



## ACCURACY OR FLUENCY FIRST ...?

**DR. ABHILASA KAUSHIK**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

JECRC University

Sitapura, Jaipur, Rajasthan **INDIA**

### ABSTRACT

*In speaking generally, there are two types of language learners: the first type gets really worried about making errors or mistakes. They think about everything that they say carefully. Sometimes, if they start to say something, and then realize they have made a mistake, they will stop and correct that mistake, maybe returning to the beginning of the sentence. They might pause between each word, contemplating what the right word or phrase is before they say it. For these learners, generally, their accuracy is high, but their fluency is low.*

### INTRODUCTION

The other type of language learner doesn't really care about making mistakes or errors. They have an idea in their head of what they want to communicate, and they say it with whatever words and language feel the most natural. They make frequent mistakes, sometimes in every sentence! Their grammar can be a mixture of English and their native language. They either don't know or don't care if they are making errors or mistakes.

These learners have high fluency, but low accuracy. So which one is more important – fluency or accuracy?

Firstly, it is important to know that “what do we mean by accuracy and fluency?” Activities which focus on accuracy try to get students to say something correctly (correct grammar, correct word form). Activities which focus on fluency try to get students to communicate successfully, even if they make some mistakes.

Both are equally important for language learning and language use. Accuracy certainly helps students communicate, and they may need a high level of accuracy to pass exams. Fluency activities are important because they allow students to express their ideas and communicate in a meaningful and enjoyable context.

**DR. ABHILASA KAUSHIK**

1P a g e



Most accuracy activities focus on mistakes. The teacher can correct students' mistakes or she can ask the children to correct some errors that she has written on the board. During fluency work, however, the teacher should only correct selectively and respond to the meaning of what a child has said, rather than the form. For example, if a child says, "I ping-pong yesterday", you can say, "Oh, you played ping-pong? That's nice."

While focusing on accuracy the children get over-conscious of making the correct usage and it makes them unable to use the language fluently. Once the students have developed this hesitation they cannot be fluent but beginning with fluency the students can lead to accuracy and then it becomes easier to learn English language. In this way the Children need a balance of fluency and accuracy activities to learn effectively. Try to plan your lessons to include both types, and think about which type will help students achieve the aim of the lesson. You can try accuracy activities after teaching new language, and after the children are comfortable, move to fluency-focused activities. But this is not the only way to do it – you can start with fluency activities and then move on to work on accuracy.

Although it depends upon the purpose of the learner whether s/he wants to focus accuracy or fluency, for example, if someone is working in a restaurant or a retail shop, the level of English you need is quite basic. S/he needs to know certain words or phrases related to his/her job – the items s/he is selling, how much they cost, and certain social phrases like *how's it going*, *thank you* and *see you later*.

This is all s/he need to communicate with his/her customers. It's not important to communicate accurately – the customer will understand both *what you want* ?, and *what do you want* ?, equally well. But it's very important to communicate the information quickly. In this situation, fluency is the key.

On the other hand, if someone is studying at university, or perhaps working in an office environment, accuracy becomes very important. This is especially true when the person is trying to communicate complicated thoughts or ideas. In these situations, speaking quickly, but with lots of errors, becomes very confusing for the listener. This is because the errors and mistakes distort, or change, the meaning of what s/he is trying to say. So the person need to pay more attention to what s/he is saying.

So what should we focus on, fluency or accuracy?

The answer depends on what kind of learner you are. If you focus too much on accuracy, and therefore speak very slowly, you need to improve your fluency. Speaking too slowly is bad



for maintaining a conversation. After a few seconds of silence, the person you are talking to starts thinking about something else. Communication is failing, you need to speak faster. Don't worry about making errors or mistakes – most are not serious, and don't affect communication.

But if you focus too much on fluency, you need to ask yourself if you are achieving your goals in communication. Are your mistakes and errors causing problems for the people who listen to you? If the answer is yes, you need to slow down and pay more attention to what you say. Speaking really fast, with lots of errors, is very problematic for the people who are listening to you. And if you are somewhere in the middle? Now you have to take a balanced approach. When you are in the safe environment of a classroom, with the support of teachers and fellow-learners, you should focus on accuracy, because these people can help correct your mistakes and errors. But when you are outside the classroom – when you are at work or socializing with friends – concentrate on communicating as fluently as possible.

## Definitions of Fluency

In one of the first studies investigating fluency, Fillmore (1979) conceptualized fluency in four different ways. First, he defined fluency as the ability to talk at length with few pauses and to be able to fill the time with talk. Second, a fluent speaker is not only capable of talking without hesitations but of expressing his/her message in a coherent, reasoned and "semantically densed" manner. Third, a person is considered to be fluent if he/she knows what to say in a wide of range of contexts. Finally,

One of the first definitions of second language fluency was provided by Pawley and Syder (1983), who regard native-like fluency as "the native speaker's ability to produce fluent stretches of discourse" (p. 191). This definition is of much narrower scope than that of Fillmore and has served as a basis for several further studies.

Lennon (1990) pointed out that fluency differs from the other scores in oral language exams (e.g. accuracy, appropriacy, etc.) in that it is purely a performance phenomenon, and consequently defined fluency as "an impression on the listener's part that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently" (p. 391). Thus he argued that "fluency reflects the speaker's ability to focus the listener's attention on his/her message by presenting a finished product, rather than inviting the listener to focus on the working of the production mechanisms"

## The Need of Fluency in the ESL Classroom



A major issue that continues to challenge language teachers is how to ensure that learners develop accuracy and complexity in their speaking, as well as fluency. Teachers know that too much corrective feedback (CF) can make learners reluctant to speak, while not enough may allow their errors to become entrenched. Many teachers resist the strong form of communicative language teaching (CLT) because it does not have ‘concrete’, ‘tangible’ content and, therefore, does not equate with ‘real’ teaching. This is hardly surprising since the one area in which language teachers have traditionally had expertise, the structure of the language, is off-limits in the strong form of CLT; all that remains is coaching learners on how to get their message across, which in the final analysis can be done with very limited linguistic resources, provided that formal accuracy is not a major concern or a concern at all.

Indeed, Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005: 327) see ‘no provisions in current CLT methodologies to promote language use to a high level of mastery through repetitive practice’, noting that ‘focused practice continues to be seen as inimical to the inherently open and unpredictable nature of communicative activities’.

Thus, while we can fairly assume that a teacher -centered classroom in which the main focus is on linguistic form will not lead to fluency, we can also be confident that a focus on authentic communication alone will not lead to accuracy and complexity. It could be that the pendulum will return towards pedagogy that prioritizes formal accuracy over communicative fluency, but I doubt this for several reasons. First, sociolinguistic research into language varieties has

Challenged the notion that there is a monolithic, ‘correct’ form—that of the ‘native speaker’—against which the language of learners can be measured. Second, this challenge has increased pressure on researchers, materials writers, and teachers to check their linguistic intuitions against findings from corpus linguistics, which continue to shed light on the importance of context at both the linguistic and sociolinguistic level. Finally, language teaching methodologies have become increasingly humanistic, stressing the importance of the learner in the language acquisition process.

The heterogeneity of linguistic competence, learning styles, strategies, and degree of social investment of language learners is precisely the impetus for greater research efforts into pedagogical methodologies that depart from the prescriptive syllabus and encourage our reflective and intuitive capacity as teachers. The time is right for a responsive pedagogy premised on careful attention to, and arising from the needs of, the individual learner.

The origins of accuracy and fluency Brumfit (1979) was the first to highlight the distinction between fluency, which represents the learner’s ‘truly internalized grammar’, contrasting this with ‘overt and conscious accuracy’ (115, emphasis in original) and suggested that fluency



should be 'regarded as natural language use, whether or not it results in native-speaker-like language comprehension or production' (Brumfit 1984: 56). When he introduced these terms as key concepts in second language acquisition (SLA) and syllabus design, Brumfit was also arguing for an approach to form- and meaning-focused teaching, which, it seems, has largely fallen on deaf ears. For instance, he proposed allowing people to operate as effectively as they [can], and attempting to mold what they produce in the desired direction, rather than explicitly teaching and expecting convergent imitation. That is, instead of giving learners language items to imitate and expecting their imitations gradually to conform to the model, teachers could discover what learners actually wanted to say and then teach them how to say it in the target language.

### **Principles of Fluency**

Being fluent does not mean speaking quickly. It is better to speak slowly and clearly than quickly and incoherently.

The ability to speak smoothly and fluently is the result of a number of factors. Some of the key factors include:

- Thought groups. Think of language as a series of phrases instead of a series of words. Before you speak, pause and compose the next PHRASE that you're going to say. After you're finished with that phrase, pause again and think of the next phrase. You will sound much more fluent if you pause slightly longer and then produce fluent phrases than if you constantly pause for a half second before every word or two.
- Linking. Native speakers of English typically link the ends and beginnings of many words together within a thought group. This makes their English sound "smooth". To find out more about thought groups and linking, refer to Manual of American English Pronunciation.
- Collocations (words that usually "belong" together). Many words in English naturally match with other words. Certain verbs tend to go with certain nouns etc. If you train yourself to recognize and learn collocations, your speech will flow more easily
- Transition words and phrases. General phrases that signal that you are beginning a new topic, summarizing information, giving reasons, naming steps etc., are also important in developing fluency. "Filler" phrases or "hesitation devices". As you listen to native speakers, you will notice that they use "filler" phrases to varying degrees. These are phrases like "What I'm trying to say is . . .", "If you know what I mean . . .", "Let me think a minute here" which give speakers a small space to think before they express their next idea.



Try to keep a relaxed attitude! If you are TOO worried about correctness, your speech may be filled with pauses!

## Communication Activities and Fluency

Communicative activities like role- plays, ESL games etc. can be used successfully with many class levels. They are especially crucial for literacy- and beginning-level classes as vehicles to move learners toward independent and confident learning. To make these activities as useful as possible there are a few things to remember:

- Keep teacher talk to a minimum. Explain as much as possible by demonstrating the process, explaining in different ways, and repeating. Don't worry if every learner doesn't understand every part of an activity. Move on when the majority of the learners get the idea, and then circulate and help as needed—unobtrusively. One way to gauge the success of a class for English language learners is to observe how much or how little the students are depending on the teacher. The more learners are working independently, in pairs, or in small groups, the more successful the class.
- Literacy- and beginning-level learners, as well as those at intermediate and advanced levels, are highly competent individuals. They may lack English and (for some) school skills, and it is the teacher's job to help them with that. These adults have successfully weathered many difficulties to get to class. Give them the credit they deserve.
- Have fun. Communicative activities are designed to be lively, interactive, and fun. When people are comfortable they are likely to learn more. An active, cooperative class is a class where a great deal of learning—social, cultural, and linguistic—is evident. Communicative activities provide opportunities for learners to use the language with one another and with people in the community.

## CONCLUSION

After realizing the importance of fluency practice that can lead to accuracy later along with building the confidence of the learner, it becomes necessary to know that how can it be developed in the students? Although with the introduction to CLT and many other methods and techniques in SLA, the 'teacher centric classroom' has been turned into the 'student centric' one where the teacher acts more of a facilitator than a dictator. In these situations today's classroom is more interactive, full of activities where the students are the active participants without being hesitant to speak because they do not have the 'accuracy-phobia' in the beginning. They can begin from some phrases, can be wrong grammatically in the



beginning, but they have to be aware of the pronunciation, tone, stress etc. that they convey the message at least but later they will move on to accuracy by taking the weaker grammatical aspects one by one. But this is to be followed in speaking skill, for writing skills they have to concentrate on accuracy from the very beginning.

## REFERENCES

- Bygate, M. (1999). Quality of language and purpose of task: Patterns of learners' language on two oral communication tasks. *Language Teaching Research*, 3, 185-214.
- Carlson, R. A., Sullivan, M., & Schneider, W. (1989). Practice and working memory effects in building procedural skill. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 15, 517-526.
- Chambers, F. (1997). What do we mean by fluency? *System*, 25, 535-544.
- Dewaele, J.-M. (2000). Saisir l'insaisissable? Les mesures de longueur d'énoncés en linguistique appliquée. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 38, 31-47.
- Dewaele, J.-M., & Pavlenko, A. (2003). Productivity and lexical diversity in native and non-native speech: A study of cross-cultural effects. In V. Cook (Ed.), *The effects of the second language on the first* (pp. 120-141). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Kormos, J. (2000). The role of individual and social variables in oral task performance. *Language Teaching Research*, 4, 275-300.
- Ejzenberg, R. (2000). The juggling act of oral fluency: A psycho-sociolinguistic metaphor. Riggenbach (Ed.), *Perspectives on fluency* (pp. 287-314). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Fillmore, C. J. (1979). On fluency. In D. Kempler, and W. S. Y. Wang (Eds.), *Individual differences in language ability and language behavior* (pp. 85-102). New York: Academic Press.
- Foster, P., & Skehan, P. (1996). The influence of planning and task type on second language performance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18, 299-323.
- Freed, B. (1995). What makes us think that students who study abroad become fluent? In B. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 123-48). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Freed, B. F. (2000). Is fluency, like beauty, in the eyes (and ears) of the beholder? In H. Riggenbach (Ed.), *Perspectives on fluency* (pp. 243-265). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Fulcher, G. (1996). Does thick description lead to smart tests? A data-based approach to rating scale construction. *Language Testing*, 13, 208 - 238.
- Goldman-Eisler, F. (1968). *Psycholinguistics: Experiments in spontaneous speech*. New York: Academic Press.
- Griffiths, R. (1991). Pausological research in an L2 context: A rationale, and review of



- selected Studies. *Applied Linguistics* 12, 345 - 364.
- Hieke, A. E. (1984). Linking as a marker of fluent speech. *Language and Speech*, 27, 343-354.
- Hieke, A. E. (1985). A componential approach to oral fluency evaluation. *Modern Language Journal*, 69, 135-142.
- Jarvis, S. (2002). Short texts, best-fitting curves, and new measures of lexical diversity. *Language Testing* 19, 57-84.
- Koponen, M., & Riggenbach, H. (2000). Overview: Varying perspectives on fluency. In H. Riggenbach (Ed.), *Perspectives on fluency* (pp. 5-24). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Lennon, P. (1990). Investigating fluency in EFL: A quantitative approach. *Language Learning*, 40, 387-412.
- Lennon, P. (2000). The lexical element in spoken second language fluency. In H. Riggenbach (Ed.), *perspectives on fluency* (pp. 25-42). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Malvern, D. D., & Richards, B. J. (1997). A new measure of lexical diversity. In A. Ryan & A. Wray (Eds.), *Evolving models of language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Möhle, D. (1984). A comparison of the second language speech production of different native speakers. In H. W. Dechert, D. Möhle, & M. Raupach (Eds.), *Second language production* (pp. 26-49). Tübingen: Günter Narr.
- Pawley, A., & Syder, F. H. (1983). Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. In J. C. Richards & R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 317-331). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Rehbein, J. (1987). On fluency in second language speech. In H. W. Dechert & M. Raupach (Eds.), *Psycholinguistic models of production* (pp. 97-105). Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Rekart, D., & Dunkel, P. (1992). The utility of objective (computer) measures of the fluency of speakers of English as a second language. *Applied Language Learning*, 3, 65-85.
- Riazantseva, A. (2001). Second language proficiency and pausing: A study of Russian speakers of English. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 23, 497-526.
- Richards, B. (1987). Type/token ratios: What do they really tell us? *Journal of Child Language*, 14, 201-209.
- Riggenbach, H. (1991). Towards an understanding of fluency: A microanalysis of nonnative speaker conversation. *Discourse Processes*, 14, 423-441.
- Sajavaara, K. (1987). Second language speech production: Factors affecting fluency. In H. W. Dechert & M. Raupach (Eds.), *Psycholinguistic models of production* (pp. 45-65). Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Schmidt, R. (1992.) Psychological mechanisms underlying second language fluency. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 14, 357-385.
- Segalowitz, N. (2000). Automaticity and attention skill in fluent performance. In H.





- Riggenbach (Ed.), perspectives on fluency (pp. 200-219). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17, 38-62.
- Skehan, P. (1998). A cognitive approach to language learning. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skehan, P. & Foster, P. (1997). Task type and task processing conditions as influences on foreign language performance. *Language Teaching Research*, 1, 185-211.
- Skehan, P. & Foster, P. (1999). The influence of task structure and processing conditions on narrative retellings. *Language Learning*, 49, 93-120.
- Tonkyn, A. (2001). The many voices of fluency. Paper presented at the BAAL Annual Meeting, September 2001.
- Towell, R., Hawkins, R., & Bazergui, N. (1996). The development of fluency in advanced learners of French. *Applied Linguistics*, 17, 84-119.
- Vanderplank, R. (1993). Pacing and spacing as predictors of difficulty in speaking and understanding English. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 47, 117-125.
- Van Gelderen, A. (1994). Prediction of global ratings of fluency and delivery in narrative discourse by linguistic and phonetic measures - oral performances of students aged 11-12 years. *Language Testing*, 11, 291 - 319.
- Wennerstorm, A. (2000). The role of intonation in second language fluency. In H. Riggenbach (Ed.), perspectives on fluency (pp. 102-127). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.