

## CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITS OF DISTANCE LEARNING TO ORAL EXPRESSION IN A FLE/FFL COURSE: (TEAMS PLATFORM CASE)

### *CONTRIBUIÇÕES E LIMITES DO ENSINO A DISTÂNCIA PARA A EXPRESSÃO ORAL EM UM CURSO DE FRANCÊS COMO LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA: (USO DA PLATAFORMA TEAMS)*

**Serrar Marwan**

ORCID 0000-0002-5841-4906

Humanities and Education Laboratory, ERDLM,  
ENS Tétouan, Abdelmalek Essaadi University  
Tétouan, Maroc.

[marwan123ez@gmail.com](mailto:marwan123ez@gmail.com)

**Chinkhir Btissam**

ORCID 0009-0006-2581-642X

Humanities and Education Laboratory, ERDLM, ENS  
Tétouan, Abdelmalek Essaadi University  
Tétouan, Maroc.

[chinkhiribtissam@gmail.com](mailto:chinkhiribtissam@gmail.com)

**Ibrahimi Ahmed**

ORCID 0009-0004-8879-5561

Humanities and Education Laboratory, ERDLM,  
ENS Tétouan, Abdelmalek Essaadi University  
Tétouan, Maroc.

[aibrahimi@uae.ac.ma](mailto:aibrahimi@uae.ac.ma)

**Abstract.** Following the alleviation of the health crisis, many researchers recommended the preservation of the synchronous teaching mode in the teaching/learning process. In light of this development, many of the paradigms governing the field of education have shifted to include new technologies in education to a greater extent. In this context, foreign language teaching has in turn undergone significant changes. Classical and traditional methods and face-to-face teaching, while still functional and relevant, have been supplemented by ICT, which optimizes school activities and extends the learning environment into the digital realm, including the distance aspect of synchronous mode. However, the adoption of this mode is detrimental to one of the main components of this teaching - oral expression; participative and interactive in nature, the latter risks losing these main characteristics when carried out remotely if proper integration is not put in place. To guarantee this, it is necessary to continue adopting effective pedagogical strategies in face-to-face teaching of oral expression and transpose them to distance learning. Therefore, this work is based on the goal of observing the progress of the oral expression activity remotely, in order to identify the contributions and limits of this mode to this type of activity. To this end, the first part of this work will establish a theoretical foundation explaining the evolution of the didactics of oral expression, and then identify the place of the task of this discipline in distance mode. In the second part, the context of the study, the target audience and module, and the method and tools used are explained. Finally, after analyzing the advantages and disadvantages identified in the remote oral expression activity, we will offer some suggestions for integration based on our analysis of this observation.

**Keywords:** oral expression, FLE, action approach, distance learning.

**Resumo.** Após o alívio da crise de saúde, muitos pesquisadores recomendaram a preservação do modo de ensino síncrono no processo de ensino/aprendizagem. À luz desse desenvolvimento, muitos dos paradigmas que regem o campo da educação mudaram para incluir mais das novas tecnologias na educação. Nesse contexto, o ensino de idiomas estrangeiros também passou por mudanças significativas. Os métodos clássicos e tradicionais, bem como o ensino presencial, embora ainda funcionais e relevantes, foram complementados pelas TICs, que permitem que as atividades escolares sejam otimizadas e que o ambiente de aprendizagem seja ampliado para incluir o aspecto digital e à distância do modo síncrono. No entanto, a adoção desse modo prejudica um dos principais componentes desse ensino - a expressão oral; de natureza participativa e interativa, essa última corre o risco de perder suas principais características durante o ensino a distância se não for devidamente integrada. Para garantir isso, é necessário continuar adotando estratégias pedagógicas eficazes no ensino da expressão oral em sala de aula e transpô-las para o ensino a distância. É nesse sentido que se baseia este estudo,



com o objetivo de observar o andamento da atividade de expressão oral a distância, a fim de identificar as contribuições e limitações dessa modalidade para esse tipo de atividade. Para tanto, este trabalho buscará, em primeiro lugar, estabelecer uma base teórica que explique a evolução da didática da expressão oral e, em seguida, identificar o lugar da tarefa dessa disciplina na modalidade a distância. A segunda parte trata do contexto do estudo, do público-alvo e do módulo, além de uma explicação do método e das ferramentas utilizadas. Por fim, depois de analisar as vantagens e desvantagens identificadas durante a atividade de expressão oral remota, serão apresentadas as possibilidades de integração após a análise dessa observação.

**Palavras-chave:** expressão oral, FLE, abordagem baseada em ações, ensino à distância.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of developments affecting the educational world in general, and language teaching in particular, a number of educational establishments and programs have integrated digital solutions in response to the health crisis, in order to guarantee pedagogical continuity. These transformations, although sometimes perceived as temporary, have ended up becoming a permanent feature of the educational system. Among the changes observed, distance learning has become a key component of a large number of educational programs. Relying on digital platforms, virtual environments and interactive tools, this mode of teaching has proved not only useful for meeting geographical and health constraints, but also promising for enriching pedagogical practices.

As a result, foreign language teaching has not escaped this transition. The need to deliver part of courses remotely has necessitated the use of digital platforms and environments such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Google classroom. These tools, initially designed to facilitate distance communication and the management of teaching resources, were quickly adopted to meet more complex needs, such as the teaching of language skills. As a result, a number of questions have been raised by researchers with a view to integrating distance learning into foreign language teaching. Among these questions is the integration of oral expression activities via this mode, while maintaining the interactive and participative aspect of this component.

In the context of our study, the OFPPT<sup>1</sup> has followed global trends by adding, in 2020, an hourly volume dedicated to distance learning for the majority of modules, particularly the FLE module (OFPPT, 2020). Faced with the obligation to migrate to online platforms such as Microsoft Teams to maintain learning activities, particularly oral expression, which is a central skill in foreign language acquisition, it is necessary to guarantee the smooth running of this activity via TEAMS.

With this in mind, this study attempts to answer the following questions: What are the real contributions of the distance mode to the speaking task? Can digital tools and platforms such as TEAMS effectively replace face-to-face interaction, or do they present limitations likely to impact the teaching-learning process? What are the best ways of integrating oral expression into distance learning?

In an attempt to find answers to these questions, we begin with a brief review of the literature, which will serve as a theoretical anchor for our work. The latter deals with the didactics of oral expression in the era of synchronous distance teaching, and with the task of oral expression according to the action-oriented perspective in distance mode. The methodology section will then explore the context of the study, the tools used and the research methodology adopted. The results and discussion sections aim to process, analyze, discuss and synthesize the results of the study. Finally, we conclude with the study's limitations.

<sup>1</sup> « Office de la formation professionnelle et de la promotion du travail », which forms the context of our study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. For an oral didactics in the era of synchronous distance learning

In the synchronous teaching era, the tools and media adopted have evolved considerably to offer more and more functionalities such as videoconferencing, screen sharing, interactive whiteboards and virtual classrooms. The benefits of this evolution are to guarantee good teacher/learner interaction, enabling the possibility of integrating oral language teaching remotely (Ould Benali, Boukerchi, & Cortier, 2021) (Belt & Lowenthal, 2023).

Oral didactics, on the other hand, remains focused on the importance of authentic and interactive communication for this type of teaching (Aslan, 2021). To guarantee this, it is necessary to continue adopting effective pedagogical strategies in face-to-face oral teaching and transpose them to distance learning. These include the use of authentic communicative tasks, such as role-playing or discussions. In addition, the preservation of constructive feedback in real time during remote oral interactions enables learners to know their performance, which will promote their progress (Mehdiyev, 2020; Xie, 2023). It is also worth noting that the social dimension of oral teaching/learning needs to be taken into account by creating an environment conducive to expression and listening, even at a distance (Niu, 2020).

### 2.2. The oral expression task according to the action-oriented perspective in distance mode

According to Branden et al. (2009), the task is an essential element of the action learning approach to course design and scripting. They are concrete, realistic situations that prompt the learner to use the target language to achieve a goal. In an e-learning mode, the task can be adapted to be carried out remotely, while retaining its interactivity thanks to digital tools and resources.

We have found several tools and strategies to ensure that the task runs smoothly in remote synchronous mode. For example, according to Durand & Poirier (2012), the value of active listening and feedback is a major contribution and added value to the completion of these activities. In her work, Mailles-Viard Metz, (2015), cites 4 types of tools that can help carry out this type of activity: “learning management platforms / awareness tools / Personal Learning Environments (PLEs/EPA) / management and self-assessment tools”.

To these types we can also add telecollaboration tools Sharma, (2016), which are one of the functionalities of platforms such as Skype and Viber, and enable learners to exploit a variety of communication tools. All these types of tools and support once integrated into the realization of a task in synchronous, asynchronous and even hybrid mode will be able to preserve its interactivity and at the same time learner motivation.

### 2.3. Educational communication and digital technology

The advent of digital technology in education has led to a number of changes in the paradigms governing the teaching/learning process. As a result, pedagogical communication has also undergone significant development. Whereas it was perceived as the set of information exchanges between teacher and learner in an educational context that was restricted to the classroom, or even as a multifunctional process encompassing the organization, establishment and development of communication, understanding, cooperation and interaction between teachers and students, generated by the objectives and content of their mutual activity Leont'ev, (1979), by Assilkhanova & Ilimkhanova, (2014) . Now, with the integration of ICT into the educational field, this notion has expanded beyond its traditional framework to include hybrid and asynchronous teaching platforms and even the ludic world with serious games (Blanié, 2022; Celik & Mangenot, 2004).

This evolution in pedagogical communication has gained momentum in recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic we witnessed, which accelerated the transition to e-learning (Gagnon-Tremblay & Turcotte, 2021). However, this change posed several challenges for teachers in terms of appropriating technologies and engaging students in their learning. As a result, many researchers and didacticians have tried to rethink new pedagogical interaction practices adapted to these new modes of teaching - hybrid and asynchronous - in order to preserve the interactivity of the teaching/learning process and deal with the communication barriers associated with these modes.

#### **2.4. Facilitating and obstructing interactivity in the remote synchronous foreign language classroom**

The debate on the question of the effectiveness of synchronous mode is fairly mixed in the academic sphere. By way of example, we cite the meta-analysis by Bernard, (2004), whose results indicate that distance learning applications can be more effective than classroom teaching in some cases, but less effective in others. They note that these results vary according to the use of this mode.

Among the benefits of this mode we can cite the enhancement of comprehension and oral expression in a mediatized environment thanks to the videoconferencing device, which reinforces the need to communicate and interact by encouraging group work and then arousing in the learner the need to communicate and be understood (Marcelli et al., 2005). Other researchers have drawn attention to another advantage, that of fostering learner autonomy. In this mode, in addition to carrying out research in the discipline being taught, learners also need to prepare the work environment on their own, search for the necessary materials, contact the teacher in the event of a breakdown, search for information on their own in certain cases... (Martin, 2005). Not to mention the fact that it helps teachers improve their digital skills and discover the great potential of ICT (Macedo-Rouet, 2009).

However, we must not overlook the limitations of this mode, despite its many advantages, which without solutions contribute to a considerable drop in interactivity. Among the most important obstacles to overcome are those of a technical nature, reflected in the inability to master the use of ICT adapted to this mode (Marchand, 2001), which has the consequence of limiting interactivity and hindering the teaching/learning process. Purely informative, non-active use, as we saw earlier, also represents a major challenge to interactivity. A synthesis of these obstacles was provided by Zhao Y. , (2021), who showed that the main limits to interactivity linked to the distance mode were the time lag between transmission and reception, and the reduced desire to participate and interact due to being in front of a screen, which requires adaptation to the communication style.

#### **2.5. The role of digital media, tools and environments in the development of language competence**

We note that in the context of foreign language teaching, several studies have been carried out to demonstrate the contribution of these resources to the acquisition and development of language skills. Nejdi et al (2024) propose the integration of mobile applications in a FLE/FFL course, firstly for their attractiveness to the public, but also for the wide choice of activities they offer. As for Garbarino & Lesparre, (2024), they study the integration of virtual reality and augmented reality because they enable learners to work on their verbal communication and pronunciation, not forgetting that they also offer a better understanding of the target language and more immersive practice.

The studies cited above and others are supported by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which in turn recommends integrating these resources using an

action-oriented approach, with the added benefit of developing online interactions for learners of the target foreign language (Council of Europe, 2003).

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

#### 3.1. Target audience and context of the activity

The target audience of our study is a specialized technician<sup>2</sup> (techniciens spécialisés) class made up of 21 learners. This is a heterogeneous class with levels ranging from A1 to B2. As for the context of the study, it concerns an FLE course in vocational training at the OFPPT. The course will take place remotely, as the timetable in this context allows<sup>3</sup>.

#### 3.2. Research methodology and tools

Nous For this work, we'll be adopting the non-participant observation method, which will enable us to follow the progress of the oral expression activity at a remote location without the learners being aware of it, so as not to alter their normal behavior. This observation will enable us to identify the contributions and limitations of this mode to this type of activity.

The technical tools used for this work are the Teams functionalities for monitoring the progress of the activity (Microsoft, 2023):

- Real-time audiovisual interaction functionality: which encourages communication and oral comprehension in French, as well as pronunciation practice thanks to the sound-sharing option. The visual aspect of the camera can be a great asset for activities requiring gestures.
- Screen sharing and whiteboard functionality: teachers and learners alike can share teaching aids and resources. This feature can even be used to share an interactive exercise or game with learners.
- Workgroup creation functionality: which enables us to carry out tasks requiring teamwork remotely, thus promoting telecollaboration among learners.
- Recording and transcribing sessions, enabling the teacher to analyze his or her actions and remedy any shortcomings, and the learner to follow his or her progress over the course of the sessions.

In order to evaluate the progress of this activity and guarantee objective observation, we will be basing ourselves on the criteria used in the DELF oral production evaluation grid:

- Pragmatic competence / task completion: interaction, comprehension and response, feedback
- Linguistic competence: vocabulary, morphosyntax, mastery of the phonological system.

Given that our activity is distance learning, we'll be adding other criteria recommended by the CEFR in this case, in order to study the multiple facets of the way our activity is carried out: use of digital tools (technical / digital competence); commitment and participation; autonomy.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Distribution of target audience by CEFR language level

We were able to gather this data thanks to the diagnostic assessment carried out at the start of the module via the Altissia platform.

<sup>2</sup> Level of education equivalent to baccalaureate +2 in exit profile

<sup>3</sup> The FLE ( French as a foreign language) module in our context is spread over 65h, divided into 35h face-to-face and 30h distance learning.

**Table 1:** Distribution of learners according to CEFR levels

level	Number of learners
A1	4
A2	9
B1	6
B2	2
Total	21

Source:

We find that the majority of learners are in the A2 and B1 levels, indicating that the target audience has an average elementary plus to intermediate level. These results imply that particular attention will need to be paid to the specific needs of A1 level learners to help them keep up with the group. In addition, activities need to be sufficiently varied to meet the expectations of each learner.

## 4.2. Pragmatic competence

**Table 2:** Observations related to pragmatic subcomponents

Sub-components	Observations
Task completion	-The task was completed by 18 learners. -The remaining 3 used connection problems as an excuse.
Comprehension and response	-The majority understood the task from the first explanation, while a minority needed further clarification.
Interaction	-For task-related interactions: almost as much as normal. -For general interactions: very few.
Feed-back	-Feedback from learners to the teacher's words, remarks and instructions is fairly rare.

Source:

These data reveal that the majority of learners (over 85%) completed the assigned task. For the remaining minority, failure to complete the task was due to technical obstacles. This reveals a good level of overall involvement, but highlights the need to ensure a better technical infrastructure or to propose alternatives in the event of connection problems.

Next, for the comprehension and response sub-component, we note from the results that the clarity of instructions is effective overall, but to further reduce the need for clarification, it may be useful to use visual aids or practical examples.

Furthermore, observation of the interactions may reflect learners' lack of desire and spontaneity in non-task-related exchanges. It might be useful to encourage this type of interaction in addition to task-related ones through appropriate activities.



Finally, the lack of feedback from distance learners may be due to a lack of habit or understanding of the importance of feedback in the learning process. Raising awareness of the importance of feedback, combined with a reassuring environment, could improve this aspect.

### 4.3. Linguistic competence

**Table 3:** Observations related to linguistic subcomponents

In terms of language competence, observation focused on the three sub-components of the table. With regard to lexical observations, the learner's productions show a higher level of

Sub-components	Observations
Vocabulary	-The majority of the productions presented contain advanced vocabulary (above the level of the learners).
Morpho-syntactic range	-Sentences are very well structured and enunciated (relatively better than those in the face-to-face tasks).
Mastery of the phonological system	-Nothing to report

vocabulary than their own. However, since a diagnostic assessment was carried out prior to this study and consequently revealed the learners' actual level, this observation cannot be explained by the mastery of a rich and advanced vocabulary on the part of the learners. It can, however, be explained by the opportunity that learners in distance mode have to resort to external help emanating from the Internet.

Observations on Morpho-syntactic range reveal that the sentences produced by learners are more correctly and coherently structured than those produced in face-to-face mode. This observation confirms the use of external digital aids.

Lastly, there was nothing to report on the mastery of the phonological system.

### 4.4. Cross-disciplinary skills

**Table 4:** Observations related to cross-disciplinary subcomponents

Sub-components	Observations
Use of digital tools	-The majority have mastered the basic digital tools, although a small number are still struggling with certain TEAMS functionalities.
Commitment and Participation	-Only 5 productions were presented voluntarily, the other 13 after the teacher's request. - Fewer questions and comments from learners than during a face-to-face course. - Less initiative
Autonomy	- Learners asked for very little in the way of clarification of the task. - As for other aspects of the distance learning course, learners were quite confused.

Source:

This last table brings together the observations relating to digital and cross-disciplinary skills taken into account in this study.

As far as the use of digital tools is concerned, the majority of learners have mastered basic digital tools, which is a major asset for learning in the digital age. However, a minority have difficulty with some of the specific functionalities of a platform like Teams, which could limit their effective participation in online activities.

Regarding the engagement and participation component, we noted that learner engagement appears to be lower online than in face-to-face. Fewer learners submitted work on their own initiative, and there was less interaction with the teacher. This finding may be linked to technical problems encountered by learners, or to the fact that learners can use certain excuses that do not exist in face-to-face mode.

Finally, as far as autonomy is concerned, learners appear to be relatively autonomous in carrying out the tasks assigned to them, since they need little clarification. However, this autonomy seems to be limited to specific tasks. For the more general aspects of distance learning, learners express difficulties, suggesting a greater need for support.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide us with interesting insights into the process of transferring oral expression activities to the distance mode. Our observations show that this mode of teaching offers advantages likely to improve the progress of this type of activity, but also contains disadvantages that can be detrimental to it.

First and foremost, learners are able to use the digital tools and supports individually to improve their productions. We noted that the majority of the productions presented showed evidence of recourse to external assistance - translation tools, proofreaders, artificial intelligence, etc. - as the quality of the presentations exceeded the level of the learners. This recourse to external assistance can be a major asset in helping learners improve their vocabulary and sentence structure. However, this asset is conditional on the use of this assistance for learning purposes, since if learners resort to it only to free themselves from the task, it could hinder the teaching-learning process. It is worth noting that this mode enables learners to get used to expressing themselves orally in a digital environment, which in addition to improving their language skills could help them in realistic and professional tasks such as preparing for a job interview at distance mode, presenting in a videoconference meeting...

With regard to the challenges that could hinder the success of the remote oral expression activity, we noted the lack of commitment and participation on the part of the learners. This disadvantage is due to the fact that learners can use excuses that do not exist in the classroom (connection problems, platform failure, etc.). In addition, the absence of a suitable learning environment in some learners' homes contributes to a lack of motivation on the part of learners and disengages them from the course, as well as undermining the interactivity of the activity. Another challenge is the inability of learners to be sufficiently autonomous in using the platforms' functionalities to carry out the activity. The latter is caused by learners' lack of familiarity with studying remotely, with the majority of them studying for the first time at home, which poses a problem of adaptation and autonomy.

Consequently, in order to improve the benefits of this mode and overcome the obstacles it presents during the oral expression activity, we propose the following courses of action:

- Make learners aware of the importance of learning outside the classroom.
- Design interactive tasks likely to motivate learners, even in remote mode, and thus guarantee interactivity.
- Dedicate a certain amount of time to introducing learners to the many features that will help them become autonomous during remote sessions.
- Assign tasks with the particularity of encouraging learners not to rely entirely on the help provided by the Internet, but to use it as a learning tool to improve their own productions and consequently develop their levels.



- Include the remote aspect in summative assessment (propose a remote speaking task such as an online interview as an assessment for this component of FLE teaching).FLE)

## 6. STUDY LIMITATIONS

Like all studies, this one has its limitations. These include:

- Sampling: given that the school where our target audience studies is located in a small town, and that the learners are mainly from poor or average families, they may not quite represent the totality of specialized technicians.
- Observation was spread over 5 hours “2 sessions of 2h30”, which may not be enough.
- Lack of evaluation and criterion-referenced observation grids to assess cross-curricular and numerical skills during an oral expression activity, especially in distance mode. Consequently, it was necessary to develop a grid based on previous work and the recommendations of the CEFR. However, the criteria adopted may not cover all the criteria that need to be taken into account.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The adoption of the distance mode in French as a foreign language in the Moroccan context of vocational training has led to the need to think of credible avenues likely to improve the conduct of FLE activities in this mode of teaching.

The aim of our study is to optimize the delivery of oral expression activities remotely. To do this, we needed to identify the contributions and limitations of this mode to the speaking task, using non-participatory observation. This approach highlighted a number of significant aspects. On the one hand, distance learning offers undeniable advantages, such as the spatio-temporal flexibility that enables learners to practice the target language in a digital environment, in addition to access to a variety of digital tools. However, this teaching method also has its limitations. Technical difficulties, the absence of physical interaction and a lack of autonomy can all detract from the quality of oral interaction. In addition, crucial aspects such as learner motivation, interaction and commitment can be put to the test.

The results obtained have enabled us to suggest ways of improving the advantages and overcoming the obstacles identified. Making learners aware of the importance of the distance mode in learning, designing tasks that guarantee interactivity even in distanciel mode... The implementation and application of these and other ideas could be the key to guaranteeing the effectiveness of the distance mode for the oral expression task.

Nevertheless, in addition to the proposed avenues, this work has enabled us to identify questions that could be the subject of future studies to remedy the limitations of this one, such as: What are the transversal and digital skills that need to be assessed in a distance learning FLE course? What is the need in terms of training for trainers to enable teachers to manage a distance foreign language course? What are the pedagogical, didactic and social aspects influencing distance learning of FLE?

Ultimately, we can say that this work highlights the contributions and limits of the distance mode in the teaching/learning of foreign languages, and more specifically the activity of oral expression. The future of hybrid foreign language teaching lies in our ability to skillfully navigate between real and virtual environments (face-to-face, distance and asynchronous) to create an engaging and meaningful learning experience that prepares learners to succeed in an increasingly connected and multilingual world.

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