

INDIVIDUAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS: FLUENCY AND ACCURACY

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Annotation: This article deals with the fluency/accuracy dichotomy in teaching speaking skills. In this case, from a technical point of view, the term fluency is a hyponym, since fluency means not only "speech the words smoothly and quickly", but also accuracy.

Key words: fluency, accuracy, individual, speaking skills, teaching, communicative language teaching, native speaker.

Today there is no need to prove that the 21st century is commonly acknowledged to be the century of globalization and vanishing borders, the century of information and communication technologies and the Internet, the century of ever growing competition worldwide and in the global market.

During the years of independence deep structural and substantial reforms and transformations in the system of higher education has taken place in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Main purpose of these reforms was to provide the adequate place of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the world community.

Indeed, it was impossible to provide the independent economy, social and political stability, and development of intellectual and spiritual potential of the nation without rebuilding the system of education and upbringing. The state policy in the field of education that could transform it into the priority sphere has been developed and conducted.

Fluency/accuracy dichotomy is one of the concepts which usually come to mind first when speaking of teaching speaking skills. According to Segalowitz (2003: 384), the term ‘fluency’ is ability”. This definition is interesting because it clearly shows that both concepts fluency and accuracy are closely knit together. Technically speaking, the term fluency is a hyponym because to be fluent means not only to ‘produce utterances smoothly and rapidly’ but also accurately. This is where approaches like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are sometimes misunderstood. Win Wu reports that “one of the fundamental principles of CLT is that learners need to engage in meaning full communication to attain communicative fluency in ESL settings” (Wu 2008). Since fluency means also accuracy, it is clear that the aim of CLT is to reach both. Fluency is reflected mainly in two aspects: speed of delivery and regularity, which means a natural amount and distribution of pauses (By gate 2009). On the subject of appropriate placement of pauses Thorn bury (2005) says that: Natural-sounding pauses are those that occur at the intersection of clauses or after groups of words that form a meaningful unit. (The vertical lines in the last sentence mark where natural pauses might occur if the sentence were being spoken.) Unnatural pauses, on the other hand, occur midway between related groups of words. (p. 7)

Next, one of the issues that have been discussed in the previous chapters is the importance of work with spoken data and transcripts in ELT. For attaining fluency, the use of authentic texts and spoken data is significant. Guillot (1999) reports that there are “practical as well as academic reasons for making the study of spoken data – native speaker and learner data – an integral ingredient of a pedagogy of fluency” (1999: 61). One of the reasons that she lists is that “it can facilitate the emergence of individual paradigms of fluency, enable students to identify the features and strategies of greatest relevance to them as learners and communicators, and, concurrently, help them to exploit both their strengths and weaknesses more efficiently” (p. 61). She further states that:

(...) it provides a teaching and learning framework for approaching fluency more critically, can be used as a platform for helping learners to negotiate the shift from communicative control and sophistication, and project the development of their fluency beyond the confines of formal settings to transcend their inescapable limits – time and restricted exposure to resources.

In other words, Guillot supports my previous argument that use of spoken data facilitates attaining fluency and that fluency leads to autonomy. As she further puts it: “to teach fluency, in this sense, fits in with what Grenfell and Harris describe as returning ‘ownership’ of the language to learners” (1999: 62).

Quite importantly, in the light of research evidence, Thornbury (2005) and Thornbury and Slade (2007) suggest that reaching native-like fluency is only possible thanks to prefabricated chunks or formulaic language that speakers use. These units include fixed phrases and idiomatic chunks such as on the other hand, at the end of the day, or It is a small world. Johnson (1996) states that a great deal of formulaic language is acquired unconsciously either from direct transfer from L1 or from exposure to authentic L2 input. He refers to these language items as ‘acquired output’, i.e. language that is acquired unconsciously and produced automatically in tasks which require ‘high automaticity’. Oral communication due to its real-time processing demands falls under this category.

There is evidence which supports the notion of acquired output, particularly the importance of extensive exposure to authentic language input for formulaic language acquisition and use. For example, Cock et al. found that advanced speakers use prefabricated language less than native speakers and for different pragmatic purposes (Thornbury and Slade 2007). There are several other studies presented by Wood (2002) which suggest that language learners use less formulaic language than native speakers due to limited exposure to authentic input. In addition, Wood discusses further implications which these findings have for LT. He recommends that classroom activities «consist of exposure to large amounts of input, with attention paid to the formulaic sequences being used” and stresses the importance of linking particular formulas to particular pragmatic ends (2002: 10). Thornbury and Slade (2007) making references to Lewis 1993 and Ellis 1998 and 2005 confirm that acquisition is best achieved through massive exposure and explicit instruction.

In our experience, some of the greatest resources of formulaic language which learners love to work with are songs and films (or series). Song lyrics usually contain

a good deal of chunks, idioms, etc., which can be exploited in the classroom. One of the advantages of songs is that learners can listen to them repeatedly inside and outside the classroom. If a song is particularly catchy, learners are quite likely to memorize a great deal of text by themselves. Apart from this, songs are good sources of authentic language, allow learners to experience a variety of accents, motivate learning while making it fun, break down barriers and build a relaxed atmosphere. Besides, songs can be used with all ages and practically all proficiency levels if they are chosen appropriately.

In terms of practicality, with the arrival of the digital era, songs can be easily obtained for classroom use along with transcribed lyrics on the Internet. ESL websites describe a number of activities which teachers can exploit when using songs. My favorite is to write down language from song lyrics (e.g. formulaic chunks) on little cards and stick them on the board. In the class room, learners form two rows. While listening to a song, they compete to be the first to grab the card with the lyrics written on it, which they have just heard. A variation of this awareness-raising activity is to prepare more sets of cards and distribute them in pairs. While listening to a song, learners put the words in the same sequence in which they hear them.

As far as visual input is concerned, there is a great range of activities that can be done with films, series, soap operas, etc. For instance, a teacher plays a muted scene of a film and puts a few lines or phrases from the scene on the board. In pairs, learners try to make a dialogue which might be taking place in the scene while inserting the language on the board into their dialogues. After that, they watch the scene again but this time with the sound on and check what was really said. Next, they can reconstruct the dialogue based on what they heard and saw. Another variation of this is distributing sets of cards with phrases from the scene on them in pairs, or groups depending on the number of actors in the scene. Learners do a similar activity but this time they grab a card with particular language whenever they use it in their dialogue. The one who has the most cards wins. Another good idea on how to practice formulaic language is to cut out newspaper headlines which contain prefabricated chunks and ask learners to speculate in small groups what the story behind the headlines might be and agree on the version of a story which is most probable/interesting/unusual, etc. This way learners use the language in the headlines meaning fully several times while speculating about the stories. They also make use of a great range of linguistic means when negotiating their stories. Next, learners can be asked to present their ideas to the class. At the following stage, learners can be given real texts which the headlines refer to. Discussing the stories with their partners or within their groups, they compare how the texts differ from their own stories.

Even though it has been said that fluency and accuracy are closely linked together, for the purposes of LT, activities to practice speaking are sometimes identified as fluency or accuracy focused. This is not to exclude one of the two concepts from teaching but rather to point out what the main purpose of the activity is, i.e. to concentrate mainly on using language accurately or the ability to ‘get the message across’. The former is usually used to practice a particular linguistic phenomenon or

language. The latter concept usually entails using a broader range of skills and helps learners train strategic competence.

Whether an activity is accuracy or fluency focused depends on a particular task learners are asked to complete. For example, role plays can be accuracy focused if learners are asked to use particular language or phrases which have been introduced earlier in a lesson. However, the same task type can be also fluency focused if learners are to act out roles that require a broader range of knowledge and skills and the task is freer.

Typically, the more controlled a task is, i.e. requires learners to use a fixed set of phrases or ascertain formula, the easier it is for learners to concentrate on a form and practice accuracy. Therefore tasks which require only limited language are used as accuracy-focused activities. These include certain types of information gap activities such as ‘Find someone who’, questionnaires, picture description, etc.

Typical fluency-focused task types are opinion-sharing activities like discussions and debates, storytelling, creative tasks such as designing plans for a new school facility and board games which require learners to speak on a particular topic, etc. Apart from this, many accuracy-focused tasks may be adapted to focus on fluency as well. For example, the ‘Find someone who’ task, can be made more complex by asking learners to expand their answers if positive and report in detail about their experience, such as ‘the best film they have seen’ or ‘the most beautiful place they have visited’. Naturally, such a procedure is more time-consuming.

It should be added at this point that scholars differ in their understanding of what is necessary for a communicative task to be effective. For instance, first proponents of CLT suggested that three basic conditions must be fulfilled in order for classroom communication to ensure progress in L2. These are communicative purpose, information gap and language choice (Littlewood 1983). By contrast, scholars supporting task-based approach advocate L2 practice which is interactive, meaningful and includes a focus on task-essential forms (Ortega 2007). To present contemporary trends of CLT, let me use Brown’s list of seven principles for designing speaking activities:

1. Use techniques covering the spectrum of learner needs, i.e. include both accuracy and fluency focused activities
2. Provide intrinsically motivating techniques which appeal to learner’s goals and interests
3. Encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts
4. Provide appropriate feedback and correction
5. Capitalize the natural link between speaking and listening. Here the author highlights the fact that language production is often initiated through language comprehension. Therefore, both skills should be integrated in LT (see also Nation and Newton 2009).
6. Give learners opportunities to initiate oral communication
7. Encourage the development of speaking strategies (based on Brown 2008)

To conclude, this section showed that it is necessary to utilize both accuracy and fluency focused tasks in the classroom. Accuracy-focused activities are likely to help

learners use language correctly, while fluency-focused activities will help them produce fluent stretches of language. On the whole, fluency-focused activities are the ultimate goal in a classroom setting because they help learners prepare for ‘what is out there’. As has been pointed out, another important aspect of teaching fluency is assisting learners in building their formulaic language. Furthermore, this section mentioned some important qualities of efficient speaking tasks, such as the need for them to be meaningful, intrinsically motivating, to encourage authentic language use, to provide feedback and to develop speaking strategies.

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