

# Developing Oral Proficiency in French As A Foreign Language

Ezoza Atamirzaeva

PhD, Senior Lecturer, Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages, Uzbekistan

**Received:** 26 February 2026; **Accepted:** 23 March 2026; **Published:** 13 April 2026

**Abstract:** Oral proficiency is one of the central aims of learning French as a foreign language because language learning is ultimately directed toward communication. Mastering oral communication requires more than memorizing vocabulary or grammatical rules; it involves understanding how language functions in context, responding appropriately to others, and expressing ideas with clarity, fluency, and confidence. This article examines the role of oral proficiency in French language learning, with particular attention to oral comprehension, oral expression, oral production, and oral interaction. It also discusses the major characteristics of effective oral communication, the pedagogical conditions that support it, and the challenges learners face in French as a foreign language classrooms. Drawing on communicative and action-oriented approaches, the article argues that meaningful oral practice, authentic input, and interaction-rich tasks are essential if learners are to develop communicative competence in French.

**Keywords:** Oral proficiency; French as a foreign language; oral expression; oral interaction; communicative competence; listening comprehension; CEFR.

**Introduction:** Learning a foreign language means learning to communicate in that language. For this reason, the teaching and learning of French cannot be reduced to the memorization of vocabulary lists or the isolated study of grammar rules. A learner may know many words and still be unable to participate in a simple conversation if they do not know how to interpret spoken language, organize their thoughts, and respond appropriately in real situations. In contemporary language pedagogy, communication is not only the goal of instruction but also one of its principal means. Learners develop competence through use, interaction, and repeated engagement with meaningful tasks (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020; Cuq & Gruca, 2017).

The concept of communicative competence has been especially influential in this respect. Hymes (1972) challenged narrow views of linguistic competence by insisting that language users must know not only what is grammatically possible, but also what is socially appropriate and contextually effective. Canale and Swain (1980) later developed this perspective by

describing communicative competence as an integration of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. Oral proficiency sits at the center of this framework because spoken communication is often the most immediate and demanding form of language use.

For learners of French, oral proficiency is particularly important. French is a language with distinctive phonological patterns, rhythm, liaison, intonation, and register variation. To speak and understand French successfully, learners must acquire not only lexical and grammatical knowledge but also the ability to process spoken discourse in real time and to respond in ways that are understandable, appropriate, and coherent. This article therefore expands on the importance of oral proficiency in learning French, clarifies the main dimensions of oral communication, and examines the pedagogical conditions and classroom practices that can help learners become effective speakers.

## Conceptualizing Oral Proficiency

Oral proficiency refers to the ability to understand and produce spoken language effectively in a range of

communicative situations. It includes comprehension, expression, production, and interaction. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) organizes language use around communicative language activities such as reception, production, interaction, and mediation, while also recognizing that users mobilize linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences in order to accomplish real-world tasks (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020). In other words, oral proficiency is not a single isolated skill; it is a composite ability that draws on knowledge, strategy, context, and performance.

Within French as a foreign language (FLE), oral competence has long been regarded as a major educational objective. Cuq and Gruca (2017) underline that foreign language teaching aims at enabling learners to act through language in varied contexts, which means that classroom practice must go beyond the repetition of forms and move toward the construction of meaning. Robert (2002) similarly presents oral production as a process of message construction and as the resulting discourse, thereby stressing both the cognitive and communicative dimensions of speaking. From this perspective, oral proficiency involves the ability to select language forms, adapt them to a communicative purpose, and deliver them in a way that makes sense to interlocutors.

The significance of oral competence also reflects the broader move from formalist approaches to communicative and action-oriented approaches in language teaching. In earlier traditions, language learning was often associated with written exercises, translation, and the mastery of explicit grammar. More recent perspectives, however, recognize learners as social actors who learn language by using it in purposeful contexts. As a result, the oral dimension is no longer seen as a secondary outcome of grammar study; it is a primary domain of competence and a condition for participation in academic, social, and professional life.

### **The Importance of Oral Proficiency in Learning French**

The importance of oral proficiency in learning French can be explained on at least four levels: communicative, cognitive, social, and academic. First, it is communicative because it allows learners to exchange meanings, ask questions, negotiate understanding, and participate in conversations. The ultimate purpose of learning French is not merely to know about the language but to use it in interaction. In real life, people often encounter French first through speech rather than through writing, whether in classrooms, online meetings, travel, media, or

professional communication.

Second, oral proficiency supports cognitive development in the target language. Speaking forces learners to retrieve vocabulary, organize syntax, monitor discourse, and adapt to feedback in real time. Listening, likewise, helps them recognize patterns, infer meaning, and build internal models of pronunciation and usage. Gaonac'h (1987) argues that language acquisition is closely related to processes of perception, memory, and learning; oral work plays an important role in activating these processes because it links comprehension and production dynamically.

Third, oral proficiency has a social function. Kramsch (1993) emphasizes that language learning is inseparable from context and culture. To communicate orally is not simply to pronounce words correctly, but to understand how meaning is shaped by social relations, cultural expectations, politeness, register, and shared knowledge. Learners who develop oral competence gain access to participation in communities of practice, whereas learners who remain confined to written exercises may struggle to function in authentic francophone environments.

Finally, oral proficiency contributes to academic success within the language classroom itself. Students use speech to answer questions, explain ideas, summarize texts, participate in peer work, and present projects. Oral participation also strengthens confidence, encourages autonomy, and reinforces other language skills. Learners who listen carefully and speak regularly tend to expand their vocabulary, improve their pronunciation, and develop greater control over discourse organization. For all of these reasons, oral proficiency should be treated not as an accessory to language learning but as one of its fundamental aims.

### **Oral Comprehension as the Foundation of Speaking**

Oral comprehension, or listening comprehension, is a foundational stage in language learning because one must first understand before responding effectively. In first-language development as well as in foreign-language learning, comprehension generally precedes fluent production. Learners need exposure to comprehensible and varied input in order to internalize sounds, vocabulary, rhythm, and structures. Without sufficient listening practice, speaking often remains hesitant, inaccurate, and overly dependent on written models.

Listening comprehension in French presents particular challenges because spoken discourse can differ significantly from written language. Learners must identify reduced forms, connected speech, intonation patterns, and discourse markers that are not always

transparent from orthography. Moreover, authentic spoken language frequently contains pauses, hesitations, false starts, repairs, and incomplete constructions. These features are not defects; they are part of the nature of oral discourse. As Robert (2002) notes, oral language includes hesitations, repetitions, and shortcuts that characterize real speech rather than idealized textbook sentences.

For this reason, teachers should explicitly develop listening competence through carefully sequenced activities. Such work can include global listening for overall meaning, focused listening for specific information, and analytical listening for phonological or pragmatic features. Authentic materials such as interviews, songs, dialogues, podcasts, classroom recordings, and news extracts can expose learners to the diversity of spoken French and help them become more flexible listeners. The CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) further supports this view by describing progressive listening abilities across levels, from recognizing familiar words and short phrases to following extended speech and complex discussion.

When listening is treated as an active process rather than a passive reception of sound, it becomes a powerful driver of oral development. Learners begin to notice how speakers manage turns, signal agreement, structure explanations, and use intonation to express attitude. Such noticing then feeds into speaking, because learners appropriate patterns they have encountered in meaningful contexts. In this sense, oral comprehension is not merely a preparatory stage before speaking; it is one of the principal means through which speaking is learned.

### **Oral Expression, Oral Production, and Oral Interaction**

Although the terms oral expression, oral production, and oral interaction are sometimes used interchangeably, they refer to related but distinct aspects of oral proficiency. Oral expression generally refers to the learner's ability to express thoughts, feelings, opinions, and information in speech. It is concerned with communicative intent and the ability to make meaning accessible to others. Oral production, in contrast, often refers more specifically to sustained speech such as narration, explanation, presentation, or description. Oral interaction highlights the reciprocal dimension of communication, in which at least two participants alternate between speaking and listening in order to co-construct meaning (Council of Europe, 2001).

This distinction is pedagogically useful. A learner may be able to produce a short monologue about daily routines yet still struggle to manage interactive conversation, where they must react quickly to

questions, ask for clarification, or negotiate turn-taking. Conversely, a learner may handle short exchanges successfully but lack the organizational control needed for extended oral production. The classroom should therefore cultivate all three dimensions.

Oral expression begins with ideas. Learners need a communicative purpose and content worth expressing. They then require structure: a way of organizing their discourse so that it becomes coherent, sequenced, and intelligible. They also need language resources, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse markers, as well as sociocultural awareness that helps them choose an appropriate register. Finally, effective oral expression draws on nonverbal features such as eye contact, gesture, facial expression, pace, pauses, and voice quality. These elements contribute significantly to intelligibility and pragmatic force.

Oral interaction is especially significant because it reflects the collaborative nature of communication. The CEFR defines interaction as an activity in which participants alternate reception and production, often with overlap, adjustment, and negotiation (Council of Europe, 2001). In the foreign-language classroom, oral interaction gives learners opportunities to ask for repetition, reformulate ideas, confirm understanding, and respond spontaneously. Such practices are essential because genuine oral ability is revealed not only when learners speak in prepared contexts but when they react, adapt, and maintain communication in unpredictable situations.

### **Characteristics of Effective Oral Communication**

Effective oral communication in French depends on a combination of linguistic control, discourse organization, sociocultural appropriateness, and personal engagement. Pierre-Yves Roux (2003) emphasizes that speaking requires several conditions: learners must have something to say, know how to say it, have a reason to say it, want to say it, and be given the opportunity to say it. These conditions remind us that oral proficiency is not simply a technical outcome of instruction. It also depends on motivation, relevance, and the design of communicative situations.

A first characteristic of effective oral communication is clarity of purpose. Speech becomes more meaningful when learners understand why they are speaking and to whom. A second characteristic is coherence. Ideas need to be sequenced logically, connected with transitions, and adapted to the task. Even short utterances benefit from some internal organization. A third characteristic is appropriateness. Learners must gradually acquire sensitivity to politeness, formality, audience expectations, and cultural conventions. This

is particularly important in French, where choices of register, pronouns, and formulaic expressions often carry social meaning.

Pronunciation and prosody are equally important. Volume, articulation, rhythm, and intonation affect whether speech is understandable and whether it sounds confident, hesitant, polite, or emphatic. Oral language is also shaped by strategic competence: when learners lack a word or structure, they need ways to paraphrase, hesitate productively, or ask for help. Canale and Swain (1980) consider such strategies part of communicative competence because they help speakers maintain communication despite limitations.

Nonverbal communication deserves special mention. Gestures, facial expressions, pauses, and eye contact contribute to the interpretation of spoken discourse. Cuq and Gruca (2017) point out that oral communication is complicated by the interaction between verbal and gestural systems, emotional signals, and implied meanings. For foreign learners, these dimensions can either facilitate understanding or create new obstacles if they are neglected in teaching. Accordingly, oral pedagogy should treat speaking as embodied communication rather than as the mechanical production of grammatically correct sentences.

### **Pedagogical Conditions for Developing Oral Proficiency**

If oral proficiency is to develop meaningfully, the classroom must offer a stimulating and language-rich environment. This includes exposure to spoken input, opportunities for practice, and a climate in which learners feel sufficiently secure to take risks. Oral competence rarely develops in classes where learners mostly listen to teacher explanations, complete written exercises, and speak only in very short turns. It grows when learners are repeatedly invited to listen, respond, discuss, describe, explain, and interact.

Authentic materials are particularly valuable in this respect. Videos, songs, interviews, dramatic scenes, radio broadcasts, short documentaries, and real-life dialogues expose learners to the diversity of spoken language and its social uses. They also provide contextual support that helps comprehension and stimulates discussion. Toffoli (2008) argues that enjoyment and meaningful participation are important for communication-oriented language learning; when learners are engaged by content, they are more willing to invest effort in understanding and speaking.

Teachers also play a decisive role in oral development. They need to design tasks with genuine communicative value, pre-teach useful expressions when necessary, and sequence activities from supported practice to

greater autonomy. For example, a lesson might begin with listening to a short dialogue, continue with guided comprehension questions, move to pair work using key expressions, and culminate in a role-play or problem-solving task. This progression allows learners to move from input to controlled use and finally to more spontaneous production.

The formulation of classroom questions is another crucial factor. Closed questions often produce only minimal responses, whereas open-ended questions invite longer, more personal, and more varied answers. Likewise, pair and group work typically increase speaking time compared with whole-class interaction, where only a few learners may speak at length. Teachers must therefore consider not only whether oral activities are included, but whether those activities actually require learners to express meaning, interact with others, and mobilize the techniques necessary for speech.

### **Classroom Practices That Foster Oral Skills**

A wide range of classroom activities can help learners develop oral proficiency in French. One of the most frequently recommended practices is role-play. In role-play, learners are placed in simulated situations such as meeting someone for the first time, asking for information, solving a practical problem, or negotiating a disagreement. This type of activity encourages them to act through language, adopt perspectives, and mobilize both verbal and nonverbal resources. It also creates a degree of distance from the self that can reduce anxiety.

Reader's theatre is another useful activity. In this format, two or more learners read or perform a text in an expressive way before an audience. This supports pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, and interpretive reading while also linking spoken language to textual understanding. Picture description and narrative tasks likewise help learners organize discourse. When asked to describe a scene, narrate a sequence of events, or explain what is happening in an image, learners must draw on vocabulary, sequencing devices, and interpretive language.

Conversation tasks with partners or small groups are especially important because they place learners in interactive situations. Pair interviews, information-gap tasks, mini-debates, and collaborative problem-solving all require learners to listen, respond, clarify, and maintain the flow of communication. According to communicative and action-oriented approaches, these activities are particularly effective when the task is meaningful and the outcome matters to the participants (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020).

Reading aloud, repetition, and pronunciation drills also

retain a place in oral pedagogy, especially at beginner levels, but they should not dominate the curriculum. Their value lies in helping learners notice sound patterns, practice articulation, and gain confidence with the phonological system of French. However, such exercises must be integrated into broader communicative practice. Oral proficiency develops most fully when controlled exercises serve as support for authentic or semi-authentic communication, not as ends in themselves.

### Challenges in Oral Expression in FLE Classrooms

Despite the recognized importance of oral skills, many teachers and learners experience difficulties in teaching and learning them. One common challenge is learner anxiety. Students often report that they hesitate to speak because they fear making mistakes, being laughed at, or being unable to find the right words. This is especially common when oral performance is highly visible, as in front-of-class speaking, or when correction is frequent and immediate.

Another major difficulty is limited vocabulary and grammar. Learners may understand a topic conceptually but lack the language resources needed to express themselves. This gap can produce silence, fragmented utterances, or overreliance on memorized phrases. Phonological difficulties compound the problem. French pronunciation may present obstacles related to nasal vowels, liaison, elision, rhythm, and intonation, all of which affect both speaking and listening. When learners are unsure about pronunciation, they may avoid speaking even if they know what they want to say.

A further challenge lies in the structure of classroom discourse itself. In some teaching contexts, oral participation is limited to short teacher-led exchanges that do not resemble natural communication. Learners answer predictable questions, repeat model sentences, or read from scripts, but they seldom engage in open-ended discussion or spontaneous interaction. Under such conditions, oral ability may remain superficial. As the draft on which this article is based also suggests, many classrooms still underuse oral expression despite recognizing its importance (uploaded draft, lines 1-20 and subsequent discussion) [filecite]turn2file0[L1-L20].

Time constraints and assessment practices also matter. Because speaking activities can be difficult to organize and evaluate, teachers may prioritize reading and writing, which are easier to assign and grade. Yet if oral work is marginalized in teaching, it will also be marginalized in learning. Developing oral proficiency requires consistent classroom time, repeated practice,

and assessment criteria that value communication, intelligibility, and interaction in addition to formal accuracy.

### Assessing Oral Proficiency

Assessment is a crucial but often delicate part of oral pedagogy. If speaking is assessed only through error counting, learners may become reluctant to take risks. If it is not assessed at all, however, learners and teachers may treat it as secondary. A balanced approach to oral assessment should therefore include both formative and summative dimensions.

The CEFR offers a useful framework for this purpose by providing illustrative descriptors for spoken production and spoken interaction across proficiency levels (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020). These descriptors encourage evaluators to consider range, coherence, fluency, interaction, and mediation rather than grammar alone. In practical terms, oral assessment can involve presentations, interviews, pair tasks, role-plays, listening-and-response activities, and portfolio-based reflection on speaking progress.

Good oral assessment should make its criteria explicit. Learners benefit when they know whether they are being evaluated for intelligibility, vocabulary range, coherence, task completion, interactional management, or pronunciation. Rubrics can help teachers assess speech more consistently and help learners understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Just as importantly, feedback should be constructive and developmental. Instead of focusing only on what was wrong, teachers can indicate what was successful in the communication and what next steps would help improvement.

Assessment can also support autonomy. Peer feedback, self-recording, and reflective listening to one's own speech enable learners to become more aware of their oral habits and progress. In this way, assessment becomes part of learning rather than merely an instrument of judgment.

### CONCLUSION

Oral proficiency is central to learning French because language education is fundamentally oriented toward communication. To master French, learners must not only know grammar and vocabulary, but also understand spoken discourse, express ideas clearly, interact spontaneously, and adapt speech to context. Oral comprehension, oral expression, oral production, and oral interaction together form the core of communicative ability.

The discussion in this article has shown that oral competence is multidimensional. It involves linguistic knowledge, discourse organization, sociocultural

awareness, strategic competence, pronunciation, and nonverbal communication. It also depends on classroom conditions: learners need authentic input, varied speaking opportunities, open-ended tasks, and teachers who can scaffold interaction without suppressing it. When such conditions are present, oral work can strengthen confidence, deepen language acquisition, and connect the classroom to real life.

At the same time, oral proficiency remains one of the most challenging domains in FLE classrooms. Anxiety, limited vocabulary, phonological difficulties, and restricted classroom discourse often prevent learners from speaking freely. These challenges make it even more important to give oral communication a central place in teaching and assessment. A learner who is able to understand, speak, and interact in French is not simply demonstrating one skill among others; they are showing that language learning has become meaningful communication in action.

langue. Ibis Rouge.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47.
2. Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment: Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing.
4. Cuq, J.-P., & Gruca, I. (2017). *Cours de didactique du français langue étrangère et seconde*. Presses universitaires de Grenoble.
5. Gaonac'h, D. (1987). *Théories d'apprentissage et acquisition d'une langue étrangère*. Hatier-Crédif.
6. Hymes, D. H. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: Selected readings* (pp. 269–293). Penguin.
7. Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
8. Ollivier, B. (1992). *Communiquer pour enseigner*. Hachette.
9. Robert, J.-P. (2002). *Dictionnaire pratique de didactique du FLE*. Ophrys.
10. Roux, P.-Y. (2003). L'oral en classe de langue: de la production à l'expression. *Le Français dans le monde*, 327, 36–38.
11. Toffoli, D. (2008). *Le plaisir de communiquer: Guide pour construire et animer des formations en*