

FREE EXPRESSION AS A PEDAGOGICAL MEDIUM FOR TOTAL/FALSE BEGINNERS(+) LEARNING ENGLISH IN A PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:

This article proposes to examine the ‘alternative’ conversational foreign language teaching approach called Free Expression under a new light: that of its potential in the EFL¹ **professional environment**, — as compared to the ways in which it has been explored thus far, geared more towards general target language (L2) learning, particularly in True/False Beginners. A recapitulation of key points in the historical, methodological and theoretical background of this approach aims to establish the framework that Free Expression operates in, and to allow a review of its protocol with respect to its exploitation for the more functional and pragmatic purposes of the **professional environment**.

1. What is Free Expression all about: an introduction

The aim of this article is to view the alternative humanistic foreign language teaching approach, Free Expression, through the prism of **Learning in the EFL Professional environment**, the theme of the November 2005 TESOL France colloquium. The definition of the Free Expression process will thus be reviewed in this article, 1) with respect to its classic framework, as I explored it in my doctoral thesis², and 2) as adapted to the aims of the **EFL professional environment**. Throughout the article: a) any reference to the **professional**

¹ English as a Foreign Language.

² As described in Section 2 of the present article.

environment is highlighted in bold letters ; and b) any English translation of initially French-coined Free Expression terminology, or of cited excerpts from an originally French bibliography, is my own and is pointed out.

To somebody like myself, who in addition to post-secondary education in France, has for years also taught English in enterprise, the **professional environment** perspective has always appeared as an obvious Free Expression possibility. One part of what is dealt with in this article is inspired from my Business / Commercial English teaching experience. Another source of input comes from a more academic environment: indeed, students in my experimental Université Paris V IUT³ groups tended to use their professional studies as in-class subjects to express themselves on in L2⁴. Finally, using relevant material, the professional theme was also briefly tried out with audience members during the 2005 TESOL France Colloquium. All the more as this was at their request, it was a moment which underscored the great level of interest generally shown for this pedagogy — its mechanisms, protocol, history and theoretical background, — during the conference. The field is of course open to further investigation, with respect to new languages, language functions or other objectives.

1.1. Some concrete comparative glimpses into the mechanisms of Free Expression

1.1.1. Traditional method

Example 1

Teacher ...and now turn to page..., chapter 10, for the lesson on...

(Students are seated in rows behind their desks, awaiting to be given models, explanations and rules, by which to pursue their L2 learning)...

This example aims to serve as a reference regarding the more traditional language classroom discourse.

³ Institut Universitaire de Technologie.

⁴ Throughout the article : L1 : native language; L2 : target language.

1.1.2. Free Expression: Classic approach

Observations in Beginner's Spanish and Greek L2, as taught to French IUT students ⁵

Example 2

- Prof *Merci* : Ἄ·ῥ·ῦ·Ἐῦῦὸ [efhari'sto], donc. Il y a le *ef-* devant, qui veut dire “bon”, un préfixe positif récupéré en français à travers le *eu-*, et *-hari'sto*, (ῥ·ῦ·Ἐ·ῥ : grâce). Bon, [kari]... Pensez à *efharis-* : est-ce que ça vous évoque quelque chose en français ?
- Nathalie *Oui* : *eucharistie*.
- Prof *Eucharistie*, voilà. Et donc, *eucharistie*, est-ce que vous pouvez le définir ce mot, ce que ça veut dire ?
- Nathalie C'est un rite chrétien, c'est pour les chrétiens ?

This example aims to show how students can exploit their knowledge of borrowed words in their L1 when studying the very language from which they were borrowed (eg. Greek-borrowed words in English or French, and anglophone or francophone students learning modern Greek; or conversely, English or French words figuring in the Greek lexicon, as examined when English or French is respectively studied in Greece...). Revisiting and gaining new awareness of such borrowed forms within their L1 allows the learners to expand their L2 vocabulary by as much (while providing them with insight on these forms as they exist in their own native language).

Example 3

- Nathalie Comment on dit *de rien*.
- Prof Δ·ῥ·Ὀῦ· [tipota].
- Nathalie (rires) Ça me semble agressif. Alors, ῦ·ῥ·Ὀ·ῦ· [tipota], ῦ·ῥ·Ὀῦ·.

This example aims to show the memorization potential of subjectivity. This particular student didn't just hear the Greek word she requested, but perceived it in a certain way: as phonetically aggressive. This impression was strong enough to lead her to evoke it, and strong enough, as she later confirmed, to serve as a memory link to that word.

Example 4

- Prof À toi, *me*, et lui c'est *se le ocurre*. Et...
- Adrien ...*se le ocurre un algo*, c'est ça ?
- Prof On ne met pas “un”... *se le ocurre algo*. *Algo* c'est le pronom, *de quelque chose*. *Se le ocurre algo*, *algo se le ocurre*, en tant que sujet, hein ? Oui ?
- Séb *Eso es* !

This particular example aims to show the memorization potential of a *memory cue* (“*moyen mnémotechnique*”). Eg. “SOS”, or “algo” (“algae” in English) respectively become springboards to the Spanish “eso es” (“that’s it”), and to “algo” (“something”), until they are no longer needed.

1.1.3. Professional environment

Free Expression : Professional studies topic in IUT class (beginning of 1st lesson)

Example 5

- Malek *me llamo*. Ben alors, [me 'jiamo] Malek.
- Prof Voilà, déjà. (petits rires). C'est vrai. Ensuite vous avez dit *je suis en section*... Alors *je suis, estoy* [e'stoi].
- Malek *estoy*.
- Prof *en*...
- Malek *en*...
- Prof Est-ce qu'on peut inventer le mot *section* ? Regardez ma langue (démonstration phonétique physique : comment articuler les sons du mot) : *sección* [sek'ion]
[...]
- Malek Donc, *estoy en la sección publicidad*. [es'toi en la sek'i'on publi'si'te...]
- Prof *publi*...
- Malek ...*sité*.
- Prof ...*sidad*. [...si'ooa%oo]
- Malek ...*dad*. [...'ooa%oo]
- Prof ...*dad*. [...'ooa%oo]
- Malek *publicidad*. . [publisi'ooa%oo]

⁵ The IUT class was both experimental and institutional : students accepted to pursue the language component of their programme through this pedagogical approach, but also sought course credits towards their degree.

This example aims to show how the IUT student begins to talk about himself by evoking a primary concern, his professional studies; and also how from the very start, the student engages in speech, which, whenever rectified, he repeats in correct form on his own initiative.

Free Expression : colloquium theme sample

Example 6

(Looking at a PowerPoint slide projection of a business woman in typical attire in a small-scale office meeting...)

- Mandy I would like to say, “we see a computer on the desk”.
- Presenter $\mu\acute{\iota}\epsilon\ \acute{\omicron}\grave{\iota}\acute{\alpha}\ \epsilon\acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}\ \sim\ \acute{\omicron}\acute{\iota}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\iota}\ \acute{\upsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\alpha}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}$. [ν lepoume ‘enan upologi’sti sto yra’fio].
- Mandy [ν le-poumee...‘e...nan upolo-yi-’sti sto yra’fio]. ($\mu\acute{\iota}\epsilon\ \acute{\omicron}\grave{\iota}\acute{\alpha}\ \epsilon\acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}\ \sim\ \acute{\omicron}\acute{\iota}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\iota}\ \dots$)
- Presenter ... $\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\alpha}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}$.
- Mandy [...sto yra’fio]. ... $\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\alpha}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}$. [ν lepoume...‘enan upolo-gi’sti sto *g*...yra’fio]. ($\mu\acute{\iota}\epsilon\ \acute{\omicron}\grave{\iota}\acute{\alpha}\ \dots\ \epsilon\acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}\ \sim\ \acute{\omicron}\acute{\iota}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\iota}\ \acute{\upsilon}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\omicron}\ g\dots\ \acute{\alpha}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\omicron}$). Or how would you say, “*She’s wearing a jacket...*”
- Presenter You would say, $\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\zeta}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\epsilon}\ \acute{\upsilon}\acute{\iota}\acute{\zeta}\acute{\iota}\acute{\epsilon}$ [fo’rai sa’kaki], $\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\zeta}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\epsilon}\ \acute{\upsilon}\acute{\iota}\acute{\zeta}\acute{\iota}\acute{\epsilon}$ [fo’rai sa’kaki]....
- Mandy [fo’-r-rai sa’ka-ki]. $\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\upsilon}\acute{\zeta}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\epsilon}\ \acute{\upsilon}\acute{\iota}\acute{\zeta}\acute{\iota}\acute{\epsilon}$! *A grey jacket ...*

This example aims to show that what appears to be a simple picture of the context described above can have a vast range of free expression possibilities.

Free Expression : Professional environment in enterprise

Example 7

(A receptionist who is a total beginner in English, very inhibited, and increasingly needing this language skill in her job.)

- Michelle Comment je dirais “Bonjour, (société) CS, ne quittez pas je vous prie.”
- Instructor “Good morning, CG, please hold the line”.
- Michelle “Good moRning, CG, please ...old...”.
- Instructor “...hold the line”.
- Michelle “h-hold...”.

(To note that a corpus can typographically only capture part of the learning process. However, to some degree, fonts can be exploited to this effect: eg. by using phonetic script to

represent a beginner's L2 utterance, given that in Free Expression, he / she has no knowledge of the written form of L2.)

2. Free Expression – an initial brief, point-form, definition of the classic protocol

Within the Free Expression pedagogy

Process

- the learner aims to express a thought on a subject in L2.
- at 0-level, the learner's thought is necessarily initially expressed in L1.
 - translation into L2 ensues, as carried out by the teacher, (or a classmate, whenever possible).
 - the learner repeats this translation, aiming to retain a maximum of its elements for future use.
- cognitively and psychologically, in time the learner becomes increasingly self-sufficient with vocabulary and structures, for the creation of new sentences.
- any unknown or unmemorized elements necessitate the renewal of this translation process.

Conditions

- the learner first listens to the instructor's terms of this particular pedagogy.
- in accepting to learn an L2 through Free Expression, the learner has made a *pedagogical pact* ("*pacte didactique*") with the instructor regarding this learning approach.
- the learner participates in organizing the classroom environment in a student-centered manner (no tables, students sitting in chairs forming a tight semi-circle in front of the screen; instructor sitting next to computer or slides' projector, in their midst).
- the learner feels reassured that any expression-related inhibitions will subside, because Free Expression promotes a positive, encouraging, learning space.
- the learner works within a fairly small group (8-15 students).
- the learner begins with the objective of developing *oral expression competence*⁶, which in a group context is expected to evolve into *communicative competence* in L2.
- the learner is aware that explicit grammar is not proposed: Free Expression relies on implicit grammar.
- the learner is encouraged to memorize forms using any personal cognitive means available, in particular mental representations that are used as *memory cues* ("*moyens mnémotechniques*").
- it is part of the "pedagogical pact" that the written code be introduced only near the end of the first year (+), and that prior to that, the learner should not resort to any written stimulus.
- progress means increasing self-sufficiency, as may be observed at two levels : 1) collective group progress, where students help each other, aiming to take over the teacher's function as translator ; and 2) individual progress, where the learner is increasingly self-sufficient in forming sentences.
- evaluation is for the moment qualitative, rather than quantitative (an issue to further investigate).

⁶ Or *speech competence*, a term to oppose to *communicative competence*, which supposes a more complex, interactive, figure.

3. Free Expression – a closer look at its basic principles

Free Expression — more specifically *oral* free expression — is an alternative (to the more traditional foreign language teaching methods) pedagogical approach. In the sense that it is usually, indeed ideally, practiced in a group framework, it can be considered to be *communicative* by extension.

Whatever the language teaching context, — institutional or private, academic or professional, with bigger or smaller-sized groups, — too often language teaching is still largely based on traditional methods (ie. the student's book/workbook with language models and written exercises, oral production activities usually figuring rather discreetly (if creatively) in that lot; or methods not too far removed from that.

As such, **Free Expression** constitutes an alternative pedagogy proposing a solution to the oral practice issue, which could stand on its own or, at the very least, complement other methods.

- **Group size:** Free Expression can function with a range of group sizes, although 8 to 15 students appears to be the ideal number in an institutional classroom situation, where both class momentum (turnover of activities, etc.) and group cohesion seem to be in balance. (The two factors may however be a function of the objectives, eg. different in **the EFL professional environment**).

- **Programme duration:** At the Université Paris V IUT⁷, Michel GAUTHIER'S experimental laboratory, the Free Expression language programme lasted two years, with classes at the rate of an hour and a half per week. *Oral free expression* indeed constituted at once the dominant medium (or pedagogical tool) and the objective of this pedagogy, reading and writing skills being introduced near the end of the first year of this time-frame.

From the very beginning the students were encouraged **to produce** their own speech: various (mostly visual) documents were proposed in class for speech tasks ranging from description to commentary, analysis and interpretation, engendering question / answer exchanges among all present; all acts ultimately taking place in L2, as assisted by translation.

⁷ Institut Universitaire de Technologie, Université Paris 5, René Descartes.

While the numerous teachers who have used Free Expression have surely exploited it in different capacities, — personally, I initially became engaged in research with general Spanish Beginner’s level as compared to general Greek Beginner’s level, — this workshop offered me a chance to link Free Expression to (Beginner’s) L2 English, from the more pragmatic **professional environment** perspective.

As this more applied, functional possibility of Free Expression is explored in this article, however, some elaborating on the initial version of this pedagogy, as practiced in the two-year IUT Free Expression framework, is in order:

3.1. The oral code:

- this pedagogy was exclusively oral practically during the entire first year, an **acquisitional approach** emulating as much as possible the acquisition pattern in children, (who need to attain a degree of *oral communicative competence* before they are able to tackle the written code).

3.2. The written code :

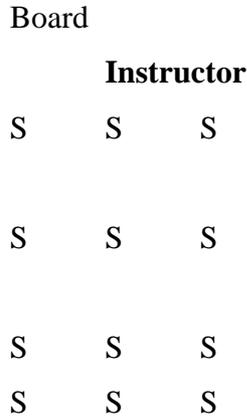
- near the end of the first year when the written code was introduced, the students could finally **see** this much anticipated written form of the language which, until that point, they had only experienced orally. Like oral free expression in its first phase, reading could now also become a means and ends to learning L2. The oral component, however, always held its pre-eminent position: ie., story excerpts, etc., were systematically first presented orally by the teacher, in a very theatrically expressive manner at that, and only afterwards read by the students from their photocopy. Written production skills were discovered even later still, in a pragmatic, pertinent, way, as students wrote-up their own oral presentations.

Below, a comparative illustration of traditionalist and Free Expression classroom organization:

The Classroom set-up:

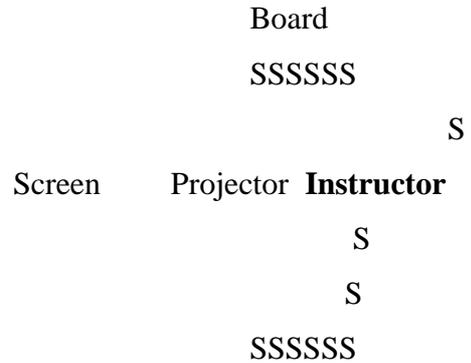
Traditional Institutional class set-up

S = Student (+ desk))



Free Expression class set-up at IUT:

S = Student (no desks)



- The classroom set-up was as illustrated in the above diagram: the tables were put away; and the chairs were drawn together into a semi-circle, so as to create the sense of a close-knit group of individuals predisposed not only to expressing themselves, but to exchanging comments as well; the slides' projector, with M. GAUTHIER pacing it, was right amongst them. There was neither any geographical nor any psychological distance between students and the instructor.

- In a **professional environment**, we doubtless do not even need to speak of a 'classroom'. In fact, a meeting room or office, as would probably be used in this instance if the sessions took place on the premises, would only add to the authenticity sought out in free expression, since it is the same space that is used for the various professional functions, whether they be in L1 or in L2.

4. Free Expression: the IUT experience and experiment as a reference and framework for the professional environment

4.1. The “pedagogical pact”

The “pedagogical pact” is an indispensable step in adopting this method (or more exactly, having it adopted by the students), especially in an institutional environment where students no doubt have the reflex-expectation, — stemming from their own previous educational experience, — of a more classic pedagogy. Sticking to their old (more ‘controllable’) learning habits may even feel to them as more psychologically reassuring, especially when evaluation and course credits are at stake. In this sense, it is important to prepare the students psychologically, at the very least, if not epistemologically⁸, for a method which, unlike what they have experienced before, does not provide lists of vocabulary, sets of grammar rules or prefabricated communicative dialogue models to refer to, revise, and be safely tested on, according to familiar marking schemes. On the other hand, Free Expression is a method that offers them something they have never (or perhaps rarely) obtained in a language classroom before: the opportunity to **speak on their own**, based on what **they** have to say on a subject. The challenge, and promise, of Free Expression at the IUT was that students were expected to, among other things, “pass” a more natural kind of test at the end of the programme, by conversing with native L2 speakers, who were invited to the class.⁹ Within the same pact, the teacher made certain to reassure the students that if the basic course requirements were met, (ie. presence and willing participation), their course mark should not be a preoccupation. Indeed, the **psycholinguistic perspective** of evaluation in Free Expression meant that the students could only expect to progress and pass the course. The degree of their success (ie. their exact grade) was on the other hand evaluated mainly, if not solely, qualitatively. (Cf. *Evaluation* rubric at the end of section 4 of the present article).

This offer to the students seemed enticing enough that in the four groups that I experienced at the Université Paris V IUT, not more than one student per group (of approximately 15, on average), showed any real apprehensions, preferring not to remain in the course. The other students accepted to operate on a kind of trust which was not just simply blind: indeed, by the end of the first session this trust was founded on the instructor’s introductory talk. This introduction to Free Expression could be characterized as an

⁸ Not just to accept, but to believe in the principles of this pedagogy. (also cf. J.-P. NARCY-COMBES, 2005).

⁹ This was impressive to watch, for the progress in communication that students had made, as much at the comprehension, as at the expression level.

“*acquisition pact*”, or “*pacte didactique*”, if not, (as I indicated in my thesis¹⁰), a “*pacte métadidactique*” or “*meta-acquisitional pact*”¹¹, for it was not just a description of procedures, but in part an adapted, — vulgarised, amusing, anecdote-filled, — theoretical plea on *acquisition*, attempting to explain to students why they only stood to benefit from such an atypical class. Students in other words were asked to adopt a new set of principles regarding (their own) language learning. On the other hand, no student was ever pressured into staying in the course against his or her wishes.

In a **professional environment** (essentially the private sector), on the other hand, institutional-type pressure is not (as) present in the pedagogical programme (ie. the function of marks is more indicative of level and skills, but it is not institutional). Quite the opposite, there is the likely expectation, even demand, that it will be a much more communicative, innovative, and pertinent learning experience. This may appear on course evaluation sheets, if implicitly.

4.2. Possible set-up in a professional environment

The functional quality of the **professional environment** premises, as used for the lessons, means that this space can be exploited with great flexibility and authenticity concerning 1) different functions and themes (eg. telephoning for an appointment, reporting a study, etc.); 2) pedagogical material (images, accessories, etc.), and 3) approaches (eg. analysis, simulation, role playing, etc.) — the operative principle being that the learners present be able to engage in free expression and dialogue during the session. Tables and chairs here are actually part of the real working environment, and far from embodying a barrier between the student and the teacher, — indeed, the student and the real world of actualized language, — they may play a functional role. Also, the number of students is typically at a minimum (1-6 on average), to maximize individual class-time attention.

The figure below aims to illustrate this organization:

¹⁰ Entitled “*Acquisition of modern Greek and Spanish through Free Expression by young adults in a public post-secondary school context*”, supervised by Professor Michel GAUTHIER and defended in December 2004.

¹¹ Or the individual epistemological adjusting that J.-P. NARCY-COMBES refers to.

(Video) Screen

Writing board (small, portable)

SS

SS

(computer projector) **Instructor** SS

4.3. Examples of Free Expression material used at the IUT

Projected images to comment on were one possible activity; another one was theater or role-playing. In content, the images ranged from (universal-)situation type comic strips (Eg. Boule et Bill, Tin Tin) to L2-culture related art (eg. Picasso, Goya, Velasquez paintings in the Spanish course, mostly depicting historically or socially-based human situations.). Theater / role-playing could be situational and improvisational. After exposure to the written code, it was possible to work on selected play passages in L2, that were photocopied, distributed and “staged” in class.

In the **professional environment**, students can comment on images ranging from real pictures concerning enterprise (meetings, presentations, business travel, gadgets, etc.), — to more entertaining, witty, enterprise-related material, such as cartoons (eg. Dilbert), or art (film, publicity graphic art, etc.); or, as mentioned, engage in improvisation in specific functional areas, such as meetings, presentations, interviews, etc. This remains an open field, and the word ‘free’ is applicable not only in expression, but also on how, pedagogically, learners can reach this faculty in L2. The quest ultimately being that the activities also vary in the course of a class session or over time, allowing the students to stand up, and also incorporate a paralinguistic dimension (gestures, movement, etc.), into their speech.

It is worth noting that whereas with beginners **the image (photolanguage)** is more generally viewed as a pretext to expression, taking on real thematic pertinence in more advanced students (R. GALISSON / D. COSTE, 1976)¹², in the case of Free Expression students were expected to apply principles of thematic analysis (description, interpretation, degree of affective identification, emotional and / or intellectual involvement, etc.) from the very

¹² Cf. *Dictionnaire de la Didactique des Langues*, p. 272-73. Also, the dictionary points out in 1976 that further research is required in this area, in terms of the use of images in the language classroom. Today, thirty years later, it is still the case.

beginning, once again relying on translation to transfer their formulated thoughts from L1 to L2.

4.4. In the professional environment

Concerning oral free expression, more classic professional methods (student's books and workbooks, etc.), including what is on offer for Business English, encounter limitations in that they are dominated mostly by well meaning, and surely with much merit linguistic models and exercises, but which nevertheless are based on a layout lending itself to more traditional-type teaching. The risk is that the exercises overshadow whatever interesting images and tables or charts there may be in the units, that could be exploited through free expression. Teachers may need to make an abstraction of the linguistic components in order to devote a certain percentage of class-time exclusively to expression-eliciting material and activities, furthermore giving the students enough time to warm up, and to engage in a more sustained linguistic effort.

It should be noted that, unlike young adult students in academic programmes who may not experience immediate, pragmatic linguistic need, adult learners in enterprise have increasingly urgent practical motives to be learning a given L2, — especially internationally sought English today. They may need to carry out telephone exchanges with colleagues or clients abroad, participate in (video-)conferences and meetings, give presentations (demonstrations, tables, charts, budget forecasts, etc.); or even take action in seeking a promotion. Much may be at stake and ride on EFL proficiency. As such, motives in the oral production skills area may therefore enhance motivation to learn an L2 such as English, but may also lead the learner to more readily appreciate the hands-on principles of this pedagogy.

4.5. Participation in Free Expression

Participation at the IUT was expected in two ways: 1) class presence, which relied on the student's own sense of responsibility; and 2) class participation, which was also controlled by attributing a 'turn' number to each speaker, so as to, a) ensure participation, should anyone decide to sit in retreat from the group (an act which could prove detrimental to group-cohesion); and b) seek equitability in participation, when there may be approximately fifteen students in the group, at times all waiting to say something at once.

Firstly, students were expected to express themselves on the material (eg. images), but each had to have something new to say. Students became aware that if they volunteered to go early on, they had greater choice of what to say, (which included what was also structurally less complex). Conversely, students found it more challenging to express ideas as they got into more abstract concepts (involving commentary, explanation, analysis or interpretation), usually accompanied by more complex language structures. On the other hand, beyond turn-taking or “*tour de parole*”, students could spontaneously intervene in response to other students’ statements, — a frequent phenomenon in the observed classes, which revealed how individual expression inevitably served the greater need to communicate, (to interact, to exchange information, to agree or disagree...).

Whatever the function of their statement, students therefore took ownership of what they said: it was **their** explanation, their description or interpretation, freely and spontaneously produced within this working framework.

4.6. Evaluation

Evaluation constitutes a delicate point, and raises the question of **how to quantify** (ie. **translate into concrete marks**) **oral speech acquisition**, when L2 speech acts as both the pedagogical means and ends to this process, and has a dimension which does appear illusive and uncontrollable. This question explains why, for the moment, evaluation is mainly qualitative, relying on the experienced opinion of the teacher. Indeed, the Free Expression philosophy by definition excludes classic-type testing, since the focus is centered around L2 speech development. Marks are thus derived from 1) basically a qualitative record of participation throughout the two-year programme, (highlights of which, near the end of the second year, include the session with the visiting native speaker, and the oral presentation on a subject of the learner’s choice¹³); and 2) the actual duration of exposure of a learner to L2: ie. all participation criteria having been fulfilled, at one year the student is objectively expected to have a better mark than at 6 months. (This marking scheme can be subject to debate, especially in an institutional context, but the IUT students accepted it as part of the pact). One reason Free Expression can be quite readily suitable to the **professional language learning environment** is that school-type evaluation is usually not the type applied there.

¹³ For this reason, M. GAUTHIER prefers to speak of *evaluation* rather than *testing*, the former denoting a longer-term evolution within the learner, as opposed to a test, which may be more representative of what a student has stocked in his / her memory for the time-limited purpose of a test.

5. A brief History of Free Expression

Free expression, (with the lower case initials) is doubtless as old as human language itself. Free Expression, with the upper case, or capital initials, on the other hand, has been around since 1968, which is when Jean VILLEGIER, a French Ministry of Education Inspector General introduced it through television programmes and field work. J. VILLEGIER had discovered Free Expression as a secondary-level Spanish teacher at "Lycée de Jeunes Filles" (high school) in Orléans, took an interest in it and continued to promote it as Education Ministry Inspector General, seeking out every opportunity to demonstrate it and to see it applied by other teachers. No doubt thanks to this initiative and enthusiasm, Free Expression (has) enjoyed¹⁴ a significant presence in the western half of France, J. VILLEGIER'S jurisdiction as education inspector.

J. VILLEGIER entrusted his colleague, at the time secondary level Spanish teacher¹⁵, and subsequently university professor and researcher M. GAUTHIER, with the theorization of this empirically discovered pedagogy. Free Expression did in effect become a major focus of M. GAUTHIER'S research in Acquisition (in the Applied Linguistics Department of Université Paris V, René Descartes), as explored at his IUT laboratory mainly through True Beginner's Level for general Spanish L2. In partnership with J. VILLEGIER, or on individual research missions, M. GAUTHIER in turn promoted Free Expression through conferences, article publications, workshops, further field investigation and post-graduate studies (DEA¹⁶ or Ph.D.) programmes supervision of subjects in this area (through which research in other languages was also initiated). The existing bibliography on the subject is mostly his own, but there have been conferences and publications devoted to the subject from researchers and educators especially in Spain, where group and learner-oriented pedagogy is rather popular.¹⁷

¹⁴ New field investigation would be required for an update on that situation.

¹⁵ Thus someone who, from his own experience, was familiar with the immediate concerns of L2 teaching in the language classroom.

¹⁶ Diplôme d'Études Approfondies, analogous to a research-based Master's Degree.

6. Methodological perspective: Free Expression vs other (alternative) methods

Methodologically, Free Expression, the only French alternative method (“Expression Libre”), is partially aligned with such preceding progressive humanistic pedagogies as the Natural Approach, the New Education wave, the Freinet Pedagogy, the Rational Approach and the Montessori Method; or contemporary (so-called alternative) approaches such as the the Community Language Learning Approach, Suggestopedia, the Total Physical Response Approach, the Relational Approach, the Silent Way, the Comprehension Strategy, the Summerhill Experience or Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP). Only ‘partially aligned’, to underscore, as beyond their common humanistic (student-centered, meaning-based) dimension, these approaches naturally exist in order to promote their own methodological specificities, (eg. Suggestopedia is very attentive not only to creating a relaxed ambiance through learner attitude, but also to creating one within its working space, through music, etc.; the Community Language Learning Approach, on the other hand, places more emphasis on the group (or “community”) than on individual expression, and also accepts to work through explicit grammar). Free Expression aims for the application of its principles with flexibility as to where one can set it up, — as ready to function in a poor, as in an affluent, environment.

Free Expression could be described as *communicative* by definition, — for the in-class exchanges that individual expression naturally engenders, — but it does not fall into the Communicative or even Post-Communicative methods that have been part of institutional foreign language education for the last thirty years. For such methods, despite their name, have never really given free reign to the student in oral expression. *Communicative* in their case has generally meant working from dialogue models and prods on an, at best, limited scale, — especially given the often difficult conditions of overpopulated classes.

7. Theoretical perspective: A few key concepts of Free Expression

7.1. Expression and Communication in L2, and Translation

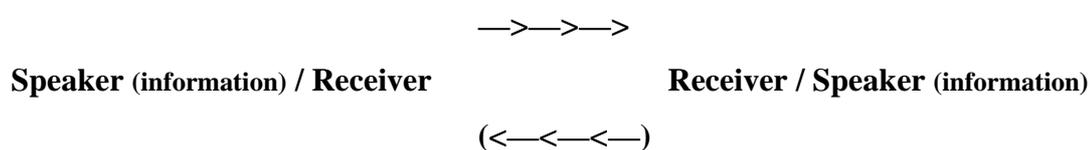
Free Expression the L2 learning approach considers that what it promotes, ie. L2 **free expression**, can only be attained by engaging in...L2 free expression. In other words, the ends and the means are one and the same. Free Expression also considers that individual expression is the first step towards **communication** between individuals within a group. In

¹⁷ cf TESOL France Journal Vol. 9, 2002, pp.5-34.

this process, **translation** is a major pedagogical tool in transferring and preserving meaning from the L1 to L2. (As such, Free Expression is not a direct method, where L1 recourse is forbidden). The fate of translation is to ultimately fade, indeed ideally to disappear along with the teacher, as students, both as individuals and as a group, take over at least the fundamental pool of the L2 lexicon and its structural forms. Of course, the teacher will always be relevant in so far as Free Expression will, to some degree, always cater to individual lexical needs or desires¹⁸ as well, — potentially stretching this lexical pool to the outer spheres of less common vocabulary.

Free Expression is about **implicit grammar** only, giving **class time** priority to individual oral expression (uttering one’s thoughts) and communication (implying social interaction) in L2, and not to grammar metalanguage. In this sense, M. GAUTHIER spoke of “*La Didactique de la Parole*”, which could loosely be translated as “*Adult L2 Speech Acquisition*”. Why this new concept, coined by M. GAUTHIER, as opposed to the existing concept of *communication*? The aim from the point of view of a language functions continuum was to point out that 1) *speech* or *oral expression acquisition* is the springboard to communication; and that 2) communication constitutes a superior, more complex stage than individual expression, which, at the very least entails comprehension, (if not other skills), in order to function.

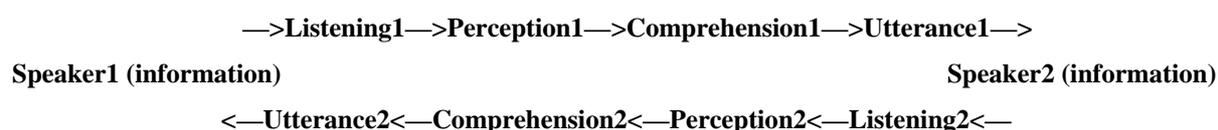
The complexity of *communication* surfaced with the initial Communication Theory. If we attempt to capture one aspect of this theory through the basic figure below, it is to subsequently oppose it to a more complex version:



The Communication Theory appeared at the outset to be a suitable paradigm to describe two speakers communicating as based on a common code. Ultimately, it was viewed as rather reductionist in that “it does not consider the semantic aspect [of a message] and is

¹⁸ Eg. the case of the young student in France who wanted to know how to say “chardonneret”, — “goldfinch” in English, — in Spanish.

only interested in the emitting, transferring and receiving of a message as form”¹⁹. The GALISSON / COSTE dictionary elaborates on this through P. GUIRAUD (1968)²⁰, who pointed out that in communication there is transfer of the form of a message, but there cannot be transfer of meaning. It is indeed up to the receiver to attribute meaning, by decoding the form of the message. With respect to Free Expression, M. GAUTHIER pointed out as well that Communication Theory did not guarantee the speakers were truly communicating (perceptually, even though technically it may have seemed to be the case)²¹. It was therefore necessary to complete this definition with more detailed elements of **group dynamics**, — ie. the cycle beginning with speaking, and listening as based on perception, comprehension, and the resulting individual response, — in order to emphasize **the process** underlying *communication*. This more complex definition of the communication process I propose summing up in the following figure:



The development of L2 oral expression and communication skills indeed constitutes a specific language learning objective. Pedagogically, this supposes the need to establish specific acquisitional objectives and to focus solely on them, with all the advantages and disadvantages (what is not taught) that this may entail. Focusing, for example, on explicit grammar would certainly promote a more conceptual awareness of L2, but it would not ensure oral expression and communication skills. A spill-over effect may enhance the grammatical dimension of one’s speech, but it would by no means develop oral expression and communication skills per se. The little class time available, then, and the numerous possible linguistic skills that one could develop mean that priorities need to be set, and choices made accordingly. This is the criterion by which Free Expression opts not to focus on explicit grammar at all, a choice which differentiates this approach from all the other alternative methods. As such, any metalinguistic questions (eg. grammar, spelling, etc.) from students (who doubtless had previously been nurtured in that language-learning tradition) at the IUT were addressed in the following way: they were neither ignored, nor overly elaborated on, nor further encouraged for that matter, — quite the opposite, they were outright

¹⁹ GALISSON / COSTE, 1976, pp. 102-103.

²⁰ GALISSON / COSTE, 1976, p. 103.

discouraged (at least during practically the entire first year of the programme). Free Expression thus relies heavily on the concept of **implicit grammar**, and the hypothesis (based on the chomskyan concept of innateness of language) that adults continue to have acquisitional abilities that enable them to deduce grammatical structures. The resolution is thus not to sacrifice precious class-time on explicit grammar metalanguage, when the focus is on the development of the much-sought oral skills (and the understanding of structural forms within this framework).

The same rationale applies to the written code which, first through reading, then through written production, is not introduced before the end of the first year in the two-year programme, — in other words once 8 – 9 months (or approx. 35 hours) of focus on oral practice have lapsed. By the end of this term learners have developed a functional, indeed, more affective relationship with the target language, and in analogy with language **acquisition** in young children, are ready to explore the written code, a less direct means of expression and communication²², in a more pertinent (and less “interfering”) manner.

7.2. Implicit Grammar and Acquisition

The choice to engage in **implicit grammar** is of course at the outset based on the *acquisitional theory*. A general definition according to the *Dictionnaire de Didactique des Langues* (1976) is that :

« [...] we speak of implicit teaching when the acquisition of linguistic competence results from the manipulation of sentences considered at once as archetypes of the target discourse and stages on the way to discovery. This is obviously the acquisitional model of the maternal language, rightly considered as an ideal model since it regularly leads to success, a fact which has served as a departure point to the idea of foreign language teaching in an implicit manner.

As in natural learning of an L1, implicit learning of a foreign language

— spares one of any metalanguage (especially grammatical metalanguage, judged to be useless and cumbersome, but which traditional teaching considered to be indispensable).

— and (at least in what concerns the audio-visual methods) resorts to integrating the proposed utterances in plausible situations, functioning as a transitional “pattern” (or model) towards the real world.

If we, for a moment, set aside the fact that the L2 remains a second code, learned after another, and at an older age (a factor that deeply modifies the givens of the problem), the essential differences between the two acquisitional modes result from the change of environment (the generally free family ambiance and the mini-society in which a child is raised, versus the more controlled school environment) [...]

[...]

REMARK :

“Implicit teaching is never synonymous with non-systematic teaching. On the contrary, one might say that one of the main preoccupations of the creators of implicit teaching (the authors of the first

²¹ GAUTHIER, 1993.

²² Cf works by J.-M . O. DELEFOSSE on this question.

American audio-oral methods of strict structuralist obedience) was the choice, the organization and the progressive quality of the linguistic material to be learned. » (GALISSON / COSTE, pp. 275-276)²³

The “Remark” section can give rise to a renewed definition of what is at once implicit and systematic in L2 acquisition methodology. On the one hand, for implicit learning, there were the highly (if not overly) systematic, artificially repetitive, structural exercises²⁴ of the American audio-oral methods, which students were supposed to deduce grammatical structures from, and which were of strict **structuralist** obedience. On the other hand, there is implicit learning as is carried out in Free Expression, which, in a more **psycholinguistic** perspective, is based on a more organic type of repetition, “the acquisitional model of the maternal language” as mentioned in the definition above. Thus, it is the clash between two opposing approaches, underpinned by two opposing theoretical perspectives, the structuralist and the psycholinguistic.

To recapitulate, Free Expression attempts to apply the child’s language **acquisition** process as closely as possible to the adult: 1) like the home environment, the Free Expression environment is built on a positive, experimental, trusting ambiance, which aims to minimize, if not eliminate, inhibition; 2) analogous to child exploration of the environment, amusing, interesting and pertinent material is explored to build free expression on, through description, commentary, argumentation, or whatever the pragmatic function of the **professional environment**. As such, realistic situational dialogue models are not to be found in Free Expression, — much less any “reality-resembling” (structural) exercises. Indeed, as much as possible this pedagogy aims for the authentically real, not the realistic. In this quest, Free Expression trusts a) the workings of the mind, which through various mechanisms, operations and strategies progressively pieces together the linguistic puzzle, retaining along the way more and more of the L2 lexicon and grammatical system, so as to be increasingly operational in the designated goals of expression and communication; and b) the workings of language, in that the fundamental lexicon and structure of any given L2 (*langue* or also *langage*, in French), will naturally come up repeatedly, through the material as well as the average preoccupations or wishes of the learner in a given area. This tendency came through in my doctoral corpus, and the object of the colloquium workshop as well as of this article was to

²³ (My translation).

²⁴ “Structural” more specifically referred to the repeating of sentences with particular structures that were presumed to be basic to L2, — and whereby the learner deduced the implicit grammar. These exercises were the result of selection, organisation and progression of the linguistic material that was considered as necessary to ‘acquire’.

project it onto the **professional environment**. Indeed, this particular thematic domain, at once vast and defined, should provide ample opportunity for vocabulary and structures to surface recurringly, especially over time.

7.3. The memorization techniques

Remembering, recall, or word / form retrieval are of course fundamental concepts in language learning, but rarely based on sheer automatic memorization of a word. A natural communication situation can give rise to all types of memorization²⁵, making it more likely for the learner to progressively piece together the language puzzle, on his / her terms, and all the more rapidly. In a classroom situation, a whole range of operations and strategies can be employed (cf. examples in first section of this article): simple repetition of words through very mechanistic drills; working with cognates, where semantic and structural similarities between etymologically related L2 and L1 words are exploited ; or natural repetition of words within free expression. *Memory cues* (or “*moyens mnémotechniques*”), is a particular technique promoted in Free Expression, where learners are encouraged to more strategically recycle their own mental representations (of whatever origin they may be, — plurilingual, phonetic, lexical, affective, connotational²⁶, etc., — as long as they stem from the learner’s own psychological and social world²⁷, and work), so as to be able to re-employ them for forms retrieval. M. GAUTHIER termed such memory cues “*signes didactiques*”, or “*acquisitional signs*”²⁸, for they are signs, but more specifically *transitional signs*, serving as springboards towards L2 vocabulary recall.

Once a form has been mastered, entering reflex mode, these transitional signs disappear, having completed their mission. This phase is thus temporary, serving to create new memory paths for word retention and retrieval function. One example that came up at the IUT, where parallel True Beginner Spanish and Greek classes were carried out in Free

²⁵ Depending on the activities, can include visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, affective, social, procedural, explanation related declarative or conscious or explicit ; affect/action-related non-declarative or implicit, and associative, its sub-category, conscious, in more extreme cases even sub / unconscious), multiplying the references by which to allow knowledge to pass from the Short-Term Memory (STM) to the Long-Term Memory (LTM) (or Retention) phase.

²⁶ According to G. MOUNIN’S (1968) definition, — one among others provided in the GALISSON / COSTE (1977) language acquisition dictionary, and which is applicable here, — “ « Everything that, in the use of a word, is not common to the experience of all the users of this word in this language ». [...] In particular, the user’s emotional attitude with respect to the signes employed or received”, add the dictionary authors; or, according to PAULHAN (1929), (whom they also cite), “secondary ideas, detailed images various impressions” (p. 117). (My translation).

²⁷ cf Lev VYGOTSKY’S works

²⁸ I translate.

Expression, can illustrate this: the Spanish *el piso* [el 'piso] (apartment building floor) and the Greek ἔπιζο [el'pizo] (j'espère) could be used in the two respective languages as obvious memory cues. In EFL, a French learner can for example use the word 'police' as a springboard towards retaining the English word 'policy'.

Phonetic associations for memory cues can sometimes seem obvious. However, it is the learner's own mental representations that really have an impact on memory: because of their highly personal character, the impressions and associations that result can be as subjective, original, and affectively charged, as the individual producing them. In this sense, they carry heightened pertinence for the student, making learning as concrete as possible on a mental, cognitive basis.²⁹

7.4. The linguistic Free Expression equations

To recapitulate Free Expression in brief abstract figures, three comparisons can be made, as based on the hypothesis that in a given speech situation, what is said generally starts out as a meaningful intention, where each concept (as stemming from a referent) — in Saussurian linguistics an L1 *signified*, or *signifié*, or $Sé1$, — corresponds to, and is actualized with, a word from a given language, — ie. a *signifier*, or *signifiant*, or $Sã$. Thus, 1) in one's L1 the speaker goes from the $Sé1$ to the $Sã1$ usually in reflex fashion (especially in what concerns the fundamental lexicon). Hence the figure,

$$Sé1^{30} \longrightarrow \emptyset \text{ (metalanguage, or epilanguage}^{31}) \longrightarrow Sã1$$

2) in a L2 learning situation through Free Expression, the process involves the formulation of the student's intention-to-be-expressed ($Sé1$), initially expressed (or exposed) in L1 ($Sã1$) so as to subsequently be translated into L2 ($Sã2$) by the instructor or a capable classmate. ($Sã2$) is repeated by the learner, with the aim of assimilation. Should assimilation not occur at this point, the translation process needs to be repeated. Thus the figure,

$$Sé1 \longrightarrow Sã1 \longrightarrow Sã2 \text{ (teacher/translation)} \longrightarrow Sã2 \text{ (learner)} \quad (\longrightarrow)$$

Learner's Goal : $Sé2 \longrightarrow Sã2$.

²⁹ The ideal learning situation of course being the actual real-life experience.

³⁰ $Sé1$, as the $Sé$ can vary culturally, as we explain below.

7.5. Phonology, phonetics and the written form

At the IUT, pronunciation was also dealt with along the way, as it concretely arose in the students' formulations. In so far as initial learning in Free Expression is based solely on the oral component of L2, it is a *phonological*, not a *phonetic*, experience, (*phonetic* referring to the technical break-down of language into basic sounds, as represented by standard phonetic symbols; *phonological*, on the other hand, also known as *functionally phonetic*, is the study of sounds as they appear within the framework of communication). Students are in fact advised not to look at the written code of the language, so as to intensify their learning of vocabulary, structures and phonetics through speech acquisition channels, thus minimizing anything constituting a 'distracting' factor in this respect. M. GAUTHIER deemed appropriate that students deal with the written code halfway through the two-year programme. As in the case of the child who learns to speak L1 first, and begins to deal with the written code approximately five-six years later (discovering it, recognizing it, tracing it and sounding it out, then applying it through reading and written production), the young adult learner, in an adapted time-frame, had by this time 1) consolidated certain oral skills, and 2) constructed mental representations of the written code, which he was all the more ready to concretely test against the actual forms, readjusting wherever necessary. In this sense, any text dealt with in class was first presented to the students orally (and theatrically at that), and only afterwards presented to them, to discover in printed form.

Conclusion

Free Expression is a natural, conversational approach with a specific protocol. It has great potential in the domain of communicative methodology in foreign language education, as much in the school as in the **professional environment**, — where the development of L2 oral communication skills (EFL in particular) can indeed be urgent. Further exploration of this pedagogy is thus necessary, as much in the institutional classroom, as in the **professional environment**. This would doubtless also help further validate Free Expression in its wider potential, and perhaps allow it to move away from its 'alternative' epithet, and more into the mainstream, where the gap in (truly) communicative methodology remains wide. One specific area at the root of this, and worth re-focusing attention on, is *evaluation*, — that aspect of Free Expression which is presently carried out mainly qualitatively, whereas, in a very quantitative world it could benefit from further "quantitative" developing as well. Perhaps, not too far off into the future, schools and the professional domain, (enterprise, etc.), may be able to implement such technoscience as is for the moment mostly reserved for other

functions (eg. aiding the handicapped, etc.), capable of converting voice into text, or vice versa. Such technology could thus serve to discreetly capture and identify learners' voices, processing, quantifying, and ultimately evaluating oral language production as it spontaneously occurs in the classroom. Done manually, this is a vast and time-consuming process indeed. At the class level, it is the kind of task that for the moment only a researcher would undertake, (at best with the analytical aid of the computer, once the oral classroom productions have been transcribed and typed in) for the purposes of corpus analysis. To have a corpus and a level of evaluation available concerning the oral expression output of each class session would offer a new sense of control in this process over time, and would allow educators to finally feel more at ease with this type of approach (as opposed to relying only on the more traditional-type tests to monitor what students have learned).

In the meantime, however, the importance of the development of *oral expression* (through "*didactique de la parole*" or "*Adult L2 Speech Acquisition*") as can ultimately lead to *communicative competence*, merits that, with or without the aid of such technology, institutions and instructors in various teaching environments take the initiative to set up Free Expression programme components, and predispose students to expressing themselves and engaging in spontaneous communication. Ultimately, if quantification is important on a scientific or classroom evaluation level, learners, (as well as the instructors) **know** when progress has been made, linguistically (in exchanging with native speakers) and/or psychologically (in dealing with inhibitions, etc.), and that, irrespective of the evaluation issue, they only stand to gain from such a pedagogy. What may perhaps help is that evaluation functions differently in the **professional environment** where the teacher is concerned. On the other hand, it is fundamental concerning the learner, as a pedagogy is approved of (or not) to the extent that it is able to help one respond to a functional necessity in the workplace.

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