



2017

EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF FLUENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

DR . TATIANA BUSHNAQ•

Abstract

Developing speaking skills in a foreign language represents the main goal of learning the language. Unlike written communication, speaking requires special processing skills. How to develop speaking fluency in a foreign language has represented a concern for linguists and didactic specialists over recent decades as a result of the rapid expansion in the use of English as a medium for global communication. Communication is a complex process and a superior intellectual activity which could either establish a new rapport between the initiator and the recipient or spoil it. The current paper aims at exploring the issue of fluency in a foreign language, targeting the non-linguistic variables that often represent an obstacle for EFL students in developing speaking fluency - a challenging goal for teachers and students alike.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, accuracy, fluency, affective variables, positive learning environment.

• – Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Al Asmarya Islamic University, Libya

Introduction

The quality of knowing a language is confirmed by four communicative skills: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. The demand to develop speaking skills in the English language is in a continuous growth given the fact that English has become the lingua franca across the globe. Developing speaking fluency in a foreign language represents a challenging goal for teachers and learners especially in countries where English is learned as a foreign language and the exposure to the language is limited and is mainly confined to the classroom. Bygate argues that:

Speaking in a second language encompasses the development of a particular type of communication skill. Oral communication, because of its circumstances of production, tends to differ from written language in its typical grammatical, lexical and discourse patterns. Moreover, some of the processing skills needed in speaking differ from those involved in reading and writing. Bygate (2001, p.14)

How to develop fluency in a foreign language has represented a concern for linguists and didactic specialists over recent decades as a result of the rapid expansion in the use of English as a medium for global communication. As Hadfield & Hadfield perceptively state:

In order to be able to interact with other people, the learners have to develop a wide range of skills. First of all, they need to think of something to say in a second language and feel

confident enough to try and express it. Then they have to put words, phrases, and sentences together – using grammar and vocabulary – to express what they want to say in a way that others can understand. They have to be able to vocalize this, using pronunciation and intonation - in a way that is clear enough for others to understand. In order to do all this quickly enough to keep up the flow of conversation, they need to be reasonably fluent. Hadfield & Hadfield (2008, p.105)

Therefore, the success of speech planning and speech production depends not only on the speakers' grammar, the range of vocabulary, acceptable pronunciation and intonation, but also on their listening and speaking fluency. Nevertheless, what defines a fluent speaker is still a question under debate and the term fluency, although a term frequently used in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) by students and teachers alike, is often misunderstood.

What exactly is fluency? Does the speaker need to sound like a native speaker in order to be considered a fluent speaker of a given language? Is fluency all about speed? Can the speaker pause and reflect? Does fluency involve accuracy? What is the difference between fluency and accuracy? What is the relation between listening and speaking fluency? What are the factors that often impede students to develop speaking fluency?

This paper will attempt to explore these questions.

1. What exactly is fluency?

The term fluency is often used as a rough synonym for global ability (Lennon, 1990, cited in Schmidt, 1992, p. 358). Schmidt (1992) believes that fluent speech is automatic, not requiring much attention or effort, and is characterized by the fact that ‘the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently’ (Lennon, 1990, cited in Schmidt 1992, p 358). Colby (2013, p. 3) has expressed a similar view. He points out that ‘fluency is a sustained clear delivery of words with a well-placed flow. The speaker hardly hesitates to respond to others in a conversation. It is a natural almost native-like automatic reflex. From Gurbuz (2014) perspective, a fluent speaker is the one whose ideas flow smoothly, produces the message easily and without a break, whose message is not affected by the language mistakes, who focuses on message rather than the language form, who is capable of sending the message in an efficient way regardless of the pauses, hesitations, or self-repairs, and whose communication is effective. On the other hand, non-fluent speech, according to Schmidt (1992, p. 358), is effortful and requires a great deal of attention, so that nonfluent speakers exhibit many hesitations and other manifestations of grouping words and attempting to combine them into utterances.

In the light of the above, fluency is not defined by the speed of speech production. It is rather the ability of a person to deliver messages without hesitations; it is the ability of the speaker to keep the flow of the conversation effortlessly; the ability to initiate and

decode messages in real time using acceptable intonation and with a clear and understandable pronunciation; the usage of appropriate vocabulary and correct grammatical structures to express intentions, ideas, and opinions. Thornberry (2006, p. 7) claims that when talking about fluency, 'speed is a factor, but it is by no means the only – or even the most important-one'. He argues that 'research into listeners' perception of a speaker's fluency suggest that pausing is equally important. All speakers pause – they have to, to draw breath'. Nevertheless, according to his view, 'frequent pausing is sure a sign of a struggling speaker'.

2. Fluency versus accuracy

Speaking is considered to be the most important skill when it comes to learning a foreign or second language. A usual conversation about languages would be:

A: How many languages do you speak?

B: I speak X languages.

Or people usually would say: "I am bilingual, I can speak English and Spanish" or "He is a polyglot. He can speak five languages fluently."

People don't usually talk about their reading, listening, or writing abilities, they rather stress their speaking ability.

It is believed that speaking a language fluently is not the same as having a good command of the grammar of that language. In ELT

EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF FLUENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

context, highlights Götz (2013, p. 3), ‘fluency has been widely used in contrast to accuracy as a clearly distinctive feature of the overall language proficiency’. A similar view is expressed by Brumfit (1984, cited in Schmidt, 1992, p 358), who states that ‘a contrast is often made between fluency and accuracy, knowledge and developmental stage’. As Schmidt (1992, p. 358) has indicated, it seems natural to say about some learners that ‘X really knows quite a lot of English but doesn’t speak fluently’ or ‘Y speaks fluently but not very grammatical’. E. H. Colby (2013, p. 3) has pointed out that ‘a fluent speaker is characterized by the effective use of grammar and vocabulary while speaking a language. The proper words you use to express your ideas is how accurate you use the language’. He adds that ‘fluency without accuracy is just a river of words that do not make sense’. Nevertheless, according to Thornberry (2006), grammar knowledge for speaking purposes consists of those grammar systems that favour rapid, real-time speech production.

Reference to Götz (2013, p. 2-9) reveals that ‘while some aspects of speech establish the degree of fluency on the part of the speaker (i.e. they enhance the speakers’ ease and effortlessness in their speech production), other variables establish a perception of fluency on the part of the listener (i.e. they establish the perception of a speaker’s fluency)’. The researcher states that ‘there is a distinction between fluency variables of production and variables of perception’. While productive fluency, according to Götz is characterized by certain temporal variables (e.g. speech rate, unfilled pauses, etc.), as

well as by some formulaic sequences and fluency enhancement strategies (e.g. speech management phenomena discourse markers etc.), perceptive fluency is characterized by accuracy, intonation, accent lexical diversity, sentence structure, etc.

In the view of the above considerations, accuracy and fluency go hand in hand; they are two congruent skills although they are considered different areas in the English as a Second or Foreign Language (L2) development and require different techniques and activities in order to be developed. They are the two factors that have a significant impact when defining a learner's success in learning a foreign language. If fluency is assessed in terms of the learner's speech rate, his/her ability to produce and deliver information easily, smoothly, without too many hesitations, accuracy is the learner's ability to produce utterances using correct grammar and appropriate vocabulary. Fluency and accuracy show the learner's proficiency of language output. Hence, to be considered a fluent speaker, besides the fluidity and automaticity of speech production, the usage of a wide range of vocabulary, clear pronunciation and appropriate intonation, one has to be able to effortlessly produce utterances in a grammatical and meaningful way.

3. Fluency and native speakerism

Does a non-native speaker need to sound like a native speaker in order to be considered a fluent speaker of a given language? In an attempt to find out what exactly distinguishes even advanced learners from native speakers, even if they have arrived at a very high level of proficiency, have spent some time abroad and are highly motivated to speak in a native-like manner, Sandra Götz (2013, p. 2), cites the work of Lennon who makes some suggestions about the possible causes of the major differences and deviances. Lennon believes that:

Some fluency deficits may arrive from articulation, which may be less well automatized in the L2 than in the primary language. However, the formulation process is most critical for fluency for various reasons. First, there is the competition between more than one linguistic system. Second, accessing and formulating tend to be highly automatized in proficient speakers, particularly L2 speakers, whereas the less proficient speaker of L2 will have to resort to controlled processes, in which more or less conscious attention is focused on laboriously assembling speech on a word-by-word basis, with consequent slowdown. Third, there may be deficits in linguistic storage, and the learner may have to resort to compensatory strategies. Lennon (2000, p. 32)

It is also worth considering the fact that there are more non-native speakers of English than native speakers of English, and given the fact that the interaction in the English language is more likely to occur between non-native speakers of English, as English has become the International language, there is no need for the learner to aspire to the native-like fluency, as sometimes it is not even a realistic goal.

4. The relationship between listening and speaking skills.

Communication is a process that involves at least two people. Correspondingly, communication does not imply just the formulation of a message, but it is rather a change of ideas between the initiator and the recipient. Therefore, communicating effectively encapsulates the ability to correctly decode, encode, and initiate messages in line with the progress of a conversation. Anderson and Lynch rightly point out that:

A carefully prepared L2 utterance is only a useful aid to communication if the speaker can deal effectively with the replies he receives. For an L2 learner to be a proficient partner in conversation, he needs to be skilled as both speaker and listener. Anderson and Lynch (2006, p. 15)

Scrivener argues that:

Even if someone knows all the grammar and lexis of a language, it doesn't necessarily mean that they will be able to understand a single word when it is spoken. Amongst other things, it may seem to them that people speak too fast to follow; they can't tell where words start and stop; people pronounce words they just don't recognize, they can't work out details of what is being said; they can't get even a general sense of the message; they don't know what attitudes people are expressing; they can't pick up those parts that are the most important for them to understand. Scrivener (2009, p. 170)

Under the circumstances, in order to be perceived a fluent speaker of a certain language, the speaker stands in need of being a

fluent listener, lest the communication process should not run as expected.

5. Nonlinguistic variables affecting the EFL students' speaking skills

It is believed that students with a high academic intelligence (IQ) achieve much more in a classroom than the students with a low IQ in terms of academic success. According to the online Dictionary of Psychology, academic intelligence represents ‘the cognitive abilities that are regarded as being highly imperative to achieve academic success’. Hence, academic intelligence has undoubtedly a major role to play in learning a foreign language. Nevertheless, it is believed that the success or the failure of a student is not solely confined to the student’s academic intelligence. Language psychologists have recently argued that emotional intelligence has a significant impact on the academic success of an English as a foreign language (EFL) student especially when it comes to developing communicative skills. Blell (2011, p. 20) defines emotional intelligence as ‘the ability to understand, discipline, and expresses emotions and to respond to the emotions of those with whom we live, learn, and work’, and according to Salovey, Brackett, and Mayer, emotional intelligence is:

The ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotions; the ability to access and/or generate feelings which facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Salovey, Brackett, and Mayer (2004, p. 47)

In the light of the above, it is worth mentioning Steven Krashen's affective filter hypothesis and the impact emotional related factors could have on language acquisition/learning. According to his hypothesis, emotional related factors such as low level of motivation, reduced degree of self-confidence, and high level of anxiety, have a negative impact on the student's success in acquiring a foreign language. Although Krashen remarks that positive affective variables facilitate language acquisition, they could unquestionably facilitate language learning.

From this perspective, a high EQ (emotional quotient - the index for emotional intelligence) level represents a key variable when it comes to developing foreign language fluency. As Blell affirms, emotional intelligence is embodied in our self-mastery. The author asserts that emotional intelligent people have the capability to manipulate their emotions which affect the way they connect to others, the quality of their relationships, and their sustained success in the diverse situations (Blell, 2011, p. 20).

Dewaele, Petrides, and Furman (2008) also Dewaele (2013) (as cited in Oxford & D, Bologhos-Sanchez, 2016 p. 118), found out that adult multilingual with higher emotional intelligence had lower levels of foreign language anxiety and, during conversation, perceived themselves as more capable of (a) gauging the emotions of their interlocutor, (b) controlling stress, and (c) feeling self-confident.

EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF FLUENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

A high level of EQ is reflected in a person's positive and balanced attitudes towards the Self. Self-confidence is one of the values of Emotional Intelligence and it is defined on the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence website as 'sureness about one's self-worth and capabilities'. People with this competence: present themselves with self-assurance; have 'presence'; can voice views that are unpopular and go out on a limb for what is right; are decisive, able to make sound decisions despite uncertainties and pressures' (www.eiconsortium.org). A self-confident student will overcome barriers in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

Students learn English for different purposes, either because they have to study it as a curriculum component and have to pass an exam (extrinsic motivation) or because they are just interested in languages, interested in other cultures, foreign literature (intrinsic motivation). In either case, students have a goal to achieve. In order to achieve the goals, it is imperative for them to develop *emotional self-motivation*. From Cherniss' perspective, emotional self-motivation is 'what assists an individual in controlling emotions so that they guide and facilitate reaching goals' (Cherniss et al., 2003, p. 137). [Tavakoli](#) (2013, p. 311) highlights that self-motivating ability has a positive impact on student's success. He further remarks that, even under disadvantageous conditions in particular classrooms and without any teacher assistance, some learners are committed to the goals they have set for themselves more than their classmates. It is

presumed that these learners motivate themselves by employing specific self-management skills to overcome situational disturbances.

Hence, the learners have to develop a positive attitude towards learning; they have to develop a motivation to learn. Motivation to learn is, according to Brophy, the feeling to value learning for its own sake, enjoying the process and being satisfied with the outcomes involving knowledge acquisition or skill development. The author believes that in certain situations, a state of motivation to learn occurs when students involve themselves actively in classroom activities by trying to master the concepts or skills involved without necessarily finding classroom activities very enjoyable or exciting. Students who are motivated to learn will take even less enjoyable activities seriously, find them meaningful and useful, and seek to get the intended benefit from them (Brophy (1983, p. 200).

Anxiety is another emotional variable that impedes learners from achieving the aim of developing oral fluency and is defined by Corsini, (2002, p. 58) as ‘a pervasive and unpleasant feeling of tension, dread, apprehension, and impending disaster; it is often a response to an undefined or unknown threat which may stem from internal conflicts, feelings of insecurity, or forbidden impulses’. Thus, in order to be able to master a foreign language at the communication level, students should diminish shyness, anxiety and other emotional related factors that impede them from producing language. A study conducted by Sharifi & Lashkarian (2015) shows that anxiety is

EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF FLUENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

negatively correlated with speaking ability having a significant influence on foreign language learning. According to them, anxiety is typically classified as one of the significant affective variables which reportedly influence foreign language learning. The majority of EFL learners frequently complain about such an irritating feeling and it is commonly believed that it is among several outstanding factors that often have a debilitating effect on the oral performance of students who learn English as a foreign language. They can be sometimes perceived as less trustworthy, less competent, less socially and physically attractive, tenser, less composed and less dominant than their less reticent counterparts.

Therefore, it is deemed that negative emotional responses associated with embarrassment, anxiety, and frustration, have a destructive impact on student's success in learning a foreign language. Therefore, emotion – coping strategies should be part of the foreign language classrooms in order to help learners become aware of emotional states and control their emotional stress. This can be achieved by creating a positive learning environment as the learning environment has a major impact on students' success especially when it comes to developing oral fluency. A positive learning environment is characterized by a good teacher-students, students-students rapport. Such a learning environment lowers students' anxiety and increases their motivation, self-confidence and their self-esteem. It also helps students to take responsibility for their own learning. A positive learning environment is the environment where students can express

themselves freely, taking risks without the fear of making mistakes and being laughed at. In a positive learning environment, students will be willing to take risks and engage. De Olivera claims that:

Student engagement is predominantly and historically seen as increasing success, positive attitudes and behaviours, and a sense of belonging in all students. Students are engaged when they are interested in their work, continue despite obstacles they may encounter, and feel a sense of fulfilment when they accomplish their work. Positive student engagement can be described as a desire or need to participate in and be successful in the learning process. (De Olivera, 2013, p. 23)

This considered however, it is important to realize that student engagement is related to, but is not the same as, student motivation. Motivation is known as a component of emotional intelligence and a personal skill that drive the self to take initiatives, to pursue and achieve goals; it shapes learners' attitude towards learning a foreign language. Skinner and Belmont (1993, cited in De Olivera 2012, p. 24), defined student engagement by focusing on more cognitive, behavioural and affective criteria in specific learning tasks. Student engagement was associated with the intensity and emotional quality of a student's involvement in initiating and carrying out activities. Students who were engaged in learning showed a positive attitude, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest, as well as continual behavioural involvement in the activity at hand. They were able to choose activities they believed they could accomplish, initiate

EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF FLUENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

action when provided the opportunity, and apply effort in the execution and completion of the task. Students who were disengaged were passive, showed little or no effort, and did not try to overcome obstacles. Oxford & Bologhos-Sanchez (2016) remark that students engagement is entangled with emotions, either positive or negative. Positive emotions, such as joy, enthusiasm, are linked to successful engagement while negative emotions such as anxiety, distress, often threaten motivation and stop further engagement.

Conclusions

Communication is a reciprocal process. It comprises a set of elements that shape the communication process: the initiator, the recipient, the message, the feedback and the context. Thus, the communication process consists of the speaker's ability to encode the message through the selection of appropriate words, to transmit the message through verbal and nonverbal means, to be able to interactively receive and understand the message, decode it, encode a new reply and initiate a new message.

Oral fluency is the ability of a person to deliver messages without hesitations; it is the ability of the speaker to keep the flow of conversation effortlessly; the ability to decode messages and to express required meaning (intentions, ideas, opinions etc) at a natural speed using stress and appropriate intonation, clear and comprehensible pronunciation, the register, accurate grammatical

structures. It is not defined by the speed of speech production. Although speed is an important factor, pausing and reflecting are equally important.

Another factor to consider is language accuracy. Accuracy and fluency are two congruent language variables. Accuracy - the speakers' ability to produce grammatically correct utterances - plays a tremendous role in labelling someone as a fluent speaker. A learner cannot be considered a fluent speaker unless he produces language using correct grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary besides appropriate intonation and speed.

Although oral fluency represents the main goal of learning a foreign language, aspiring to native-like fluency, in terms of diction, is not a realistic goal for the vast majority of adult students, especially those that have limited or no exposure to the language outside the classroom.

How to improve foreign/second language fluency has been the topic of research for many pedagogical and linguistics studies. It requires constant, consistent practice, and a great deal of motivation. Motivation is the students' desire to learn, enjoying the process and taking part in the outcomes of experiences involving knowledge acquisition or skill development. Motivation can be increased by working on developing students' emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence decreases foreign language anxiety and increases students' self-confidence and self-esteem. Students' anxiety and lack

EXPLORING THE ISSUE OF FLUENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

of confidence are two of the factors that often impede students to succeed in developing fluency in a foreign language. A high EQ level helps students manage their emotions which in turn facilitates reaching their goals. Therefore, it is imperative for the teachers to create a positive, supportive, conducive, and forward-looking learning environment where students can feel comfortable, safe and emotionally engaged. Moreover, it is essential for learners to build their emotional intelligence, hence to become aware of their emotional states, since a high EQ level steers students to success.

References

Anderson, A. & Lynch, T. (2006), *Listening*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Blell, D. (2011), *Emotional intelligence: for the authentic and diverse workplace*, iUnivers, USA.

Brohy, J.& Kher, N. (1990), *Teacher socialization as a mechanism for developing student motivation to learn*, In: Feldman, R 1990, *The social psychology of education: current research and theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bygate, M. (2011), *Speaking*, In: Nunan, D & Carter, R 2001, *Teaching english to speakers of other languages*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Cary, C. & Goleman, D. (2003), *The emotionally intelligent workplace: how to select for, measure, and improve emotional intelligence in individuals, groups, and organizations*. San Francisco.

Colby, H. (2013), *How to be a business English ace*, published by E.H. Colby.

Corsini, R. (2002), [*The dictionary of psychology*, Brunner-Routledge, New York](#),

De Oliveira, L. (2012), *Building student engagement in the language classroom through the use of interactive technology*, The University of British Columbia. <http://www.dlc-ubc.ca/dlc3/edcp508b/wp->

<content/uploads/sites/25/2012/06/DeOliveira-copy.pdf>, viewed on 28 September 2017.

Götz, S. (2013), *Fluency in native and nonnative English speech*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam.

Gurbuz, N. (2014), *Developing spoken Language fluency*, In: Pandian, A et al, *Teaching and learning language: current trends and practices*, Penerbit USM.

Hadfield, J. & Hadfield, Ch. (2008), *Introduction to teaching English*, Oxford University Press.

<https://psychologydictionary.org> viewed 27 September 2017

Krashen, S. (1988), *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Prentice-Hall International.

Oxford, R. & Bologhos-Sanchez, D. (2016), *A tale of two learners: discovering, mentoring, motivations, emotions, engagement, and perseverance*, In: Gkonou, C. et al, 2016, *New Directions in Language Learning Psychology*, Springer International Publishing Switzerland.

Salovey, P., Brackett, M., Mayer, J. (2004), *Emotional intelligence, key reading on Mayer and Solovey model*, National Professional Resources Inc./Dude Publishing.

Schmidt, R. (1992), *psychological mechanisms underlying second language fluency*, viewed 27 September 2017, <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/PDFs/SCHMIDT%20Psychological%20mechanisms%20underlying%20second%20language%20fluency.pdf>

Sharifi, F. & Lashkarian, A.(2015), *Relationship between anxiety and speaking ability of EFL learners*, Journal of Applied Linguistics (Dubai) 1(3); 31-41 ISSN: 2413-1105, Available online @ www.iaajs.com/jal viewed 27 September 2017.

Scrivener, J. (2009), *Learning teaching*, Malaysia, Macmillan.

[Tavakoli](#), H. (2013), *A dictionary of language acquisition: a comprehensive overview of key terms in first and second language acquisition*, Rahnama Press.

Thornberry, S. (2006), *Ho to teach speaking*. Pearson Educational Limited.

www.eiconsortium.org viewed 28 September 2017.