Improving Students' Communicative Fluency through Oral Production Activities

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Friday, February 9, 2024

Introduction / Rationale

- Action research has many purposes, one of which is to find ways to engage target groups of students to ensure their success and prepare them for the real world.

- Based on this purpose, I decided to respond to the need expressed by my high intermediate students in their course feedback: to improve their fluency.

Research questions

- My general question:
How can I improve my students' oral fluency in a high-intermediate French communication course?

- My specific question:
What cooperative activities can best help students improve their oral fluency?

Literature Review

a. "Fluency" vs. "Oral Fluency"

b. "Oral Fluency" vs. "Accuracy"

c. Cooperative Learning Approach

a. Fluency vs. Oral Fluency

- "The term fluency has a range of meanings, the most common of which is related to "high proficiency", that is an excellent grasp of the vocabulary and grammar of a language" *(Koponen & Riggenbach, 2000 p.6)*

- Oral fluency is the ability to communicate clearly without long pauses, hesitations using fillers (such as "um," "uh," "ah," etc.), and repetition of words.

b. Oral Fluency vs. Accuracy

If *oral fluency* can be measured by calculating the number of words per minute, the percentage of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts, *accuracy* can be measured by calculating the number of linguistic errors per 50 or 100 words, as it focuses primarily on language.

c. Cooperative Learning Approach

Cooperative learning involves students working together in small groups to achieve common goals or complete tasks such as communicative activities.

There are many benefits, the most important being interpersonal skills: peer interaction/exchange, teamwork, motivation, empathy…

➤ **Participants**

Students in the high intermediate level (CEFN-332-771) of the French for Professional Communication Program, in the Global and Strategic Communication Domain, at the School of Continuing Studies.

2 Cohorts in 2023:
- Summer session: 15 students
- Fall session: 13 students

CEFN-332-771 - Fre. Communication

➢ Context -1-

➢ **Purpose of the CEFN 332 French course**

To provide professionals with the linguistic and cultural tools they need, to communicate in French in their workplace.

➢ **Feedback and requests from students**

During the winter, summer, and fall 2022 sessions: "*We prepare our ideas and sentences before interacting (...) we want to improve our fluency! We want to communicate faster!*"

CONTEXT

➤ Context -2-

➤ **Key fact #1#**

According to the *Quebec Scale of French Proficiency Levels for Adult Immigrants* in the high intermediate level **(level 7),** <u>at the end of this level,</u> **students should be able to :**

- communicate on topics of general or specific interest, in conversations or presentations.
- make concrete (facts) statements, sometimes using complex syntactic constructions.
- use a wide range of vocabulary.

➢ Context -3-

➢ **Key fact #2#**

According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR),*

a high intermediate level student is capable of communicating comfortably in many professional and personal contexts and can be sufficient, even in difficult social situations.

CONTEXT

➢ Research Design

➢ **My action research is based on a mixed approach.**

➢ Measurement tools for the qualitative approach:

• Open-ended surveys : impressions/ opinions

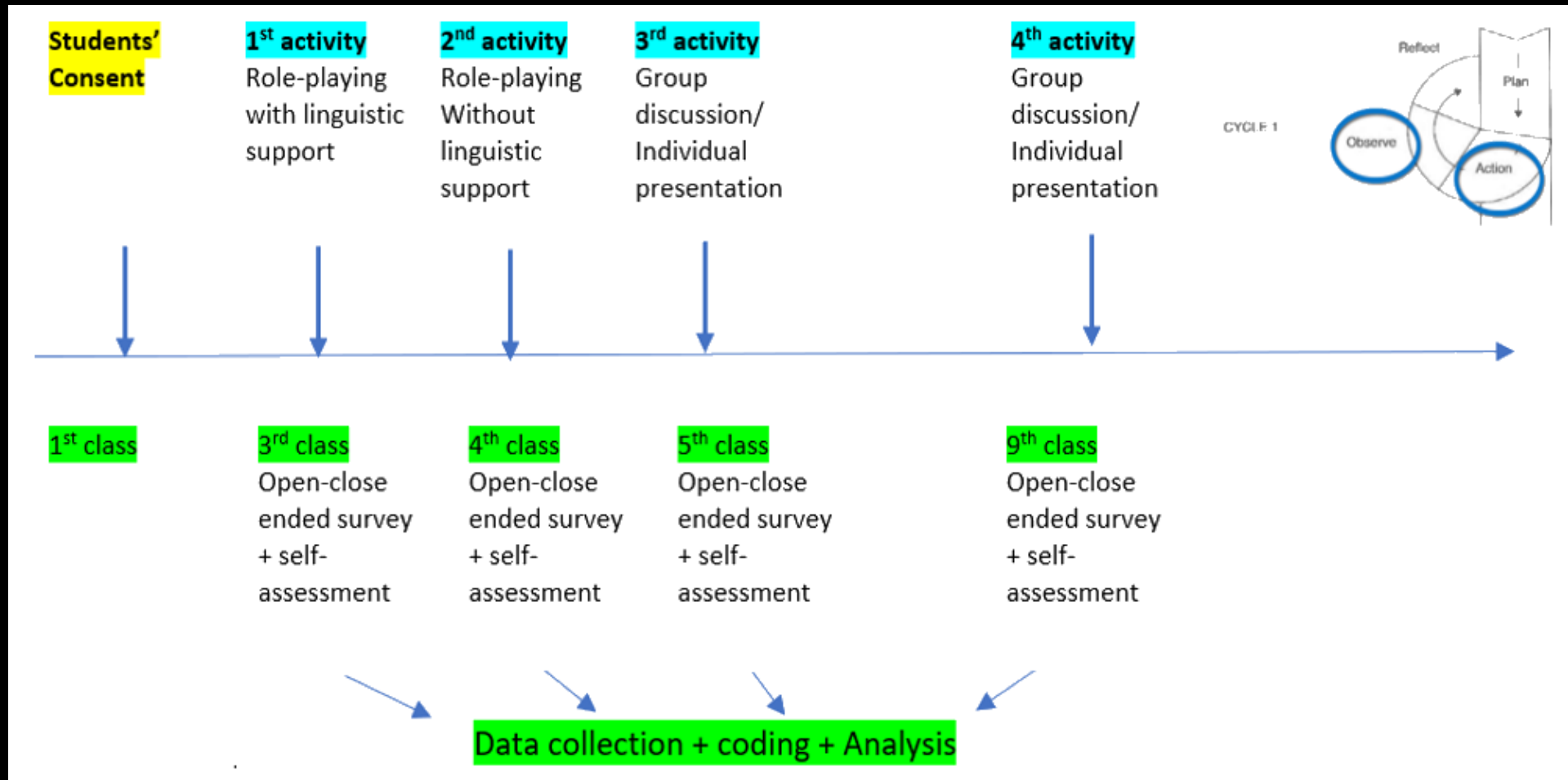• Students' recordings : clear voice / pronunciation

➢ Measurement tools for the quantitative approach:

• Closed-ended surveys : Yes/ May be/ No

• Criteria grid for analyzing oral recordings

  (words/sec, sentences/sec, hesitations/sec)

• Self-assessment grids

➢ Timetable of the data collection
 "What cooperative activities can best help students improve their oral fluency?"

➢ Results of 2 qualitative measurement tools

a- Open ended-surveys

Some examples of the results of the four open-ended surveys	
Positive Feedback	Negative Feedback
• Linguistic support was of a good help. • The role-playing topic was easy to develop. • No difficulties in expressing ideas. • The interaction with our peers was beneficial: we became more familiar with the topic; we were able to express ourselves more easily.	• Difficulty: - using suggested vocabulary words, finding words, structuring sentences, speaking fluently. - communicating with peer did not help. - generating and improvising ideas. • The time limit was a source of stress

➢ Results of 2 qualitative measurement tools

b- Recordings

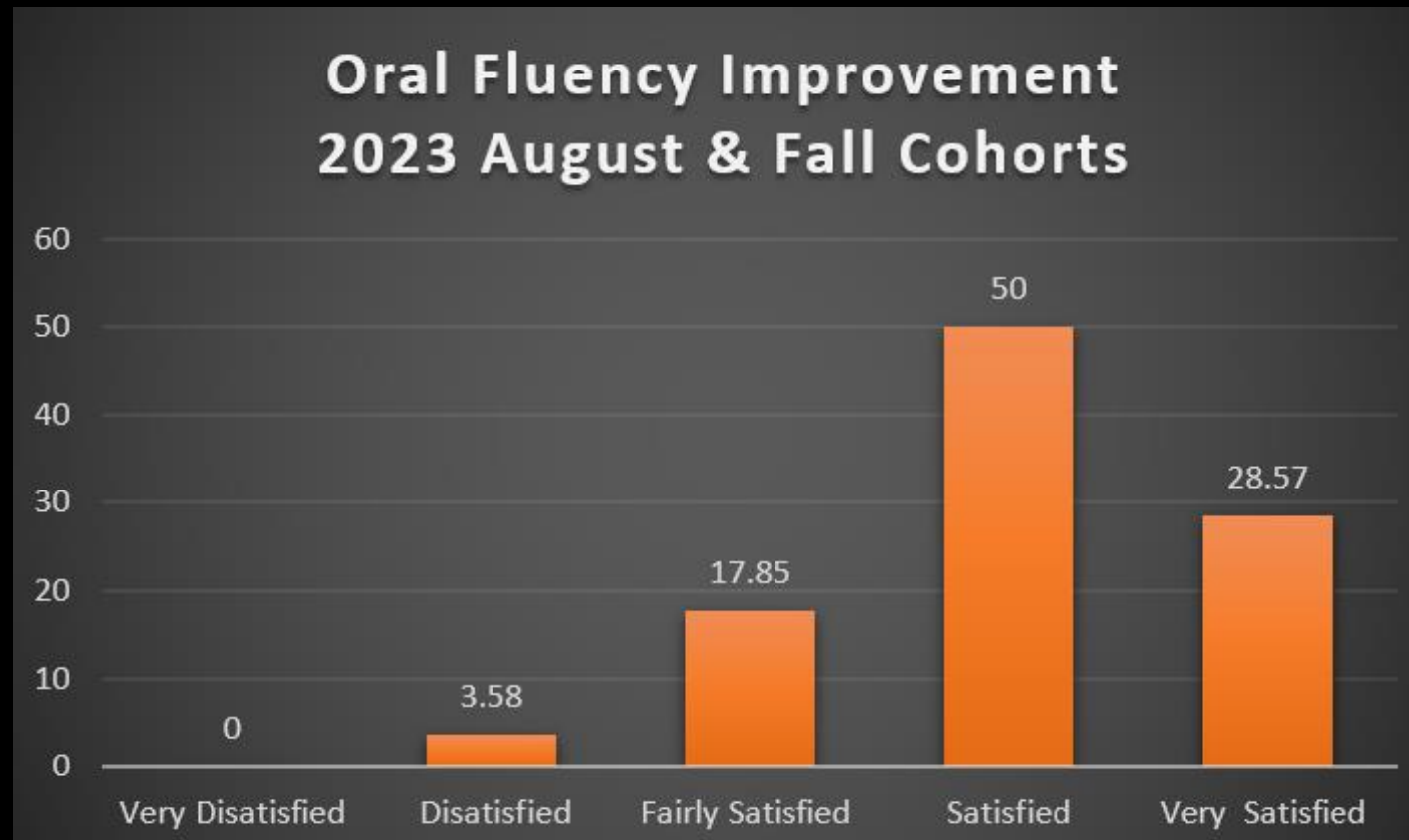| Some examples of observations on the four oral activity recordings	
Positive Findings	**Negative Findings**
• Conversations were clear or easy to follow and to understand at a normal conversational pace. • The students spoke fluently, despite a few linguistic errors that did not affect the meaning of the message.	• Few students in the first activity had a fast pace due to the culture of their native language: extra concentration was needed to understand them. • Some conversations were not clear or easy to follow due to many hesitations, repetitions, and non-lexical fillers.

➢ Results of 1/3 quantitative measurement tools : *Students'* *self-assessment grids*

a- The assessed statement (2 cohorts)
« *I spoke fluently during the activity.* »

ORAL FLUENCY: SELF-ASSESSMENT
2023 AUGUST-FALL COHORTS
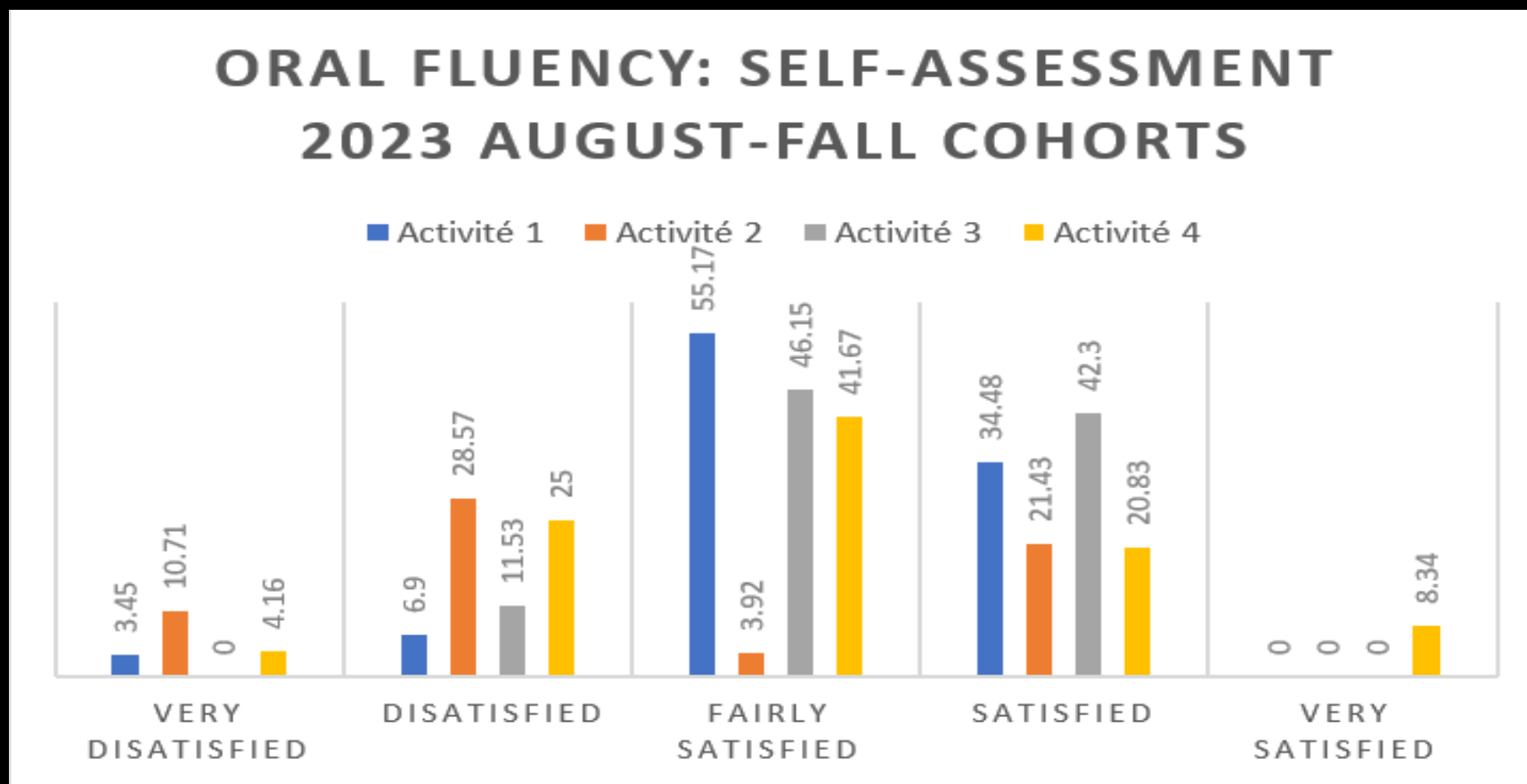
b- The assessed statement :
« *The overall communicative activities helped me to improve my oral fluency* »

Oral Fluency Improvement
2023 August & Fall Cohorts

Very Disatisfied	Disatisfied	Fairly Satisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
0	3.58	17.85	50	28.57

Reflection/Discussion

What cooperative activities can best help students improve their oral fluency?

Based on the results of the data analysis, the cooperative activities that best help students at the high intermediate level to improve their oral fluency are those that take into account the following points:

- *Select topics related to real-life situations.*

- *Vary the triggering documents.*

- *Include linguistic support related to the chosen topic.*

- *Allow time for peer-to-peer preparation.*

- *After each communicative activity:*

  - Provide constructive feedback.

  - Ask learners to fill in a self-assessment grid, one of the best ways to find out whether they have benefited from the activity or not.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

REFERENCES

Reference / Key Points -1-

Rossiter, M. J., Derwing, T. M., Manimtim, L. G., & Thomson, R. I. (2010). Oral fluency: The neglected component in the communicative language classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 66*(4), 583-606.

https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/390808

Key points:

This article provides many definitions of "fluency" as well as ideas for improving oral fluency through explicit language instruction (formulaic sequences), communication strategies (discourse markers), and various techniques for developing "fluency" (awareness raising, task repetition) in English as a Second Language (L2) courses.

Reference / Key Points -2-

Nation, P. (1989). Improving speaking fluency. *System, 17*(3), 377-384.

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0346251X89900109

Key points:

This article presents study cases and their analysis. It shows through them : a- the difference between fluency (number of words in a given time) and accuracy (correct use of a language). b- the progress made by students at both levels through the 4,3,2 techniques, where they had to repeat the same speech 3 times with less time and fewer words to different audiences.

Reference / Key Points - 3 -

Kim, Y., & Tracy-Ventura, N. (2013). The role of task repetition in L2 performance development: What needs to be repeated during task-based interaction? *System, 41*(3), 829-840. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0346251X13001140

Key points:

This article shows the benefits of procedural and content repetition compared to procedural repetition alone: repeating the same procedure with different content promoted more syntactic development, but both groups improved significantly in the accurate use of a task-induced linguistic structure (i.e., simple past). However, with adolescent EFL learners, observations showed that this type of repetition didn't necessarily promote the development of speaking rate and the production of accurate sentences.

Reference / Key Points - 4 -

Peltonen, P. (2017). Temporal fluency and problem-solving in interaction: An exploratory study of fluency resources in L2 dialogue. *System, 70*, 1-13. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S034625 1X1630286X

Key points:

This article shows that L2 fluency studies have predominantly used monologue samples as data and have examined fluency mainly with temporal measures (i.e. the amount and speed of speaking and pausing), whereas it should also include the social dimension (dialogic fluency), which refers to the cohesion and flow of the interaction. On the other hand, since the relationship between fluency and problem-solving mechanisms seems to be complex: learning to use strategies (i.e. "turn-pauses") when encountering problems, as an alternative to remaining silent, prepares students (ninth graders/ upper secondary) for real-life communicative situations.