated by Long, is; *use task, not text*. In order to stimulate real communication in the target language in school, communicative tasks are necessary. The value of communicative tasks in supporting language acquisition has been discussed by various authors, including Ellis (2003). Tasks directed at sharing personal experiences elicit interaction on social and personal topics. A task should also elicit cognitive processes (such as classifying, ordering and evaluating) and have a communicative outcome. An activity is genuinely communicative if it involves at least two participants working together to complete a task by exchanging information possessed by one and not

the other (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005, p. 331). Two requirements for genuineness of communication are implied in this definition. First, new information must pass from one interlocutor to the other (an 'info gap' is filled), and the solicited information must be crucial for the continuation of the assigned task (the task can be made more communicative by introducing an overall goal, such as finding out what the students have in common). Based on these requirements for genuine communication, tasks can be classified into three categories from the perspective of which kind of 'info gap' has to be filled in (Prabhu, 1987; Willis, 1996): information-gap activities involving a transfer of given information from one person to another, reasoning-gap activities involving the discovery of new information through inferences, and opinion-gap activities involving the identification and expression of personal preference or attitude. These types of tasks could be part of genuine communication and have to be taken into account when two participants are communicating.

2 Levels of attainment derived from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)
However, a second point has to be taken into account as well, because the type of communication can be executed on several levels, ranging from basic to proficient, bringing us to the question: how to define levels of attainment into tasks? The Council of Europe (2001) has developed a Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This CEFR is a document which describes i) the competences necessary for communication, ii) the related knowledge and skills and iii) the situations and domains of communication. Three broad levels are distinguished:
- Basic User: A1 and A2
- Independent User: B1 and B2
- Proficient User: C1 and C2

For our purpose, which is teaching interactive speaking proficiency in French at an elementary level in upper secondary education, only the level of the 'basic user' is relevant. The students who participated in our research, learned to communicate at the level A2. The CEFR is an evaluation instrument through which students can make their level of proficiency visible, formulated in the form of 'can-do statements' (see Appendix 1 for examples). For instance, descriptors of such 'can-do statements' at the level A2, for 'spoken interaction', are formulated as:

> I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.

Actually, we included this description of 'spoken interaction' at the level of A2, because this is also the learning goal of interactive speaking proficiency in French we wanted to achieve with the students participating in our research to achieve. In order to reach this goal we based our experimental curriculum on several methodological principles derive from research findings in not only SLA but also in educational psychology.

3 Some relevant educational research-methodological principles
To some extent, in our designed curriculum, some aspects of the teacher's role are conveyed to the pupils themselves. The pupils are working together within the context of cooperative and task-based learning (*MP Promote cooperative / collaborative learning*) and therefore the students themselves became part of the feedback process. Apart from being interlocutor as one of two participants during the process of communicating, every student fulfilled the role of observer of the communication between his/her fellow students. As teachers, we tend to think that providing feedback to our students is done exclusively by ourselves, but there is no reason why students should not be part of the feedback process. For this, students have to learn how to observe the fellow students' performances of speaking proficiency in order to provide them with useful feedback. This turned out to have a powerful effect on their own performances (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
The manner in which students provide feedback is particularly important. In order to provide feedback students need the criteria of our expectations from the students during the execution of the speaking tasks. In order to help the students make an assessment of the observed performances, we compiled a rubric to be used by the students. This rubric was aimed at being a powerful tool for structuring the process of peer feedback.

In summary, we included the following MPs in the experimental curriculum:
- cooperative and task-based learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994)
- roles of interlocutor and observer of communication (Braaksma, 2002)
- peer modelling and providing peer feedback based on observing (Braaksma, 2002)
- rubrics for the content of speaking proficiency (Sadler, 1989)

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

How can we implement MPs in the classroom? The main goal of this article is to propose a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to curriculum design. In the newly designed experimental curriculum for the improvement of French speaking proficiency, we made use of different forms of feedback given by the students themselves based on observing each other during the speaking assignments. We are focusing on students of 16/17 years old, in upper secondary education (level A2, based on the competencies proposed by the CEFR), learning French as a foreign language with the help of a curriculum consisting of the following instructional practices:
- interactive and communicative speaking activities, based on:
- a fixed format in which students, in groups of three, alternately execute the roles of interlocutor and observer;
- use of a rubric which has been developed in order to support the process of giving feedback by the observers.

The overall research problem is how to improve the students' interactive speaking proficiency through peer feedback. Based on this research problem, we formulated the following three research questions:
1. How can we stimulate students to use the target language during speaking interaction assignments?
2. What are the instructional practices for providing student-led feedback based on the observation of speaking activities executed by fellow students?
3. What progress do the students make in interactive speaking proficiency based on the newly designed experimental curriculum?

METHOD

This study is an embedded case study design (Yin, 2003). A whole class is involved and the analysis of the data is focused on how the participating students and their teacher are executing the assignments for enhancing speaking proficiency and how they appreciate the progress in teaching and learning.

Participants

The participants in this experimental study were one experienced teacher of French and one class of twenty-five 16/17-year-old students of a secondary school in the Netherlands. All students of this class participated in the study and we collected our data through their activities and opinions.

Setting

The experimenter's role is to prepare and to organise a series of assignments, and the teacher's role is to coach and guide the students during the execution of these assignments. We started the project 'interaction and communication in French' with a kick-off meeting in week 35. At the beginning of each assignment, the teacher distributed handouts with the instruction on the task. All tasks were learner-centred, so the learners/students had to read the instruction carefully, because it is the task itself which provides the information on the working and learning process of the students. After reading, the students did an individual pre-task, and a task in groups of three. We also developed a task-specific rubric. This rubric consists of a set of descriptors. It refers to specific content and to generic dimensions, such as pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, based on the CEFR, level A2. The pupils used the rubric as a checklist in order to prepare their own performance and to give feedback on the performance of their classmates. Peer feedback in this phase plays a crucial role in order to improve speaking proficiency.

Materials
We designed a series of assignments aimed at eliciting speaking activities. In terms of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, all these assignments function as scaffolds for the development of the students' interactive speaking proficiency by mutual exchange, negotiation and co-construction. Therefore, a wide range of complementary activities is needed.

The framework of the task consists of a pre-task phase and a task phase. The pre-task phase is the shortest phase in this framework and could last between five and ten minutes. It prepares students to do the task. The questions in the task guide them to generate ideas and to focus on the content and the language. The aims of this phase are: starting up the thinking processes; activating prior knowledge about how they learn and which language they need and motivating them to learn.

The task phase is the longest phase and could last between thirty and forty minutes. Students do the task in groups of three. They alternate the roles of interlocutor and observer. The task-cycle consists of the performance of the task, the observation of their classmates during the performance, the feedback after the performance, and vice-versa.

The students need a reason to speak to each other. Therefore we designed information-gap activities. Each student in this group has information that the other students do not have. The aims of this phase are: interacting in the target language, helping each other to fill in the info gap and giving tips and tops (observers).

In order to give an impression of a designed task, we have added an example of this phase. In Appendix 2 we have added an example of a complete task, written, of course, in the target language. In Appendix 3 we have compiled the activities executed in phase 1, week 35 – 41 (2010).

Exercise 21, page 36 Task 'la météo'
Format in groups of three:
- Number one doesn't show his or her map, but presents the today's weather. He started with: today it's … in Paris/ … Number two draws the weather, the temperatures and the cities on the map. Number three shows his map and controls the results. Next, numbers one and two exchange their reasons why they hope that tomorrow or the day after tomorrow the weather will be ... They ask each other a question about this wish.
- Number three listens, writes down a tip and a top and gives feedback at the end of the conversation.
- Next, number three presents the weather, number one draws. Number three shows his map. They do the conversation. Number two listens and gives tips and tops.
- Finally, number two presents and two and three do the conversation. Number one listens and gives tips and tops.
- They swap roles.

Data sources
Data are being collected from various sources, in which both the students and the teacher participate. We make use of questionnaires, observations and classroom discussions with the students. The interviews with the teacher are aimed at collecting information on her opinion about the students' learning processes elicited by the designed tasks. Observations are focused on what students are doing during class and how they interpret and execute the tasks. All these sources will be providing us with a lot of information about how to improve the students' interactive speaking proficiency in French.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
The first results indicate that the execution of the designed activities and assignments stimulate the students in thinking about and interacting in the target language. However, within the context of this paper, no further results, discussion and conclusion will be included. The research is still ongoing and

runs throughout this school year (August 2010 till June 2011), so we are still in the very process of collecting data and have not had the opportunity yet to fully analyze them in relation to the research questions. This will be done in the following version of this paper and will be presented at the ISATT2011 conference.

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Appendix 1: Spoken interaction (level A1, A2 and B1): European can-do statements

http://www.languages.unimaas.nl/niveaus_common_european_framework_reference/CEF_English.htm

LEVEL		A1	A2	B1
SPEAKING	SPOKEN INTERACTION	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).

Appendix 2: Example of the structure of a designed task
La météo, exercice 21
Grandes Lignes, cahier 2, havo 4, niveau CEFR: A2

Antisèche
1. Quel conseil as tu eu la dernière fois? Ecris comment tu vas faire attention à ce point-là.

2. Quel temps fait-il aujourd'hui ? Dessine toi-même une carte météo de la France sous forme d'une hexagone :
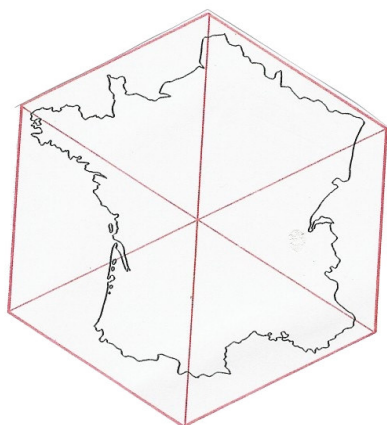
Ecris les mots nécessaires dont tu as besoin.
Ecris en mot-clés pourquoi tu voudrais savoir les prévisions de la météo de demain ou d'après demain.

Exercice 21 à la page 36 Tâche préparatoire
Déroulement: à trois:
- Le numéro 1 ne montre pas sa carte météo, mais présente le temps qu'il y fait. Il commence par : aujourd'hui il ... à Paris/ ... Le numéro 2 dessine le temps, les températures et les villes sur la carte. Le numéro 1 montre sa carte et contrôle le résultat. Ensuite les numéros 1 et 2 échangent leurs raisons pour lesquelles ils espèrent quíl fera ... demain ou après-demain. Chacun pose une question sur ce souhait.
- Le numéro 3 écoute, écrit un conseil et un compliment et échange-les à la fin de cette conversation.
- Ensuite le numéro 3 présente le temps, le numéro 1 dessine. Le numéro 3 montre sa carte. Ils font la conversation. Le numéro 2 écoute et donne des conseils et des compliments.
- Finalement le numéro 2 présente et 2 et 3 font la conversation. Le numéro 1 écoute et donne des conseils et des compliments.

Phrases/mots utiles:
Quel temps fait-il aujourd'hui? Quel temps fera-t-il demain ou après-demain?
Il pleut/ pleuvra, il neige/neigera, il ya des nuages/ il y aura des nuages, il fait beau/ il fera beau …
Demain je vais faire du vélo. J'espère qu'il fera sec.
Question possible: pourquoi tu ne prendras pas le bus?
Après-demain je vais me promener avec mon chien. J'espère que les températures seront en hausse.
Question possible: pourquoi tu trouves cela important? Tu pourras mettre des vêtements chauds.
Bof, mais moi je n'aime pas vraiment le froid, la pluie …
Oui, exactement!
Je ne connais pas le mot en français, tu pourrais m'aider?

Appendix 3: Interventions

Phase 1 2010 Week 35 - 41

<u>Kick-off meeting</u>
- Kick-off meeting of the project 'interaction and communication in French', the topics and the tasks.;
- Presentation of the researcher;

Questionnaire 1:
- Items about the task instruction, their interest in the project and the students' attitude towards and experience with interactive and communicative speaking activities

<u>Designed speaking activity 1; Une enquête sur les ados et les marques</u>
Type of task
- Information- and opinion-gap activity;
- Reading activity in textbook and speaking

Format
- in groups of three, alternating execute the roles of interlocutor and observer

<u>Speaking activity textbook</u>; Mon style à moi
Type of task
- Preparation for an assignment
- Mood board

Format
- in groups of three, alternating execute the roles of interlocutor and observer

<u>Designed task-specific rubric</u>

<u>Assignment</u>
Type of task
- Presentation of the mood-board

Format
- Half of the group, role of observer, listening and filling in a simple evaluation form

Questionnaire 2:
- Items about the learning outcomes of the observing activity

<u>Designed speaking activity 2; Sortir</u>
Type of task
- Information- reasoning- and opinion-gap activity
- Listening activity in textbook and speaking activity on the basis of a holyday diagram, filled in by the pupils.

Format
- in groups of three alternating execute the roles of interlocutor and observer

Questionnaire 3:
- Items about their interest in observing the speaking activities, the learning outcomes of the observing activity, the collaboration process and the content of the info-gap the learning outcomes of the observing activity