

## **REVISITING CONVERSATION TOPICS IN FRENCH: A CASE STUDY FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS OF AGRICULTURE**

**Laura COROAMĂ\***

*\*IMAGER, University of Paris Est Creteil Val de Marne, Institut Français Timișoara*

***Abstract:** Teaching French in the First Year of Agriculture cannot be limited to its informative dimension. Among the objectives with formative implications, one may mention assessing students' entry level, analyzing their needs compared to the requirements of the faculty or prospecting new content. As conversation plays an important role in learning and teaching a foreign language and culture, the aim of this paper is to reconsider some main conversation topics that could be proposed to students in order to meet both their needs of expression and updated current information. What criteria and utility for this content selection? To what extent should general and specialized vocabulary be at the heart of the curriculum in the first year of studying French in an academic environment?*

***Key words:** specialized vocabulary, speech acts, authentic texts, communicational needs.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays changes are inevitable at all levels of society and individuals need to adapt their linguistic portfolio in order to cope with daily challenges, may they be personal or professional. International mobility has increased the pressure of acquiring both general and specialised vocabulary.

It is mandatory for university teachers to rethink and readapt vocabulary structures and, at the same time, to implement innovative teaching strategies in order to facilitate rapid acquisition of vocabulary and its effective use in real life situations.

The aim of this paper is to give a general view of the content of conversation topics for first year students in the Faculty of Agriculture. It also includes categories of vocabulary exercises which could improve the quality of speech acts and communication in French, in general.

### **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The public of the current study has been formed out of first year students who accepted to respond to a questionnaire and participate in explanatory interviews. I have gathered research data from 50 students, aged between 18 and 40. Their heterogeneous profile is revelatory as their level of French is not in accordance with the number of years they have studied it, in secondary school and high school.

The majority of students, 80%, have a beginner's level in French, while English was their major language in the previous school years. Although they have named grammar as the main difficulty in learning French, I was interested to see what the span of their vocabulary in this particular foreign language is and how they can manage conversations. Another detail worth mentioning is that the curricula for first year students in Agriculture proposes general French as a preparation for more specialised content in the following years.

Despite using a limited number of students for this study, I opted for:

- A short questionnaire, which I use to trace their linguistic background;
- 10 interviews with students of different levels of language and in which I wanted to go further on in the analysis of the linguistic material acquired in various environments at different moments in time;
- A collective mind-map for which I asked them to come up with topics they are interested in and which they find useful for their learning, and future, in general. I have to mention that this part of my corpus of data has proved to be particularly fruitful for my future courses as it has framed up a more updated image of students' passions and cognitive needs.

In a nutshell, this data was inventoried and analysed according to a theoretical system based on the ecological approach of language learning (VAN LIER, KRAMSCH). Learning experiences and the impact of environment on the potentiality of learning are at the core of this methodological approach.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### *Learning vocabulary – necessary footsteps for authentic conversations*

If we want to use language effectively we have to stock vocabulary. Therefore, the study of vocabulary occupies a central place in teaching-learning a foreign language:

*“You will see most improvement, if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words.”* (THORNBURY, 2002).

Mastering a wide range of vocabulary improves the expression of one's ideas, thoughts and feelings. The expression of meaning also represents the foundation of the receptive (reading and listening) and the productive (speaking and writing) skills. In other words, the acquisition of vocabulary becomes both mandatory and motivating in the process of improvement of the foreign language.

As far as French is concerned, Romanian students have undoubtedly some great advantages as its common Latin origin with Romanian highly eases learning. Punctual experiments during the French course with first year students within reading comprehension activities have shown a certain easiness with which students grasped the global meaning of the document. The majority of the group identified 80% of the essential meaning of the text, answering accurately at the key questions envisaging *time, space, action, characters*.

Using neologisms as a compensatory strategy has revealed pertinent observations such as:

- it is mentally rewarding to find words close to your mother tongue and to move on with the communication process;
- it gives your oral performance an “air” of semi-formality or neutral approach which can be transferred and re-used in numerous communicational contexts;
- using words and phrases with similar meaning and pronunciation in your own language is effortless and less consuming than the process of choosing new words, with absolutely no connection to your native linguistic background.

Besides this historical relatedness with French, another helpful strategy is identifying words and phrases coming from English and which have been included both in the Romanian and the French vocabulary. Although the latter has been more reluctant to foreign borrowings,

there are still many vocabulary items in French, especially in media and professional environments. As the students' first foreign language is English, they can wisely use this strategy in order to transfer words and adapt their discourse for a most accurate communication.

*The threshold between imposing and proposing conversation topics*

From a traditional perspective, the language course is unidirectional as far as transmitting knowledge is concerned. The teacher announces the content, structured in textbooks or other complementary course auxiliaries, and students accept it as a tool which should help them learn the language.

From an ecological perspective, however, every experience in which the individual is engaged may lead to learning. And when I mention *experience*, I do not mean experience limited to the academic environment, but any type of experience which takes place in a formal or informal context. In addition, teachers should ask themselves several questions:

- According to which criteria do I choose the conversation topics for my students?
- Are these selection criteria shared by my students?
- To what extent am I imposing certain topics without previously verifying their pertinence to students' needs?
- What other topics do I propose to my students if I notice their reluctance to my initial proposal?
- How do I assure continuity between their past linguistic background and what I propose in my French course?

Going deeper in this reflexion, one can notice that while imposing conversation topics mostly satisfy your teaching objectives, accepting students' proposals is more a learner-centred teaching approach. It also adds responsibility and autonomy on student's behalf as the learning process has become a dual one, a co-participative activity with a permanent regulation depending on the participants' needs.

Nevertheless, I am aware I cannot change their course content every semester according to the new student profile. However, letting students participate in their own learning process cannot but be beneficial for both parties.

*Learning French as an individual activity or as a developing process?!*

Speaking a language is more than understanding the functioning of a system of signs; it is living a new life and discovering yourself from another perspective. Modern teaching methodology cannot continue to survive by transmitting the language strictly for its pragmatic purposes.

If learning a language is equivalent to knowing more about the world, as teachers, we have a special responsibility when choosing and proposing discussion topics. After reading students' answers when asked what topics they would prefer, several observations need to be highlighted. First of all, students face cognitive impediments when put in the situation of treating a conversation topic. Reactions such as "I don't know what to say about this not even in Romanian" should make teachers wonder about the epistemological dimension of teaching a foreign language, French in occurrence. The causes of this difficulty which seems to be at the core of their lack of competence in treating a topic might be of various natures:

- precarious level of general culture;
- deficient skills which do not allow them to improve their knowledge;
- lack of motivation as far as global learning and self-development is concerned;
- misconception that they only need specialised knowledge in order to be successful, etc.

In this case, it is compulsory for the language teacher to be aware of this epistemological gap and he/she is required to articulate language learning with this type of knowledge, another reason to pay even more attention to the conversation topics proposed for study.

Second of all, it is of utmost importance to offer a thorough analysis of students' interest, bearing in mind that developing speaking skills does demand a total motivational engagement from the learner's part. After crossing data from students' responses in interviews and their mind-maps, the results put forward the following discussion topics:

1. *technology-related topics* were ranked number one in students' favourite themes. Although not all teachers might be updated to modern technology, it could be a resourceful opportunity to allow students to come up with proposals and assume responsibility about their choices.

2. *business opportunities* have also been mentioned as a challenging topic. Some of the questioned students already work or they have a business initiative. Finding out about examples which have a connection with their interests represent a motivating element and makes them more curious about acquiring new information.

3. *entertainment* is a rich source of conversation subjects as it is very close to students' daily life and preoccupations.

The need to express themselves and share with the others their opinions or ideas is challenging for the students and encourages them to activate their vocabulary in order to achieve the communicative task.

A possible follow-up is to stimulate collective feedbacks from the students, reinforced by teacher's reactions in order to structure old vocabulary and the new one that emerged during the conversation activity. Constant structuring of new vocabulary should become a current strategy of acquiring and using vocabulary in different contexts.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite French not being the most attractive language as far as students' learning motivations are concerned, meaningful conversation can produce enriching occasions of learning vocabulary and use it in conversational situations. First year students' vocabulary bank cannot be improved during a short period of time. However, students should always show keen interest and enthusiasm in finding, learning and understanding new words. Acquiring and practicing various and innovative learning vocabulary strategies should also be a priority in the first year of study. Word is a powerful tool and learning to use it in different environments, associating a wide sphere of meanings, has also a powerful impact on the individual's development.

As Nathaniel Hawthorne notices "Words – so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil, in the hands of one who knows how to combine them."

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