

*The Challenge of Sounds in FL Listening and Speaking:
Perspectives From Dutch Learners of French and Their Teachers*

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Abstract

Foreign language (FL) listening comprehension and pronunciation skills appeal to the mastery of the target language's (TL) sounds and sound patterns. If learners encounter difficulties when listening to the TL, the amount of language serving as input for language learning decreases and they will also have limited opportunities to engage in oral communication. FL listening and production challenges are often explained from a cognitive (e.g. Dupoux & Peperkamp, 2002; De Jong et al., 2012) or articulatory (e.g. Colantoni & Steele, 2008) perspective. Previous studies also show that activities raising learners' awareness of TL sound patterns benefit both perception and production (e.g. Bradlow et al., 1997; Tsang, 2019). Research findings on sound pattern difficulties and phonics instruction however appear to percolate only slowly and limitedly into educational practice. This contribution brings research and classroom practice together. Taking the productive and perceptive difficulties encountered by Dutch secondary school pupils learning French as a starting point (Brand & Berns, 2023), we further complete the picture with questionnaire results tracing pupils' and teachers' perspectives. Our findings confirm the segregated nature of listening comprehension and pronunciation teaching, which seems to directly impact learners' lack of confidence when producing and listening to word chains. We further discuss the usefulness of attention for sounds and features for various learner groups, the perceived adequacy of textbook listening and speaking activities, and possibilities and limitations for the curriculum. The outcomes are based on the French language classroom, but are also considered in the light of FL learning in general.

Keywords: FL Pronunciation Skills, FL Listening Comprehension, FL Oral Production, Educational Practice

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1. Introduction

Learning the sounds and sound patterns of the target language (TL) is similar to learning other elements of the language, such as vocabulary, morphosyntax or semantics: a learner needs to be familiarised with the structures of the TL and its differences with their mother tongue (e.g. Colantoni & Steele, 2008; Tsang, 2019). This requires regular TL exposure and training, during which it is also key to focus on the development and automatization of receptive and productive oral language skills (cf. Pennington & Richards 1986, 217-218).

In the case of FL reading and writing learners may reread or rewrite a message when needed, but oral language skills are more instantaneous and volatile. In authentic communication, a learner may ask their interlocutor to repeat a message, but this cannot be done endlessly and there are numerous imaginable situations of oral communication where there is no possibility for repetition or relistening. When engaged in oral production learners have to react relatively quickly, there are no or limited opportunities to start over and mistakes transpire immediately. Receptive and productive oral skills therefore pose a particular challenge for learners that can also make them feel insecure or anxious (e.g. Horwitz, 2001; Phillips, 1991/1992).

In the course of language learning history, attention paid to the TL's sounds has varied considerably. As already transpires in its name, the grammar-translation approach (which was dominant up to the end of the 19th century) did not allocate any explicit room for pronunciation and listening skills. The main focus was put on written comprehension and production, as this allowed learners to gain access to FL literature or to write and read letters in this language (e.g. Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010). From the second half of the 19th century, the importance of paying attention to TL sounds for developing oral fluency was put on the agenda more often, for instance by the language teaching methodologists Thomas Prendergast, François Gouin and Maximilian Berlitz. Gouin (1892, 137) phrased it as follows: "the written word [is] the shadow of the spoken word". The introduction of the International Phonetic Alphabet in 1887 also contributed to an increased attention for FL phonetics in the curriculum, and supporters of the Reform Movement saw it as important for a learner to pay attention to the exact realisation of TL sounds through explicit, formal, instruction. The audiolingual method that clearly emerged from the 1940s continued to allocate a prominent position to TL sounds. By "drilling" chunks in language laboratories, both learners' productive and perceptive oral abilities were automatized. With the advent of the communicative approach in the 1970s and 1980s, the focus on TL sounds changed again. Oral skills are of clear importance both productively and receptively, but training of these skills is centered around functional intelligibility. Attention to sound thus became less explicit and less detailed, especially at the lower levels of language proficiency.

Learning the sounds and sound patterns of the target language thus involves several considerations. Both the amount of attention that should be paid to TL phonetics and phonology, and the way in which this should be done, are still subject to debate. This paper takes a closer look at the extent to which paying attention to TL sounds is perceived as useful, stimulating and motivating in a secondary school context by investigating attitudes, beliefs and experiences of Dutch learners of French and their teachers. Section 2 first looks at different strategies that learners use to decode the FL speech chain and discusses previous results regarding perceptual and productive challenges of Dutch FL learners of French. Section 3 then describes the method used for the present study, and in section 4 the results are presented – first from the learner perspective, followed by the teacher perspective. We

conclude this contribution in section 5, by synthesising our key-findings and highlighting several angles for future research.

2. Background

2.1 Strategies for Deciphering TL Speech

In current classroom practice FL teachers often implement a top-down approach to promote listening comprehension. They provide their pupils with listening strategies (e.g., using background knowledge, contextual information) as a tool for figuring out the general meaning of the acoustic signal. Little attention is paid to what the target language sounds like to FL learners or to the factors that can impede comprehension (Tsang, 2019). A bottom-up approach aims to foster the knowledge of FL sounds and sound patterns as it facilitates the segmentation and decoding of the acoustic signal. In real life listening, both top-down and bottom-up approaches are used, with more emphasis on either of them depending on the listening goal and listeners' knowledge of the language (McClelland & Elman, 1986; Norris et al., 2000). Beginning learners may not have enough knowledge of the FL to use their top-down skills (Hildyard & Olson, 1982; Cornaire, 1998) and bottom-up listening activities can then help them to fill in the gaps. Research has shown that explicit instruction, drawing attention to language-specific phonetic/phonological properties, can not only improve FL learners' listening comprehension but can also benefit their pronunciation (e.g., Bradlow et al., 1997; Felker et al., 2021; Tsang, 2019). This combined effect would make instruction on the TL sound signal even more valuable than previously thought. Timely exposure to such instruction would not only be beneficial for advanced learners, but also for beginning learners as it could help them to see through prominent difficulties from an early stage onwards.

2.2 Oral Skills and Language Anxiety

The process of language learning may come with varying degrees of insecurity or anxiety for learners. As reported by existing research (e.g. Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 2001), this particularly holds for oral skills, where learners are confronted with the TL's sound signal and have to be able to interpret and possibly react quite instantaneously. Any misinterpretations or productive errors in TL language use are immediately noticeable. In written language modes, on the contrary, learners may take a bit more time if they wish and they can reread a text, look up unknown words or expressions, or rewrite their text where needed.

This linguistic anxiety may be further exacerbated by the fact that learners are often learning a language as part of a pre-defined curriculum in classroom settings, so also the impact of "classroom anxiety" and "test anxiety" have to be taken into account (e.g. Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2002). Again, these two forms of anxiety seem to have an especially high impact on oral forms of language. If learners have to listen to audio they cannot decipher, if they have to engage in a dialogue they cannot follow, if they have to speak in front of the classroom or if they have to read-aloud to their teacher and their peers, learners (especially in their puberty) may feel very uncomfortable, and this may impact their language learning process. Lefkowitz & Hedgcock (2002) state it as follows: "[...] strong social currents in their classroom communities [...] can inhibit successful interaction and language learning" (p. 239), which means that "FL teachers should likewise attempt to discern whether unsatisfactory oral production reflects covert social dynamics (e.g., the pursuit of peer

approval), inadequate acquisition of FL speech skills, or perhaps a combination of the two” (p. 240).

2.3 Perceptive and Productive Difficulties for Dutch FL Learners of French

To determine in what respect(s) FL teachers could optimise learners’ phonetic/phonological awareness, as to improve learners’ productive and receptive skills, Brand & Berns (2023) investigated the perceptive and productive difficulties that Dutch FL learners of French encounter. Thirteen third grade secondary school pupils (mean age = 14,2 years) were asked to perform a dictation, and subsequently had to do a translation and a reading-aloud task. The dictation task aimed at tracing learners’ processing of French words in a short sentence and their phoneme-grapheme mapping, the reading-aloud task provided insight into the transposition of graphemes into sounds, and by means of the translation task we could control for lexical knowledge. We analysed learners’ performances on language-specific phonetic/phonological properties: 1) voiced vs. voiceless fricatives (e.g., *vous*, ‘you’, vs. *fou*, ‘crazy’), 2) non-transparent mapping between French pronunciation and orthography (e.g., the sound [o] can be written as *o*, *ô*, *au*, *aut*, *aux*, *eau*, *eaux*, *ot*, *os*) and 3) nasal vowels.

Results showed a dominant effect of writing in both perception and production. The perception data revealed that lexically unfamiliar words are difficult to link to a possible written form. Interestingly, lexically familiar words (as confirmed by the translation task) were often not recognized in their oral forms either. In production, realisations emerged that clearly betrayed a letter-based pronunciation. Pupils used an intermediate strategy that allows them to memorise the spelling of a word, but that does not yet steer them toward a correct pronunciation, a strategy tellingly reflected in Gouin’s (1892, 137) remark that “the first cause [...] of a false accent and pronunciation is the study of languages by means of reading”. For the production of unfamiliar words, learners tried to deduct the pronunciation by piecing together sound-letter combinations they knew (from frequently occurring items and chunks), or they relied on grapheme-phoneme correspondences in Dutch or in other languages they were familiar with, such as English and Spanish.¹

These results clearly indicate the need for bottom-up listening activities allowing learners to transgress their writing-based representations. Taking the productive and perceptive difficulties encountered by Dutch secondary school pupils learning French as a starting point, the present study further extends the picture of TL sounds in the French language classroom by exploring the attitudes and experiences among pupils and their teachers.

3. Method

116 Dutch secondary school pupils filled in a questionnaire during one of their French classes. 15 of them are enrolled at a school in Utrecht (located in the ‘Randstad’, the urban conglomeration in the west of the country), and 101 of them go to school in Hulst (a village in the province of Zeeland, bordering Flanders). They were all born and raised in the Netherlands (or in the Flemish border region in the case of some Hulst pupils), and speak

¹ E.g. the pronunciation of *continuer* and *histoire* was influenced by their English counterparts ‘to continue’ and ‘history’, and the pronunciation of *que* (‘that’) was occasionally influenced by the Spanish equivalent *que*, realised as [ke].

Dutch at home. None of the learners reported hearing problems or dyslexia. The participants come from three different grades (Table 1).²

	First grade	Third grade	Fifth grade
Level	Pre-university education (‘vwo’)	Pre-university education (‘vwo’)	Preparatory higher vocational education (‘havo’)
n	43	56	17

Table 1: Dutch FL learners of French

Next to the demographic background questions, the questionnaire contained another 27 questions (23 closed and 4 open-ended questions) asking for:

- an estimation of their performances in French reading, writing, listening and speaking (10-point Likert scale);
- an estimation of their language anxiety level during French speech perception and production (5-point Likert scale);
- two key words representing their likes and dislikes regarding the teaching of speech perception and production;
- their experiences with and wishes for the audio materials used in class and their textbook (5-point Likert scale and open-ended questions).

18 teachers (Tables 2 and 3), teaching French in seven different Dutch provinces, shared their experiences in a questionnaire. These teachers were contacted via modern foreign languages teachers’ communities on LinkedIn and via the professional networks of both authors. The participating teachers replied anonymously and filled in the questionnaires via Google Forms.

Next to several questions about the teacher’s background, this questionnaire included 26 questions (10 closed and 16 open-ended questions) about the following topics:

- the estimated time (in minutes) spent on the teaching of reading, writing, listening, speaking and pronunciation;
- possible reasons for productive and perceptive difficulties that pupils (may) encounter;
- possible ways to overcome these difficulties;
- the extent to which teachers consider it important to pay attention to pronunciation (5-point Likert scale).

Teaching experience (in years)	< 5	5-10	> 10
Teachers (n)	2	4	12

Table 2: Teaching experience of the Dutch secondary school teachers of French

	Qualified for all levels of secondary school	Qualified for lower secondary school	Teacher trainees
Teachers (n)	12	4	2

Table 3: Teachers’ level of qualification

² This research design was approved by the ethics assessment committee of the Radboud Teachers Academy in February 2022.

4. Results

4.1 Current Classroom Practice

Table 4 shows how many minutes teachers spend on average on the teaching of reading, writing, speaking, listening and pronunciation in lower and upper secondary education. Across the FL curriculum, but even more so during the final years, most of the class time is devoted to reading. This result reflects a washback effect, brought about by the fact that the Dutch nationwide final exam solely consists of reading comprehension and represents 50% of pupils' final grade. The remaining 50% consists of tests that assess various language skills (potentially also including reading) and these grades are collected at different moments throughout upper secondary school. Teachers have to divide their rather limited class time between the various skills, and in their tightly packed curriculum attention to pronunciation is indeed less embedded.

	Minutes per week	
	Lower secondary education	Upper secondary education
Reading	21,0	37,4
Writing	18,0	34,0
Speaking	18,2	30,6
Listening	17,9	27,0
Pronunciation	10,0	15,4

Table 4: Estimated average time (in minutes) spent on teaching FL skills

Although teachers do not, or cannot, pay much attention to pronunciation in the FL classroom, most teachers find this aspect important (see Figure 1).

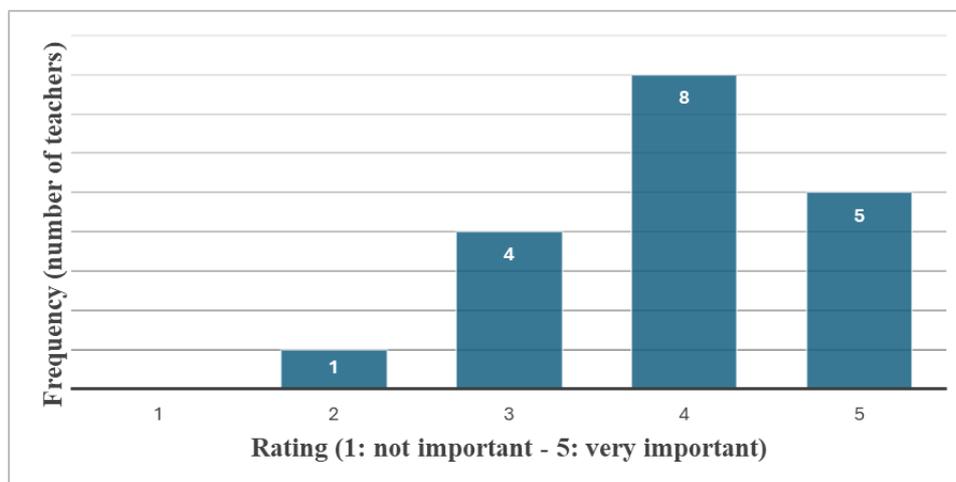


Figure 1: The importance of pronunciation teaching according to FL teachers of French

4.2 Self-Reported Levels of Proficiency and Anxiety

Table 5 below summarises pupils' evaluation of their own language skills on a 10-point scale (corresponding to the grading scale used in educational settings in The Netherlands, where 10 is the highest possible grade and where 5,5 or 6,0 represents a passing grade).

	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	Pronunciation	Mean across competences
Yr1 Pre-university	5,5	5,4	4,9	5,2	5,7	5,3
Yr3 Pre-university	6,0	5,8	4,8	5,1	6,5	5,6
Yr5 Preparatory higher vocational education	6,1	5,6	5,7	5,1	6,4	5,8

Table 5: Self-reported proficiency scores

Pupils rate their French skills rather modestly, as reflected by the mean across competences that is close to the passing grade of 5,5 or just below. In both year 1 and year 3, learners rate speaking, and especially listening, as their weakest competences. Year 5 remains equally uncertain about oral production, but contrary to the two preceding groups, both writing and listening seem to be equally difficult for them. The results show a clear discrepancy in self-attributed scores between speaking, the overall lowest score across years, and pronunciation, the overall highest score across years. This seems paradoxical at first sight. Based on the answers on the open-ended questions, it becomes clear that pupils are used to repeating words or short expressions in isolation, hence the relatively high score assigned to pronunciation. Linking sounds, syllables, words and sentences to create well-connected and fluent speech in a dialogue is something they find much more challenging.

4.3 Pupils' Perspectives on Oral Production and Listening Comprehension Practice

In follow-up questions, pupils were asked to indicate (by means of one or two key words) strong and weak points related to the current practice of teaching and testing listening comprehension and oral production. Their answers were grouped into several categories, Figures 2 and 3 first of all provide an overview of the aspects the pupils appreciate most.

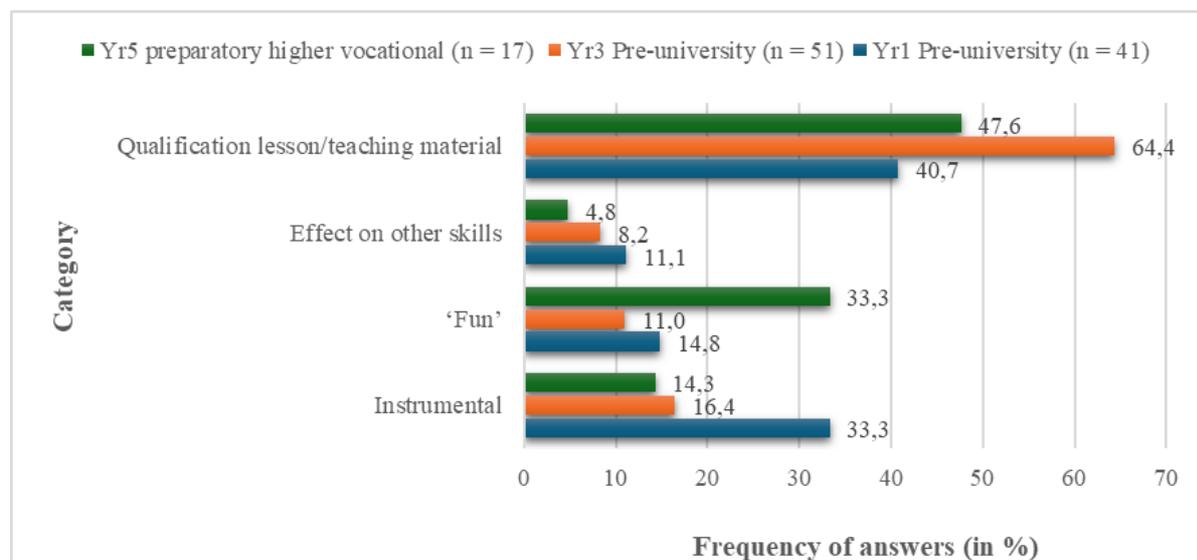


Figure 2: Strong points listening comprehension

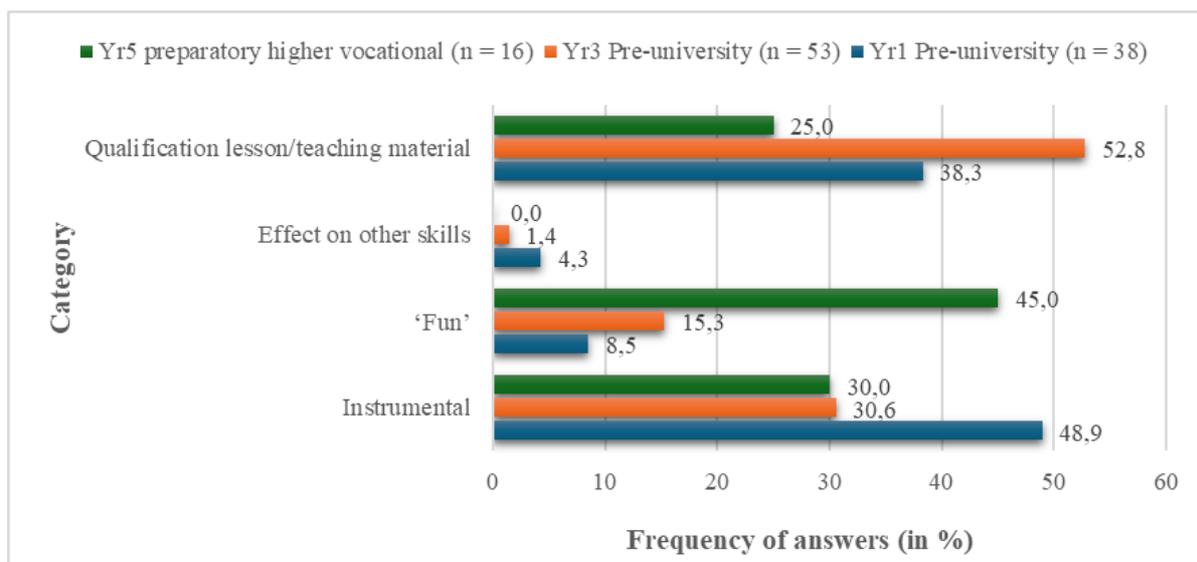


Figure 3: Strong points oral production

For Year 1 and Year 3 a similar pattern arises for the two skills. Answers that belong to the instrumental category or that provided a qualification of the lessons or the teaching materials were most frequent. Pupils see that these skills may come in handy in communicative TL contexts, they find the lessons, homework and tests not too demanding and they like collaborating with a classmate in the exercises. The answers given only rarely relate to potential effects of listening or speaking on other language skills. In case such answers were given, pupils mentioned the effect on pronunciation, on vocabulary and, interestingly, they also mentioned orthography, as they had to write down what they needed to say before actually starting to speak. In year 5, then, the effect on other skills is even less frequently mentioned as an aspect they appreciate. They rather feel that speaking tasks may be handy for real-life communication and for both skills they mention they find them quite 'fun'.

When it comes to the aspects they value least, an identical distribution of answers arises for both skills across all years, as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5.

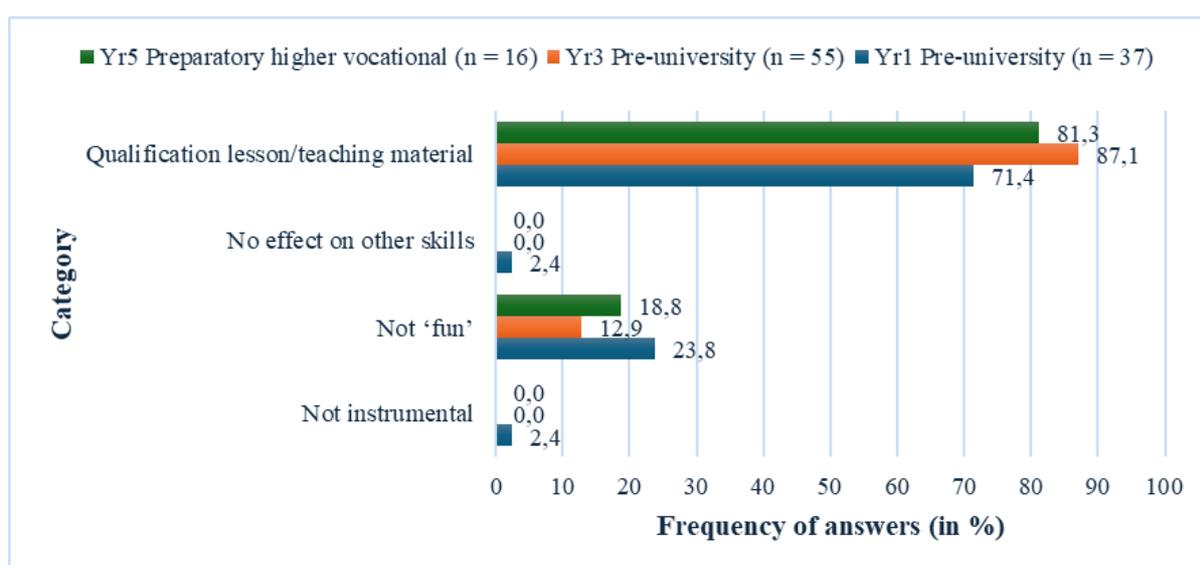


Figure 4: Weaker points of listening comprehension

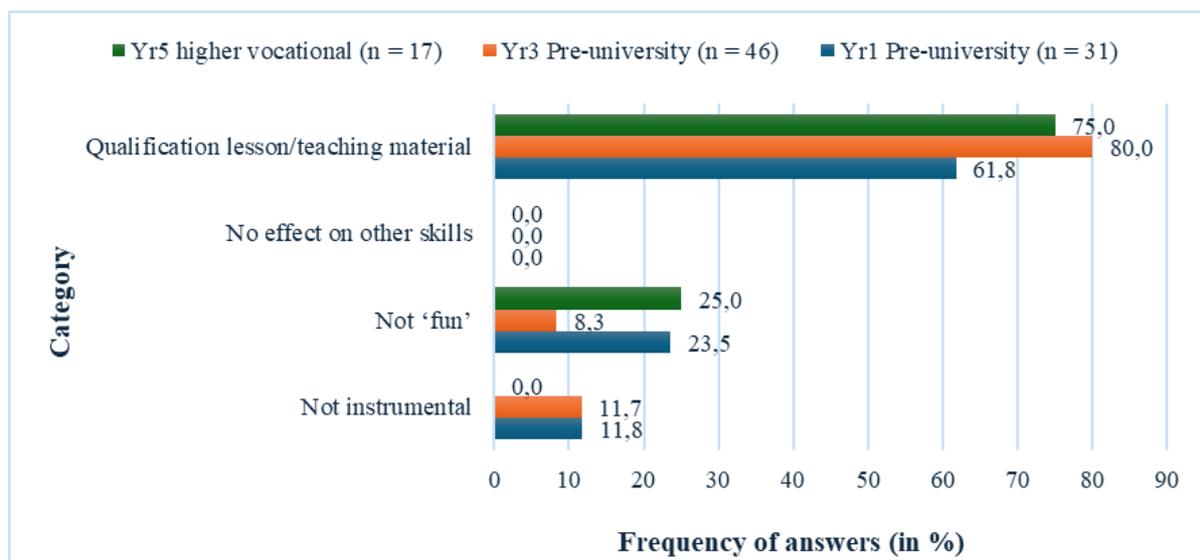


Figure 5: Weaker points of oral production

The most frequently given answers provide a qualification of the way both skills are taught. This category was also often mentioned in their answers with strong points (cf. Figures 2 and 3), but now clearly different reasons emerge. They find these skills difficult and they mainly do not like the way it is currently presented in their manual and embedded in class. They indicate that they find the tasks rather boring and uninspiring, they find the topics not very engaging, and they feel the exercises do not prepare them for communication outside the classroom. In second place come various answers saying that these two skills are “just not fun”, without further specifying why. The instrumental value of both skills is generally recognized by the various groups, as few answers were given denying the usefulness of these skills. As for the positive points, we have seen that cross-fertilization of skills was mentioned rather infrequently. In the case of the negative points, this category is again infrequently used. This could indicate that learners do see the added value of the transferability of skills, but it is not on top of their list with strong points, or it could be the case that (possible) cross-links between skills are something they are simply not that aware of.

4.4 Teachers' Perspectives on Oral Production and Listening Comprehension Practice

Teachers provide various reasons for the perceptive difficulties that their learners encounter (Table 6). Lack of lexical knowledge and of exposure to the French language are mentioned by most teachers (n = 13). Furthermore, several teachers (n = 11) refer to phonetic and phonological characteristics. Remarkably, there is only one teacher who explains difficulties in speech perception by a lack of knowledge of listening strategies, i.e. strategies characteristic of a top-down approach to perception (cf. section 2.1).

	n
poor vocabulary, lack of knowledge of verb conjugations and linking words	5
too little exposure to French, outside school (vs. English)	4
too little input of French in the classroom (target language use)	4
speech rate	4
<i>liaison, enchaînement</i>	4
opaque orthography	3
stress patterns	1
lack of knowledge of listening strategies	1
too little use of authentic material	1
<i>Total</i>	27

Table 6: Reasons for learners' perceptive difficulties mentioned by teachers

To explain difficulties in speech production, teachers again refer to their pupils' limited vocabulary (see Table 7). In addition, teachers indicate that there is often too little time to practice productive skills, and several teachers refer to language anxiety in the classroom. Table 7 also shows that pronunciation, which is a key element in a bottom-up approach, is only considered by one teacher as one of the obstacles for speech production.

	n
poor vocabulary	7
too little practice/too little time	6
uncertainty/anxiety	5
too little input outside school	2
word order	2
grammar/language system	2
pronunciation	1
lack of motivation	1
<i>Total</i>	26

Table 7: Reasons for learners' productive difficulties mentioned by teachers

To overcome perceptive difficulties, a considerable number of the participating teachers (n = 7) would like to pay more attention to the type of audio materials used in the classroom (Table 8). According to them, the materials should be more authentic and relate to pupils' experiences. These results are in line with the suggestions made by the learners (section 4.3), and the teachers thus seem to be clearly aware of their pupils' needs and wishes. Among the remaining answers, which were all mentioned only once, we see some additional solutions focusing on breaking down a lengthy speech chain into intelligible pieces, for instance by using shorter fragments, familiarising pupils with different voices and by linking perception and production more closely. One teacher suggests taking away perceptual challenges by lowering the level of tests, but this view is not shared by the other teachers in this sample.

<i>More attention should be paid to:</i>	n
modern, authentic sound materials related to the pupils' experiences	7
listening strategies	3
listening (more practicing)	2
detailed listening (instead of global listening)	2
avoidance of 'teaching to the test' (nationwide reading exam)	1
common vocabulary	1
practicing with short fragments	1
target language use in the classroom	1
listening during conversational tasks (relating 2 skills: perception and production)	1
lowering the level of tests	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>20</i>

Table 8: Ways to overcome difficulties in speech perception according to teachers

As far as the embedding of speech production activities goes, only three teachers judge the curriculum optimal as it currently stands (Table 9). Potential routes for optimization include more practice, more appealing and low-threshold assignments and paying more attention to thematically ordered words and chunks. The remaining comments are of various nature, ranging from the organisation of group work to the set-up of educational materials.

<i>More attention should be paid to:</i>	n
practicing	4
nothing (it is good as it is)	3
appealing and low-threshold assignments	3
thematically ordered words, chunks	3
more open dialogues (without scripts)	2
repetition	1
relatable topics for pupils	1
starting from an early age	1
working in small groups	1
peer feedback	1
language use in educational materials (less Dutch)	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>21</i>

Table 9: Ways to overcome difficulties in speech production according to teachers

5. Conclusions

The insights and experiences shared by Dutch FL learners of French and their teachers allowed us to shed more light on the interplay between learners' and teachers' needs and wishes on the one hand and current classroom practice on the other. While several learners clearly see that the development of their oral language skills may be instrumental or even "fun", it transpires in their results that they do not necessarily get the most out of the current curriculum. The combination of various thoughts and experiences shared by both the learners and the teachers seems to suggest that linking various oral skills could have a positive impact on learners' development. Instead of focusing on words in isolation, paying attention to the way the TL is actually pronounced in connected speech would make learners better prepared for deciphering what they hear and for producing a message themselves. This, in turn, would also contribute to reducing their language anxiety. By creating a clear link with vocabulary learning, now often presented as separate and/or written lists, perceptive and productive skills could be further strengthened. All this would then probably also lead to more cross-fertilization between skills, something of which pupils now seem to see only limited

relevance. Integrating tasks could be done relatively straightforwardly, as attention for TL pronunciation can be intertwined, subtly yet systematically, in the existing components of the curriculum without eating too much into valuable class time. Selecting relatable topics and creating engaging task types is another challenge to be taken into account, but we hope that our small scale teacher-learner exploration contributes a step towards a more interconnected view on oral language skills, preparing learners for TL use both inside and outside the classroom.

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