

9 French creative theatre in a course for beginners: the case of ‘Finissez vos phrases!’ by Jean Tardieu

Géraldine Crahay¹

Abstract

This article discusses the benefits of theatrical texts in language courses for beginners. These original, fun, and yet challenging materials help learners develop linguistic and intercultural competencies and transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and cooperation. Specifically, this article examines the use of Jean Tardieu's (2000/1955) short comedy *Finissez vos phrases!* in a French course for beginners at university level. The particularities of this play are its brevity and the incompleteness of its dialogues. I argue that studying Tardieu's (2000/1955) comedy allows learners to develop their communication skills by reading the whole play, watching a performance of the play, completing the dialogues, and performing their new version in front of the class. Moreover, *Finissez vos phrases!* familiarises learners with French conversational conventions and encourages them to think about the effectiveness of language. It also enhances their cooperative skills, lets them express their creativity and, ultimately, offers them a playful approach to learning French.

Keywords: literature and language, theatre, creative writing, conversational conventions, Jean Tardieu, beginners.

1. Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom; geraldine.crahay@durham.ac.uk

How to cite this chapter: Crahay, G. (2020). French creative theatre in a course for beginners: the case of ‘Finissez vos phrases!’ by Jean Tardieu. In A. B. Almeida, U. Bavendiek & R. Biasini (Eds), *Literature in language learning: new approaches* (pp. 77-84). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.43.1098>

1. Introduction

The language of literary texts is often considered to be different from ordinary language (Hall, 2005, pp. 9-38; Kramersch, 1993, p. 130) and, for this reason, too difficult at the lower levels of language learning. Except for Lazar (1993), most scholars examining the use of literature in language teaching run quickly through the case of beginners or ignore it altogether to focus on more advanced levels.

The Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR, corroborates this view. The first version of the descriptors of the different levels only referred to the use of literary texts from B2 level on: "I can understand contemporary literary prose" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 6). The new descriptors, published in 2018, are more detailed (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 65). They extend their use to A2 and B1 levels, as well as clarifying the literary genres (comics, songs, poems, short stories, novels, and non-fiction texts). However, they still omit the A1 level, prefer simple non-literary texts, and do not refer to theatre.

In this article, I make the claim that literary texts are not too difficult for language courses for beginners because, as Hall (2005) points out, they are "linguistically less distinctive and unrepresentative of the wider language than has traditionally been claimed" (p. 2). On the contrary, literary texts, and notably theatrical texts, should be introduced in the language classroom as soon as possible because they can help learners develop linguistic and intercultural competences. Moreover, they enhance creativity, an essential part of communicative competence (Hall, 2005, p. 28) that characterises literary and everyday languages (Atkins & Carter, 2012; Hall, 2005, p. 27).

To illustrate the relevance of theatrical texts in the language classroom, I discuss the case of the short play *Finissez vos phrases!* by the French author Jean Tardieu (2000/1955) in a French *ab initio* elective (but credit-bearing) module taught at Durham University during the academic year 2018/2019.

2. Jean Tardieu and *Finissez vos phrases!*

The French playwright Jean Tardieu (1903-1995) wrote short comedies that played with words and invited the readers and audience to think about the meaning of words and the conventional aspect of communication. Conversations are so submitted to norms that the words that they use are often irrelevant in conveying meaning.

The play *Finissez vos phrases!* is both playful and challenging because, as the title teasingly suggests, all the sentences in the dialogues are unfinished. As the example below shows, keywords are missing. Yet, this oddity does not impede the overall understanding of the play. For instance, in the following interaction, the reader can understand that the two protagonists know and are greeting each other.

“Monsieur A, avec chaleur: Chère amie. Quelle chance de vous...

*Madame B, ravie: Très heureuse, moi aussi. Très heureuse de...
vraiment oui!*

*Monsieur A: Comment allez-vous, depuis que?” (Tardieu, 2000/1955,
p. 27).*

Moreover, this comedy is suitable for beginners owing to its brevity (around 1,300 words), which means that the whole text can be read in class. *Finissez vos phrases!* is also characterised by the relative simplicity of its language and content. The play tells the story of two acquaintances, Monsieur A and Madame B, who meet in the street and start a conversation that they pursue in a café. The comedy accordingly appears genuine due to the universal banality of its synopsis and its language, which mirrors the hesitations of ‘real’ interactions.

3. Organisation of the lessons

The lessons took place in the second term of the academic year 2018/2019 over six weeks. Between ten and thirty minutes were dedicated to *Finissez*

vos phrases! each week, so that learners were not rushed into reading the play. The outcomes of the activities were to enhance communication skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking), build vocabulary, revise grammar, and develop intercultural awareness and creativity.

The first activity consisted in reading a text about Jean Tardieu (2000/1955), adapted from the *Afterword* of the collection of his short plays. Students reflected upon the goals of Tardieu's (2000/1955) writing, listed the characteristics of a theatrical text, and thought about their behaviour when meeting an acquaintance by chance. These tasks aimed at highlighting the form, the content, and the particularities of the text. Students also read the beginning of the play (about 200 words) and explained the text's oddities. Learners' answers to the different tasks were discussed during the lesson and the incompleteness of the dialogues was highlighted.

The next in-class activity was watching the beginning of the play (which they already knew) performed by the *École de théâtre de Paris* (Paris Theatre School) in 2010². Watching a performance of the play enabled students to hear the written words out loud and to appreciate how they were interpreted by French drama students. Learners also gathered implicit information that they may have missed when reading the text. For instance, most students found Monsieur A shy and strange and suggested that he was in love with Madame B. The actor's nervous gestures and his avoiding Madame B's eyes made this important storyline explicit. The activity highlighted the fact that non-verbal expression contributes to the meaning of a text.

Afterwards, the class was divided into groups of two or three students and each group received an extract of the play. Their task consisted in completing the dialogue of their extract. This transformational writing activity enabled learners to demonstrate their understanding of the play in a more progressive way than merely answering questions (see Hall, 2005, p. 150). As Pope (1995) pointed

2. <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xds06a>

out, “[t]he best way to understand how a text works [...] is to change it” (quoted by Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000, p. 38).

However, the purpose of the task went beyond mere reading comprehension. Firstly, students could think critically about sociolinguistic conventions. They realised that most everyday conversation can be understood even though it is truncated because it obeys implicit conversational rules (Clayman & Gill, 2012), for instance greeting an acquaintance and turn-taking.

Moreover, filling the gaps allowed students to revise French grammar and vocabulary, as they had to follow grammatical constraints when re-writing their extract. Importantly, the task helped them become aware that grammar actively contributes to the meaning of a text (Doniger, 2003, p. 101). For example, after declaring his love to Madame B, Monsieur A says: “Allons à! Allons au!” (Tardieu, 2000/1955, p. 35). Some students wrote: “Allons à LA MAISON! Allons au LIT!”³, thus showing their understanding of contracted articles, i.e. the fact that the preposition *à* followed with the masculine singular definite article *le* becomes *au*, while it does not contract when followed with the feminine singular *la*.

Finally, the writing task valorised learners’ creativity. Students enjoyed experimenting with the language and expressing familiar experiences (meeting an acquaintance, confessing one’s love, etc.) with unfamiliar words (Kramsch, 1993, p. 171). A challenge was, however, comprehending that there were no right and wrong answers. The text of the play was a finished product that learners could transform as they liked. Grammar and idiomatic expressions conditioned some answers, but otherwise students had complete freedom. The best productions were often the most inventive ones. For instance, in one version, Madame B talks about her son, whose misfortune is marrying a wicked woman:

“*Madame B (acceptant son bras, soudain volubile): [...] Je pense encore à mon pauvre FILS. Il allait, comme ça, sans RIEN – ou plutôt*

3. Words in capital letters are learners’ additions (reproduced without modifications).

avec CETTE FILLE. Et tout à coup, voilà que ILS SONT MARIÉS! Ah là là! [...] Avoir eu tant de BONHEUR ET M’OUBLIER! Et voilà que plus IL RENTRE CHEZ LUI AVEC CETTE JEUNE FEMME DIABOLIQUE!” (after Tardieu, 2000/1955, p. 29).

Despite a few grammatical and stylistic blunders, Madame B’s monologue is comprehensible, sophisticated, and entertaining.

After three writing sessions, learners performed their re-written extract in front of the class. Performing aimed at encouraging collaboration, improving spoken language (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000, p. 123), and, above all, celebrating the text (Kramersch, 1993, p. 157). Some students brought props and costumes (wigs, berets, and drawings). Although the performance was formative, students still received informal feedback (see Table 1).

Table 1. Feedback of the performance of the extract of *Finissez vos phrases!*

	0	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
Content (originality)							
Language (grammar)							
Language (vocabulary)							
Speaking (pronunciation)							
Speaking (fluency)							
Performance (acting)							
Performance (props)							

4. Conclusion

Some issues did arise during the classroom activities. One of them was the lack of clear indication of the gaps within Tardieu’s (2000/1955) text. Creating the missing gaps could help students better understand the play, but, on the other hand, might restrict their creativity by imposing the teacher’s interpretation of the text on them. Moreover, learners may lack the grammatical and lexical tools to deal with some difficulties, such as complex relative pronouns, the future tense, and the subjunctive mood.

Yet, despite these challenges, my conclusions are positive. I recommend using literature in the language classroom at elementary level. Theatrical texts constitute good learning resources owing to their dual nature: written and oral. They help learners develop communication skills, grammatical, lexical, and sociolinguistic competences, cooperation, creativity, and critical thinking. It is nevertheless necessary to prioritise simple texts (adapt them if needed) that are playful but still challenging in terms of content and/or reflections on language (about conversational rules, for instance). Deblase (2005), an English teacher who uses tableaux and soundscapes to teach literature, summarises the advantages of theatre in the classroom:

“[u]sing drama to teach literature works because it invites students into the language of the text. [...] Students work collaboratively to interpret the text and its subtext. And because the students are responsible for revealing the meaning of the literary text, they become empowered rather than intimidated by language” (p. 32).

In reinterpreting the text, in appropriating its meaning through creative writing, learners become empowered by the text. Is empowering our students not our primary mission as teachers?

References

- Atkins, S., & Carter, R. (2012). Creativity in speech. In J. P. Gee & M. Handford (Eds), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 315-325). Routledge.
- Clayman, S. E., & Gill, V. T. (2012). Conversation analysis. In J. P. Gee & M. Handford (Eds), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 120-134). Routledge.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Structured overview of All CEFR Scale*. <https://rm.coe.int/168045b15e>
- Council of Europe. (2018). *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*. <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>

- Deblase, G. (2005). Teaching literature and language through guided discovery and informal classroom drama. *The English Journal*, 95(1), 29-32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/30047394>
- Doniger, P. E. (2003). Language matters: grammar as a tool in the teaching of literature. *The English Journal*, 92(3), 101-04. <https://doi.org/10.2307/822268>
- Hall, G. (2005). *Literature in language education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: a guide for teachers and trainers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Parkinson, B., & Reid Thomas, H. (2000). *Teaching literature in a second language*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Pope, R. (1995). *Textual interventions: critical and creative strategies for literary studies*. Routledge.
- Tardieu, J. (2000/1955). *Finissez vos phrases!* Gallimard Jeunesse.



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2020 by Editors (collective work)
© 2020 by Authors (individual work)

Literature in language learning: new approaches
Edited by Ana Bela Almeida, Ulrike Bavendiek, and Rosalba Biasini

Publication date: 2020/09/14

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.43.9782490057696>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover illustration, free to use, Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/reading-reader-kindle-female-76942/>
Cover layout by © 2020 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-69-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-70-2 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-68-9 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: septembre 2020.
