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► **To cite this version:**

James Dean Brown. Aspects of Fluency and Accuracy. Les Après-midi de LAIRDIL, 1995, 04, pp.9-35.  
hal-04056133

**HAL Id: hal-04056133**

**<https://ut3-toulouseinp.hal.science/hal-04056133v1>**

Submitted on 3 Apr 2023

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# Aspects of Fluency and Accuracy

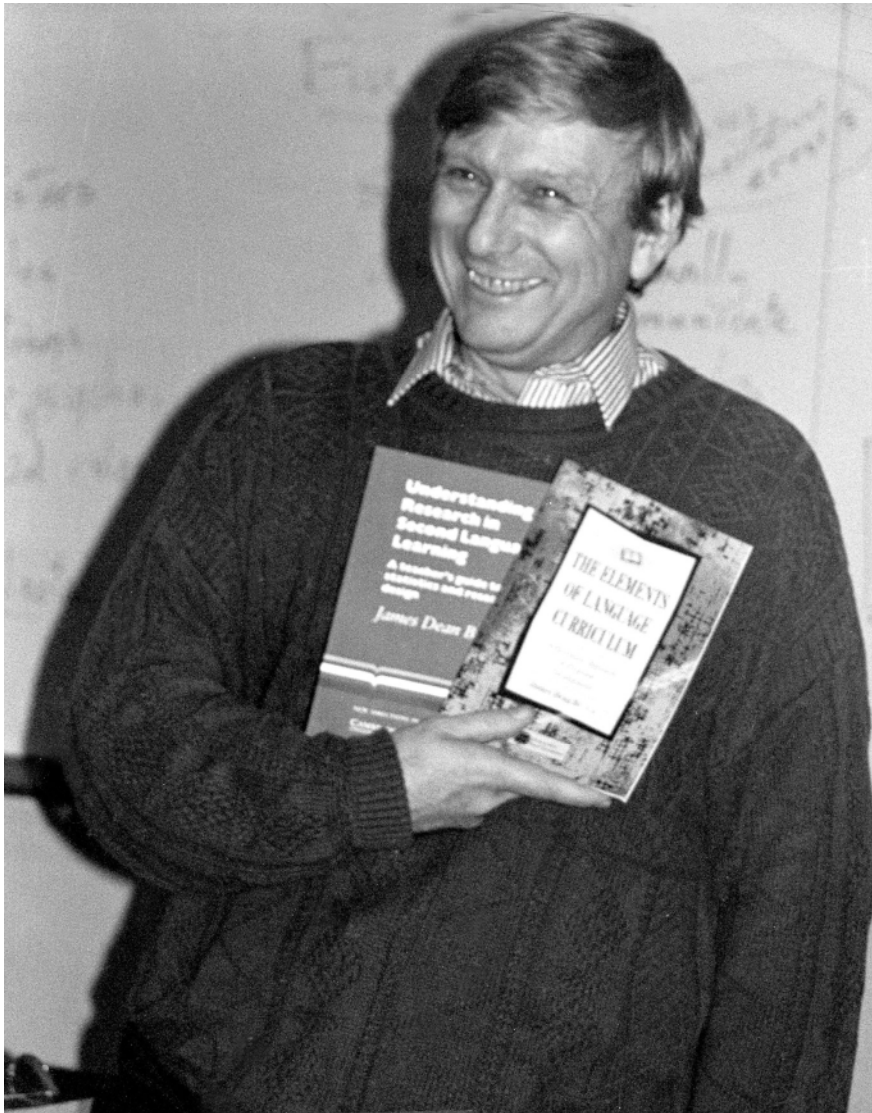
## Abstract

The introduction of this paper explores a number of different definitions of "fluency" and its apparent antithesis, "accuracy." The paper then goes on to suggest ways that the language teaching profession's view of fluency should be expanded to include a wider array of linguistic tools that students must be able to use, a variety of choices that students must be able to make and an assortment of strategies that they should eventually be able to use to compensate for the fact that they lack full knowledge and fluency in the language.

In more detail, to improve fluency, students must have certain linguistic tools that go well beyond the knowledge of pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary that most teachers provide their students. Students must also be able to use (a) suprasegmental, (b) paralinguistic, (c) proxemic and (d) pragmatic tools to their advantage. In addition, to increase their fluency, they must learn to make linguistic *choices* that have to do with (a) settings, (b) social, sexual, and psychological roles, as well as (c) register and style. There are also six linguistic *strategies* that will help students increase their fluency, that is, the abilities: (a) to use speed to their advantage, (b) to use pauses and hesitations efficiently, (c) to give appropriate feedback, (d) to repair competently, (e) to clarify effectively, and (f) to negotiate for meaning when necessary.

Finally, teachers can do at least five things in their classrooms to foster fluency: (a) encourage students to make errors, (b) create many opportunities for students to practise, (c) create activities that force students to focus on getting a message across, (d) assess student's fluency not their accuracy and (e) talk to the students about fluency.

This paper concludes by noting that fluency is not an absolute issue where a student either has it or doesn't have it. Rather, fluency is a matter of degrees. Hence, some degree of fluency can probably be attained at all levels of ability. Given this state of affairs, students should gradually be acquainted with the linguistic tools, choices and strategies they will need to communicate fluently, regardless of the level of language proficiency they may have at the moment.



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IUT, Toulouse, 1995

# Aspects of Fluency and Accuracy

## Introduction

According to Hartmann and Stork (1976, p. 86), "A person is said to be a fluent speaker of a language when he can use its structures accurately whilst concentrating on content rather than form, using the units and patterns automatically at normal conversational speed when they are needed."

Fillmore (1979) proposed four kinds of fluency:

1. the ability to fill time with talk (*i.e.*, to talk without awkward pauses for a relatively long time);
2. the ability to talk in coherent, reasoned, and "semantically dense" sentences (the quotes are Fillmore's);
3. the ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts;
4. the ability to be creative and imaginative in using the language.

Notice that Fillmore's notion of fluency is limited to oral productive language. This issue will be discussed in more detail later.

For Brumfit (1984, p. 56), fluency is "to be regarded as natural language use." He also summarizes Fillmore's four kinds of fluency saying that they are related to four characteristics: speed and continuity, coherence, context-sensitivity, and creativity. These characteristics, he argues, are related to four "basic sets of abilities" as follows: psycho-motor, cognitive, affective and aesthetic (p. 54).

Richards, Platt and Weber (1985, p. 108) define fluency as "the features which give speech the qualities of being natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions. They go on to say that, in second and foreign language situations, fluency characterizes a level of communication proficiency, which includes the abilities:

1. to produce written and/or spoken language with ease;
2. to speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary and grammar;
3. to communicate ideas effectively;
4. to produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication (Richards *et al*, 1985, pp. 108-109).

Lennon (1990, p. 388) argues that fluency has been used in the literature in two senses, which he labels the broad and narrow senses. To him, the broad definition functions "as a cover term for oral proficiency", which "represents the highest point on a scale that measures spoken command of a foreign language" (p. 389). He goes on later to define the narrow sense as being "one, presumably isolatable, component of oral proficiency. This sense is found particularly in procedures for grading oral examinations..." (p. 389).

Schmidt (1992) prefers to describe fluency as an *automatic procedural skill* (after Carlson, Sullivan & Schneider, 1989). He argues that L2 fluency is a performance phenomenon which "depends on procedural knowledge" (citing Faerch and Kasper [1984]) or knowing how to do something, rather than declarative knowledge or knowledge about something.

According to Richards *et al.* (1985, p. 109), fluency can also be understood in contrast to accuracy, "which refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently". Traditionally, accuracy has been taught and demanded not only in syntax, as suggested by Richards *et al.*, but also in the areas of pronunciation and vocabulary. Of course, pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary could easily be included in the notion of grammar if Richards *et al.* are using grammar to refer to a sort of all inclusive big "G" Grammar. I feel that fluency can best be understood, not in contrast to accuracy, but in complement to it. As Brumfit (1984) put it, "In no sense is it (accuracy) meant to imply that fluent language may not also be accurate language".

The above definitions furnish a good starting point because they include much of what fluency is. However, in my view, a full understanding of fluency must take into account many other factors - factors which will be discussed in this paper.

### **Expanding our view of fluency**

My experiences in trying to teach or foster fluency in my students have led me to believe that, if we want to help our students become more fluent, we must expand or reshape our views of fluency to include three crucial elements. I will call these three elements tools, choices and strategies.

First, students must be given access to all of the *tools* of the effective communicator in any language. Mere knowledge of pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary will not suffice because these are only three of the tools that are

available to people when they communicate. Nobody relies as heavily on carefully pronounced words and grammar to communicate as L2 learners do. Certainly, native speakers use a much wider range of tools including suprasegmentals, paralinguistics, proxemics and pragmatics.

Second, acquisition of fluency depends on the students having an expanded and complete picture of the *choices* that they must make to accurately communicate in their L2. Which choices they will make will depend primarily on the settings in which communication is taking place, as well as the social, sexual, and psychological roles of the interlocutors and register and style involved in the discourse.

Third, because 100 percent accuracy is only a long range goal, and because a certain degree of fluency can probably be attained at all levels of accuracy, students must learn *strategies* to help them communicate fluently with whatever level of language they have at the moment.

In short, I feel that teachers must expand the traditional boundaries of accuracy to offer rules of appropriacy including knowledge of the tools that they must be able to use, the choices that they should be able to make and the strategies that they must use to compensate for the fact that they lack full knowledge and fluency.

## **Tools**

As mentioned above, teachers can foster fluency in their students by giving them access to all of the *tools* of an effective communicator. Given what we now know about language, just giving students knowledge of pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary only provides them with three of the available tools. Teachers who are aware of recent developments in applied linguistics will be in a position to offer their students a much wider range of tools including knowledge about (a) suprasegmentals, (b) paralinguistics, (c) proxemics and (d) pragmatics, as well as practice in their use.

### ***Suprasegmentals***

Suprasegmentals are aspects of pronunciation which extend beyond the individual phoneme, or segmental level. In other words, suprasegmentals typically involve more than one phoneme. Those aspects of language which are often listed as suprasegmentals in English are stress, intonation and voice quality. These elements are important in their own way because they are important for understanding the language produced by others, as well as for

expressing oneself. To illustrate, consider the fact that an utterance like, "You are looking very nice tonight", can be said in a matter-of-fact manner, sincerely, sarcastically, suggestively, sexily and probably many other ways, depending on stress, intonation, and voice quality. In other words, the same pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary can mean a variety of things depending on stress, intonation and voice quality - the suprasegmentals.

### ***Paralinguistics***

Paralinguistic features are those aspects of the spoken language that are outside of the vocal system. Some of the commonly listed paralinguistic features are facial expressions, eye movements, eye gaze, head movements and hand gestures. These are important communication tools and most humans use them. Interestingly, these are the tools that many of us use when all other forms of communication break down, as in situations where we do not speak the language at all. Hence, use of these features may be one of the strategies that learners can use, when other linguistic tools break down, to keep communication moving along.

### ***Proxemics***

Proxemic aspects of a language have to do with the use of the body in communication. Thus, the communicative aspects of distance, touching and posture during communication would all be proxemics. Proxemics are important because they can be used to communicate friendliness, concern, hostility and many other complex emotions without complex pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary. They are equally important because the misuse of proxemics in intercultural situations can cause serious misunderstandings. Over the years the most salient example of proxemic miscommunication has been provided by my many male Saudi and Kuwaiti students who have stood very close to me (oh, my goodness) and even touched me (horror of horrors) in violation of the rules of proxemics of my own linguistic and cultural group, North Americans.

### ***Pragmatics***

Pragmatics involves those aspects of the language that have to do with the particular contexts and situations in which the language is produced. Thus the relationships between real world knowledge and the language being used in a particular context would be pragmatics. Likewise, the relationships between speaker and listener in that context would be pragmatics. This would be a

simple issue if the pragmatic rules of all languages were the same, but like all other aspects of language, large differences in pragmatics exist between languages (and cultures): differences that can cause communication problems, differences that can be taught and learned and differences that must be understood if fluency is ever to be improved.

### ***Pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary revisited***

We must also recognize that even our views of pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary teaching may be limiting our students' options.

For instance, in *pronunciation*, we tend to focus on segmentals (the smallest units of distinctive sound) to the exclusion of suprasegmentals, but also to the exclusion of very important and useful generalizations about pronunciation itself, like the fact that unstressed vowels in English become *schwa* in many environments and like the fact that incorrect word stress is far more likely to cause incomprehension among native speakers than incorrect production of segmentals. We also largely ignore the many forms of reduction that occur in rapid spoken English. Why is it that we do not teach these things? And why is it that we are amazed when our students cannot understand natural spoken language like *whenarwegonnagedoudahere?* (When are we going to get out of here?) (For more on this topic, see Brown & Hilferty, 1986, 1987, 1989 & forthcoming).

Similarly, our view of *syntax* may be antiquated and limiting our students' options. Consider the notion of requiring our students to use complete sentences. While that may be appropriate for teaching writing, at least formal writing, it is not appropriate for teaching speaking. It is a fact that the syntax of spoken discourse does not require complete sentences. Indeed, complete sentences will sound strange to native speakers. Consider the following imaginary conversation between a native speaker (NS), who does not use complete sentences, and a non-native speaker (NNS), who does use complete sentences just like he was taught:

- NS     *Howzit goin'?*  
NNS    *I am doing very well, thank you.*  
NS     *Your family?*  
NNS    *They are doing very well, too, thank you.*  
NS     *Whereya going?*  
NNS    *I am walking to the snack bar. Would you like to come with me?*

Wouldn't it be much more natural (and fluent) for the rules of conversational pronunciation and syntax to be used as follows?

- NS     *Howzit goin'?*



NNS *Fine, thanks.*  
NS *Your family?*  
NNS *They're good, too.*  
NS *Whereya goin'?*  
NNS *The snack bar. Ya wanna come along?*

First, notice how the second conversation uses the syntax of spoken colloquial English, which *does not* prescribe complete sentences, but rather organizes itself around *utterances*.

Second, note that several of these utterances appear to be chunks of language (e.g., "Howzit goin'?" and "Fine, thanks.") that could/should be taught as units (as contrasted with sentences constructed on the basis of syntax rules from vocabulary items). Finally, note, in the second dialog, that the pronunciation is reduced and somewhat more relaxed (and appropriate).

Lastly, our view of *vocabulary* may be old-fashioned and limiting our students options. Why is it that we avoid idioms? Truly fluent speakers must have command of the vocabulary and idioms of the language. Also, why is it that we never teach the swear words and "vulgar" expressions? These types of vocabulary are part of the language (see Claire, 1990) and for students (men and women alike) to function in some of the most relaxed and informal language styles fluently, they must have a command of this vocabulary, too.

### ***Big "G" Grammar***

In short, the Grammar (in the big "G" sense of that term) that we offer to our students should indeed include pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary, but only in their expanded and full versions if we want to offer students the full range of even these three tools. In addition, this Grammar should include suprasegmentals, paralinguistics, proxemics and pragmatics if we wish to give our students the full range of tools that they will need to increase their fluency.

The answer that I often get to these observations is that the students will pick up these things after they get to the country. If that argument is satisfactory, perhaps we can assume that students will "pick up" all aspects of the language once they get to the foreign country, if given enough time. Why would we want to send partially informed humans into these situations? People with only three out of the seven sets of language tools available to them and incomplete views of even those three tools.

Isn't the purpose of studying a foreign language to make the process of language learning more efficient and less painful (in advance of actually needing the new language for real-life communication)? If so, then how can we justify not giving our students the full range of tools that they will need in their

grammar in order to be fluent and effective communicators? From a practical point of view, it may not matter that these tools are theoretically sound and important tools prerequisite for achieving fluency, because the bottom line for the teacher may be that students find these topics interesting. Try some of these topics and see if the students don't find them interesting

1. Differences between L1 and L2 in how stress, intonation and voice quality are used to affect meaning.
2. Differences between L1 and L2 in how facial expressions, eye movements, eye gaze, head movements and hand gestures are used .
3. Differences between L1 and L2 in distance, touching and posture during conversation.
4. Differences between L1 and L2 in the pragmatic rules of conversation in different contexts and situations, as well as the rules related to the relationship(s) between speaker and listener.
5. The importance of *schwa* in English pronunciation.
6. The importance of word stress in native speaker comprehension of non-native speech.
7. The importance of reduced forms in comprehending native English speech.
8. The importance of using and understanding utterances (rather than complete sentences) in spoken English.
9. The importance of learning some aspects of English as chunks rather than as vocabulary items and syntax rules.
10. Idioms as important elements of vocabulary in English. Swear words and vulgarisms in English.

If I am correct, incidental to providing students with the tools they will need to become fluent in English, teachers can introduce topics that will make their classes more interesting to the students than the standard triad of pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary.

## Choices

As mentioned above, the acquisition of fluency probably depends on the students having an expanded picture of the *choices*, or options, that they have when they are communicating. To me, that goes well beyond the mere knowledge of pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary that most teachers give their students and even beyond the suprasegmentals, paralinguistics, proxemics and pragmatics that I argued for in the previous section. Widdowson (1978, p. 13) made a distinction between what he called reference rules and expression rules. *Reference rules* would be those rules that make up the student's knowledge of the language. Given the foregoing discussion, a student's reference rules would consist of what they know of the pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary, suprasegmental, paralinguistic, proxemic and pragmatic rules of

English. The *expression rules* would be those rules that determine what the student actually does with the language.

Thus the choices that students make when they communicate in the language must be based on reference rules. These reference rules often center on (a) settings, (b) social, sexual and psychological roles and (c) register and style.

### ***Settings***

The place where communication takes place is the setting. Settings vary considerably. Consider the following limited list and how they might affect the way anyone would speak: a classroom, a gym, a gas station, a dentist's office, a grocery store, a library, a movie house, a large meeting of 250 people, a small meeting of seven people, etc.

Such settings are important linguistically because they can affect the way language is produced, that is, the choices the speakers make in terms of pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary, suprasegmental, paralinguistic, proxemic and pragmatic rules. For instance, a person talking conversationally outdoors will generally speak louder and more effusively than a person speaking in a library. Or, a person who is lecturing to a large university class is likely to speak quite differently than the same person working with a kindergarten class.

### ***Sexual, psychological and social roles***

Within various situations, sexual, psychological and social roles may further determine the choices that people make in communicating.

*Sexual roles* have to do with differences between males and females in terms of how they communicate with other males and females. The research indicates that females and males communicate differently in general. For instance, it has been found that females speak less often and less long in faculty meeting settings than males in American universities. In addition, females speak differently to males than they do to other females and males speak differently to females than they do to other males. These are differences that learners must take into account when making linguistic choices.

*Psychological roles* have to do with differences based on personality, aggressivity, dominance, power relationships, etc. For instance, a small, passive, powerless person will speak to a large, aggressive, powerful person differently than to another small, passive, powerless person. Thus very different linguistic choices may be based on psychological roles.

*Social roles* have to do with differences based on the relative status of the different roles in society of the people who are communicating. We all take on a variety of social roles in our lives. For instance, in my personal life, I am a father, son, uncle, friend, ex-husband, boy-friend, etc. In my work, I am a friend, colleague, professor, administrator, employee, committee chair, committee member, etc. In my daily life, I am also a customer at a bank, grocery store, auto garage, drug store, dentist's office, doctor's office, etc. In some roles, I may be rather humble and meek, for instance, when I take my car in for servicing, I know nothing about mechanics and feel rather powerless so my linguistic choices are those of a humble, meek customer.

### ***Register and style***

Over the years, some confusion has arisen over the definitions and use of the terms register and style.

*Register* will be used here only to refer to differences in language based on membership in different occupations (*e.g.*, ministers, professors, students, mechanics, sportscasters, etc.) or different hobbies or interest areas (*e.g.*, fishing, skating, skiing, model railroading, computer hacking, etc.). Membership in any of these groups certainly involves the use of special vocabulary and may involve other modifications in syntax and even pronunciation. For instance, Protestant ministers definitely use a register that involves special vocabulary (*e.g.*, Baptism, Host, Holy Trinity, salvation, sermon, etc.), syntax (*e.g.*, "thy will be done", "hallowed be thy name", etc.) and will even sometimes use a special stentorous pronunciation while delivering a sermon.

*Style* will only refer to differences in level of formality, perhaps ranging from very formal to formal to colloquial to casual to very casual. These differences in style occur because of differences in settings, differences in social, sexual and psychological roles and differences in register. However, style can also vary within any of these categories, based on the degree of personal relationship between the interlocutors. For instance, a minister might move from very formal style during the sermon, where personal relationships are distant, to more colloquial while greeting parishioners at the door of the church after the sermon, to very casual while greeting a particularly close friend at that same door - all the while using the minister's register such that everyone is well aware of the roles involved.

### ***Making correct choices***

Being able to switch registers and styles and responding correctly to different social, sexual and psychological roles in various settings is one mark of a fluent speaker of any language. Yet, often we fail to help our students to learn the various rules involved in these choices. Naturally, such rules will be more important when the students are at a relatively advanced level of learning. However, I believe that we can start teaching the students some aspects of these rules much earlier if we really want to.

### **Strategies**

As mentioned earlier, fluency is not an absolute characteristic which a student either has or doesn't have. Rather, fluency is a matter of degrees, so some degree of fluency can probably be attained at all levels of accuracy. Given this state of affairs, students should probably be taught specific linguistic *strategies* to help them communicate fluently with whatever level of language they have at the moment. There are at least six such linguistic *strategies* that will help students to become increasingly fluent. These six are the abilities: (a) to use speed to their advantage, (b) to use pauses and hesitations efficiently, (c) to give appropriate feedback, (d) to repair competently, (e) to clarify effectively and (f) to negotiate for meaning when necessary.

### ***Ability to use speed to their advantage***

Lay people, when asked to define fluency, will often talk about fluency being speed. But fast speech is not necessarily fluent speech. Indeed, fluent native speakers differ in the speed of their speech. It may in fact be that non-native speakers of English will try to use speed to make themselves seem more fluent and, in the process, simply demonstrate their inability to speak quickly with any success. The point is that fast speech, whether native or non-native, is not necessarily fluent speech. This is a message that may be important to get across to students: it is okay to speak relatively slowly as long as it is done appropriately. In fact, native speakers often speak at a rather slow rate so they will have time to think as they talk and so they will be clear to their listeners. Hence, the appropriate speed is the speed at which the speaker can think cogently and still get his/her message across clearly.

### ***Ability to use pauses and hesitations***

Native speakers pause and hesitate often while they are talking. In fact, second language learners must be made to understand that natives spend up to 50 percent of their speaking time pausing, so pausing and hesitating must be signs of fluency. (For more on pauses, see Clark and Clark, 1977; Hatch, 1983; or Tarter, 1986). Because students often will not believe that natives pause and hesitate, the teacher may want to audiotape (or better yet, videotape) some native speakers talking in a natural situation (*i.e.*, not actors) in order to show students how natives actually do hesitate and pause. In one way or another, students must be shown that pausing and hesitating are necessary and natural parts of spoken language. Human beings need time to think, and they use pauses to accomplish that.

However, students must also recognize that using a slower speed with pauses and hesitations may require the use of fillers. Fillers are sometimes just sounds like *uh*, *uhm*, *er*, *ah* and *mm*; other times, fillers may be words such as *okay*, *well*, *you know* and so forth. Whether the filler is a sound or word, the purpose is to avoid silence, which in turn makes the communication more natural - and fluent. Native speakers of English will hesitate and pause, but they will not allow long silences to build up. Instead, they appropriately use fillers to avoid long silences and in the process give themselves time to think.

### ***Ability to give appropriate feedback***

*Feedback* includes all signals that one speaker directs at another to indicate general success or failure to communicate. Feedback may express understanding or misunderstanding, agreement or disagreement, comprehension or confusion, etc. And the signals that are used to express these meanings can include gestures, facial expressions, sounds and words. Gestures might include a hand signal to stop or continue or talk faster or head signals like nods of agreement, head shaking in wonder, etc. Facial expressions could involve quizzical expressions, smiles, winks, direct eye contact, etc. Sounds might include grunts of agreement, sounds like *uh huh*, *mm*, etc. Words that are often used to give feedback are things like *yep*, *yeah*, *okay*, *really*, etc. Using all of these feedback mechanisms differs from language to language and even dialect to dialect. Hence, students cannot be expected to "pick them up" easily. These feedback cues should be taught because they are clear and obvious markers of fluency that can make a person seem very foreign or very fluent.

### ***Ability to repair competently***

Native speakers often mispronounce words, create false starts, back track, stutter and so forth. In the process, they feel nothing akin to the mortification that some non-native speakers feel when they make such "mistakes." In part, the natives handle their mistakes better because they know how to competently repair them. Repairs are used during conversations to correct errors and misunderstandings. When speakers correct themselves, it is called self-repair. When one speaker corrects another it is called other-repair. Students need to learn how to correct their own errors, how to understand and accept corrections from others and perhaps eventually how to correct others.

### ***Ability to clarify effectively***

One type of repair that is particularly important is clarification. When a fluent speaker recognizes that the listener is not understanding (through facial expressions or verbal cues), that speaker will be able to clarify effectively through rephrasing, defining terms, summarizing or drawing a picture if necessary. The point is that, when misunderstood, fluent speakers will use whatever strategies are necessary to make the message clear.

### ***Ability to negotiate for meaning when necessary***

Similarly, when fluent speakers recognize that they are not understanding, they will use whatever facial expressions or verbal cues are necessary to get the speaker to clarify. And if they are still not understanding after the speaker clarifies, the fluent speaker will continue to seek clarification. This process of give and take in conversation (including all aspects of repair, feedback and clarification) is known as negotiation. Typically, the effort is focused on negotiating meaning, but that is not always the case. Negotiation can also involve vocabulary, grammar or even pronunciation.

## **Fostering fluency**

In my view, fluency can only partially be "taught" in the traditional sense of that word. Certainly, we can expand our students' knowledge base in terms of choices, tools and strategies but, at a certain point, I think that we have to realize that the teaching of fluency will be different from other types of teaching, that is, to teach fluency we must be willing to let go, to let the students

do the work, to set up situations in which fluency will be fostered and then encourage communication.

Unlike other aspects of language learning, fluency has to do with automaticity. As Schmidt (1992) put it, fluent speech is automatic, not requiring much attention and is characterized by the fact that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently (Lennon, 1990, p. 391). Such automaticity can only be achieved by the students themselves, and we can only help the students by creating opportunities for them to increase their own fluency.

My experiences in teaching speaking in China and elsewhere indicate to me that achieving ease and efficiency in speech production can be fostered by teachers if they (a) encourage students to make errors, (b) create many opportunities for students to practise, (c) create activities that force students to focus on getting a message across, (d) assess students' fluency not their accuracy and (e) talk to the students about fluency.

### ***Encourage students to make errors***

Many students may be hampered in their efforts to become fluent by the fact that they concentrate so ferociously on the accuracy of their syntax. Especially in some of the Asian countries that I have worked in, students are afraid of making mistakes because they do not want to "lose face" in front of their peers. Making errors is therefore a topic that I have had to teach to my students. To do so, I have used three strategies: (a) explaining native speaker error patterns, (b) minimizing error correction and (c) treating error making as a skill that students must master.

### ***Explaining native speaker error patterns***

Non-native speakers seldom recognize that native speakers make errors as a natural part of using language, especially in spoken language, including syntactic errors of subject, verb agreement, article agreement, tense, etc., pronunciation errors, errors in lexical choice and even logical errors. Normally, native speakers who are talking together don't even notice such errors unless they interfere with the communication. And when interference does occur, various strategies are used by both interlocutors and the conversation proceeds on its way. The students most likely do these things in their own native language. It may therefore prove useful to point these facts out to them and suggest that they listen to their own verbal production and that of other native speakers of their mother tongue to see if it isn't true in their language.



Students may not be close enough observers of linguistic phenomena to notice such errors in native production. So, another strategy that native speaker teachers can use to help convince students that such errors exist is for the teachers to monitor their own production when in front of their classes and point out to the students occasions when they make mistakes, or backtrack and self correct, or hesitate, or repeat a word, etc. For non-native speaking teachers, it may be necessary to tape live native speech wherein such errors occur and play that back to the students so they can become aware that even native speakers make errors.

The point of all this, of course, is that the students need to be convinced that it is okay for them to make production errors, indeed, it is a natural part of all communication, even among native speakers. The odd thing from my point of view is not that natives make errors (I have observed that for years), but rather that non-natives think that they must produce error-free complete sentences in spoken language. If this is part of the belief system of the students, it can only be destructive because they are bound to fail: they can be no better than native speakers and native speakers fail to use 100 percent correct grammar in complete sentences. If students are ever to increase their fluency, they must understand that they are placing expectations on themselves that are much higher than the expectations that native speakers place on themselves. I often ask my students, "What makes you think that you can speak English better than me, a native speaker?" That never fails to make them laugh, but like most humor, this question has an important grain of truth in it that is not lost on most of the students.

### ***Minimizing error correction***

If a teacher wants to encourage students to take a chance on making errors, it is absolutely necessary that error correction be kept to a minimum. At least in situations where the teacher wants students to increase their fluency, error correction should probably be limited to those errors which interfere with communication. The students will in all probability have their hands full dealing with the errors that they are monitoring in their own speech production without the teacher adding to their problems.

In some sense, the students' task is to bring their production of the language up to the knowledge of the language that they already have. For students to do that effectively, they need to be left alone to gradually bring their productive skills up to at least an approximation of their linguistic competence. "Fluency, then, can be seen as the maximally effective operation of the language

system so far acquired by the student" (Brumfit, 1984, p. 57). The point is that teachers should not yank the students back to focusing on accuracy (by doing too much error correction) during periods of fluency development because that will bring the whole process to a halt.

### ***Treating error making as a skill***

If students can be convinced that error making is a natural part of language use, and that their job is to learn how to make errors appropriately, then they will have some hope of becoming fluent. What subskills must the students develop in order to strengthen their error-making skill? First, they must learn that making errors is a necessary part of making progress toward fluency. Second, they should learn that errors are a natural part of their language development, not an indication of their lack of worth as human beings. Third, they must develop a willingness to make errors. A student who is afraid to make errors won't make errors and a student who won't make errors won't become fluent. For many students, this may mean learning to take chances in ways that they have never done before.

### ***Create many opportunities for students to practise***

In addition to encouraging students to make errors (in constructive ways) teachers may want to provide students with ample opportunities to practise using the language. In other words, the students must be induced to practise all aspects of the language so they become comfortable with using whatever expanded set of tools they have at the moment.

As a profession, we tend to provide this practice in "conversation" courses. However, my experience with conversation courses is that 90 percent of the time is spent with the teacher talking and the students listening and 10 percent dedicated to students talking. Thus in a 50 minute class, five to ten minutes might be dedicated to students actually talking. Since that five to ten minutes is often spent in teacher-student interactions (one student at a time), the time must be divided by the number of students in order to calculate the amount of time that students actually spend talking. Thus in a small class of ten students, each one might get thirty seconds of precious language production time. Of course, the time would be considerably reduced in a "conversation" class of 20 students, not to mention the "conversation" classes of 30, 40, 50 or 60 students that I have seen in some countries.

To create classes where students get much more practice producing language, we have to create "speaking" courses which, by definition, mean that

teachers must shut their mouths and set up activities which involve many students talking at the same time. Such strategies are difficult for many teachers. We are often much more comfortable in a teacher-centered (*i.e.*, very controlled) situation. In addition, student-centered activities take a lot of careful planning. In other words, it is easier to run a "conversation" course than a "speaking" course, but we owe it to our students to create "speaking" courses where they can get the practice they so sorely need to increase their fluency.

The central issue in creating "speaking" courses is that teachers must also learn how to relinquish their control of the class. For the many teachers who were themselves educated in a system where teachers were the center of every class, it is difficult to set up student-centered activities like pair work, group work, role plays, etc. and then simply let the students go. As one student put it (with reference to how I handle group work), "You look like a caged lion roaming aimlessly around the room while students are doing group work." For many of us, letting go in this sense is not easy.

Part of the solution to this problem is that teachers should give themselves a purpose in all student-centered activities - perhaps as a cultural informant, source of vocabulary, sympathetic listener, etc. Perhaps the teacher will simply move from pair to pair or group to group, not doing error correction but rather encouraging students to focus on their messages and stop worrying about accuracy and making errors. The main point is that, while designing activities, teachers should not only plan what the students will be doing, but also plan how the teacher will fit into the activity.

I also find that creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere helps foster fluency among the students. Naturally, the atmosphere of any class is a function of the personality of the teacher and the group dynamics in a particular class. However, I believe that any teacher can work on and improve the atmosphere in class by using humor, songs, personal interactions, smiles, cartoons, etc. to create a more fun and relaxed place for learning to take place.

### ***Create activities that focus on a message***

When I was teaching fluency in China fifteen years ago, it was necessary to create almost all of our activities from scratch. Fortunately, nowadays, teachers have numerous resources to fall back on (for instance, see Sadow, 1982; Klippel, 1987; Fried-Booth, 1988; Ladousse, 1988; Bailey & Savage, 1994). Whether selecting fluency activities from sources like those just listed, or in creating activities for a specific situation, teachers should keep in mind that all fluency activities should focus the students on getting their meaning across.

In China, our intermediate level speaking course provided a series of role-play, pair-work and group work activities (including panel presentations, debates, problem solving, etc.) that afforded the students ample opportunities to practise specific functions of the language in relatively non-threatening environments. Because the advanced level speaking course was designed to prepare students for university seminar-type situations, we tended to focus on group work and individual presentations to the group.

Regardless of which specific types of activities are chosen, they should all be constructed so that students have some specific task to perform or a clearly defined goal to reach. Although we did not know it at the time, we were using a task-based approach and those tasks were designed to maximize the degree to which students were focused on getting their meaning across. In other words, long before task-based curriculum had a name, we were doing it in China just to keep the students focused on their message rather than on the accuracy of the language they were using.

### ***Assess student's fluency not their accuracy***

Even when teachers address the issue of fluency well, if they test the students' accuracy rather than their fluency at the end of the course, they will have trouble getting the students' trust and cooperation in the future. Whether we like it or not, students are very test-driven. If we test them using multiple-choice grammar tests, they will prepare for multiple-choice grammar tests and wonder why on earth we are doing pair work in class. If on the other hand, the test involves role plays, pair work, interviews, etc., the students will prepare for such testing activities. Students are not stupid. They will prepare for the test and we must use that energy to guide them into practising what we want them to practise.

To create tests that reflect the types of things we want the students to practise throughout the semester, we must think about what it is that we want them to be able to do at the end of the course. Once we know what we want them to be able to do, we must then design achievement tests that allow the teacher to observe whether or not the students can indeed do those things and to what degree they have achieved those abilities.

In the intermediate speaking course in China, we tested the students in interviews, not with multiple-choice grammar tests, but with interviews. Our course objectives were that the students should be able to effectively use 15 of the functions covered in the Gambits series (Keller & Warner, 1979) by the end of the term. The content of the test was based on the specific objectives of our

course. Clearly, we wanted to develop an oral performance test. In this case, we needed a test of the students' abilities to perform the 15 functions that we were teaching.

In the end, the speaking teachers decided collectively that the test should be a taped interview, and that the interviews should be a sort of role play, where the students were supposed to be students in the United States and the teacher was supposed to be a professor in their field. We wanted five minute interviews, and to save time, at the beginning of each interview, we asked the student to choose three cards from among fifteen (one for each objective). Each card had a number of questions and/or situations that would elicit the function that was being tested by that card. The interviewers used each card until they felt that the students had been given an adequate chance to show what they could (or could not) do with the function in question, then moved on to the next card. No scoring was done while the interview was being conducted. However, the interviews were tape-recorded so that scoring could be done later.

At different times during the program, various schemes were used to score these interviews but the clearest scheme asked two teachers (the student's own teacher and one other) to give the students separate ratings for fluency, content, effectiveness in communicating their meaning, correct choice of exponents to accomplish the function and stress/intonation. Each of these five categories was given a total of five points possible for a total of 25 points. Notice that our testing scheme made no effort to rate grammatical or phonological accuracy, but instead focused the students on getting their idea across fluently.

In our advanced speaking course, the final projects were speeches that the students had to give in front of the other students and a video camera. Students were not allowed to read the speeches, though they could talk from an outline, and they were graded down if we felt that they had memorized the talks.

The topics were selected by them (with teacher approval) from their major field of study. They were told to find topics that would be informative and interesting to the other scientists in the audience. The students had been taught how to make effective speeches throughout the term. We hoped that the intrinsic interest of the topics to the speakers and their desire to really communicate their ideas to their fellow scientists would help them to stay focused on meaning and not worry too much about accuracy.

In order to make the experience as realistic as possible, some students in the class were given role cards during each presentation. The card might say, "ask a rude question", or "disagree with the speaker on some point", or "interrupt the speaker rudely to make a point of your own", etc.

In addition to watching themselves on videotape, students were rated on content, organization, speaking effectiveness (eye contact, gestures, voice projection, etc.), handling of the audience and intonation/stress. Notice again that we wanted them to worry about everything but accuracy. We wanted the students to be so focused on getting their meaning across in an effective public speaking manner, that they simply didn't have time to worry about grammatical accuracy. And, in general, the speeches were remarkably fluent.

Mendelsohn (1992) provides a similar set of observation/scoring criteria that teachers might consider adapting for their own purposes. Mendelsohn also leaves issues of grammatical or phonological accuracy out (allowing space for the teacher to write in notes, but not directly addressing accuracy in the feedback process).

The point is that the tests in a speaking course must be used to shape how the students view and practise the language. (For more on how tests can be used in language programs, see Brown 1990.) Certainly, developing good fluency-focused communicative tests is difficult and administering such tests is hard work and can be time consuming. But creating sound communicative tests is no more difficult than developing good fluency-focused communicative teaching materials. Why would anyone even consider testing such a curriculum in any other way? The message that a test sends to the students can totally defeat the teacher's efforts in the classroom unless there is a very close match between what is being taught and what is being tested. In other words, how the teacher assesses or tests in a course will affect how students see fluency, both in terms of what it is and how important it is.

### ***Talk to the students about fluency***

Unfortunately, students do not always agree with such teaching methods. For instance, early in the development of our program in China, the students complained that they couldn't learn from other students (in pair work, group work, etc.) and that they preferred for the teacher to lecture on the finer points of grammar in English (suggesting that perhaps we should watch our Chinese colleagues to learn how it should be done). Convincing the students that our way of teaching was useful and even valuable to them became an important part of our jobs.

We began by talking to them about their test scores, pointing out that they had high scores in grammar, but relatively low ones in the other skill areas of reading and listening (which, we noted, actually required them to do something with the language). We also pointed out that they lacked the ability to write with

any fluency or speak fluently. So, we strongly encouraged the students to stop worrying about grammar and grammatical accuracy and focus instead on increasing their fluency.

In addition, we began to explain to them what we were trying to accomplish in terms of developing their abilities to use speed to their advantage, to use pauses and hesitations efficiently, to give appropriate feedback, to repair competently, to clarify effectively and to negotiate for meaning when necessary. We also shared with them why we were encouraging them to make errors, creating many opportunities for them to practise, creating activities that forced them to focus on getting a message across, assessing their fluency not their accuracy and why we were talking to them about fluency. In short, we were honest with them about our intentions, we were respecting their ability to comprehend what we were trying to do and we were soliciting their feedback. These strategies seemed to work quite well.

There were also three stories that I told repeatedly to make several points about fluency. One story was about how students perceive the learning of fluency, another one was about the benefits of becoming fluent and the third story was about how fluency applies to skills other than speaking.

***Story one: Student perceptions of fluency learning.***

At the end of the first thirty-week cycle (about 900 hours of instruction) in our China program, one angry student approached me in the hallway and said, "I think you should know that this program is a terrible program. We don't learn anything. You have too much testing and you don't teach us anything."

A crowd of apparently like-minded students was gathering; they were nodding in agreement with the outspoken student. I was surrounded with my back against a wall and I was beginning to worry. The outspoken student continued, "You should study how the Chinese teachers teach English. You could learn a lot from them. You should teach the building blocks of language: grammar and vocabulary. Then we would learn a lot."

A sudden inspiration made me ask a single question, "Do any of you really think that you could have made these complaints and argued your point this well thirty weeks ago? Do you think you would have had the fluency? We have taught you fluency, my friends, and you could not have gotten that from a grammar book. I want you to think about that."

The point is that fluency acquisition may go completely unnoticed by students or, at best, they will think that they did it for themselves, without help from their teachers. I think they are wrong, that is, I think that students will

have great difficulty acquiring fluency, especially in an EFL setting, unless teachers set up situations (*e.g.*, pair work, group work, problem solving, etc.) in which students can actually practise using the language - situations that may be antithetical to the grammar-translation methods that many students think of as appropriate language teaching. I repeated this story many times to illustrate these points to my students.

***Story two: The benefits of becoming fluent.***

Toward the end of the third ten-week term, one of the students went to a conference in North America in his particular scientific field. When he returned, he was very excited. He had apparently gone to a talk by a professor in his specialization that he admired greatly. At one point, he had raised his hand and used the polite interruption function that we had taught him to ask a question. Apparently, it was a very good question because later that same professor stopped him and asked him if he would like to have a cup of coffee. By the time they were finished with their coffee, the student had been promised (and indeed later got) a scholarship to do two years of graduate study at a very prestigious American institution.

This story became a standard story that I told our Chinese scientists to convince them that they really must learn fluency in English at all costs. Their colleague would never have gotten the scholarship, so the story went, if he had passively sat in the audience without asking any questions or if he had been unable to converse over coffee with that particular professor. I always put a heavy emphasis on the amount of money involved, which was the equivalent of a lifetime's worth of salary in the PRC, because I realized that the PRC Chinese are among the best capitalists in the world.

Whenever I told this story, my focus on fluency suddenly seemed to make sense to the students and I miraculously got a great deal more cooperation in doing pair-work, group-work and other communicative activities. Apparently, money can be a great motivator even in language learning.

***Story three: The benefits of becoming fluent.***

Toward the end of the first term in the China program, I was explaining the directions for a pair work activity when one of the students raised his hand and said, "Teacher, teacher, please to speak more slowly." I turned to him and said, "No, my friend, you listen more quickly." I have often thought about that moment. In trying to make a joke, I had hit on what may be a truth about the nature of listening comprehension: it is the listener's responsibility to learn to



listen more quickly, or fluently, rather than the speaker's obligation to speak more slowly (and unnaturally). It struck me that fluency might not be just a speaking skill issue, but also related to the listening skill.

In the months that followed, our program expanded this notion. We modified our teaching in the listening course and then in reading and writing courses, as well, based on the notion that fluency is a necessary component of all four skills. I have no question in my mind that these insights served our students well. Lennon (1990) appears to agree, at least in terms of the writing skill, when he states:

Theoretically, the idea of fluency could be extended to writing. Indeed, some foreign language learners are certainly more fluent writers than others. But for some reason little value is placed on written fluency in language teaching; although, in terms of the uses to which L2 writing will be put by many language learners professionally, it is probably a vital need. (p. 391)

The point is that the acquisition of fluency is often thought of as being related only to the speaking skill. I often used this story to illustrate to my students that fluency is probably involved in all four skills. But that is a topic for another paper.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, this paper argued that, in addition to the traditional linguistic tools of (1) pronunciation, (1) syntax and (3) vocabulary, students must also learn to use four new sets of tools in their second or foreign language:

4. suprasegmentals
5. paralinguistics
6. proxemics
7. pragmatics.

Students should also learn to make linguistic choices based on the following three sets of factors:

1. settings
2. social, sexual and psychological roles
3. register and style.

And students can learn six linguistic strategies that will help them to increase their fluency, including the abilities to:

1. use speed to their advantage
2. use pauses and hesitations efficiently
3. give appropriate feedback

4. repair competently
5. clarify effectively
6. negotiate for meaning when necessary.

Finally, to foster fluency, teachers can do five things in their classrooms:

1. encourage students to make errors
2. create many opportunities for students to practise
3. create activities that force students to focus on getting a message across
4. assess student's fluency not their accuracy
5. talk to the students about fluency.

This paper has repeatedly argued that fluency is not an absolute issue which students either have or don't have. Rather, fluency is a matter of degrees and some degree of fluency can probably be attained at all levels of language ability. Given this state of affairs, students should gradually be acquainted with the linguistic tools, choices and strategies they will need to communicate fluently, regardless of the level of language proficiency they may have at any particular moment.

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