IMPROVING SPEAKING FLUENCY

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This paper examines the improvement of learners of English during the performance of a speaking activity which involves repeating the same unrehearsed talk. Improvements in fluency, grammatical accuracy, and control of the content showed that during the short time spent doing the activity, learners performed at a level above their normal level of performance. It is argued that working at this higher than usual performance is a way of bringing about long-term improvement in fluency.

Speaking activities in the language classroom can have a variety of goals. These include the following.
1. The learning of content matter.
2. The learning of language items from other participants.
3. The development of fluency.
4. Learning communication strategies.
5. Developing skill in discourse.
This paper looks at the development of fluency, in particular at a technique called the 4/3/2 technique.

Fillmore's (1979) first kind of fluency is "the ability to fill time with talk . . . a person who is fluent in this way does not have to stop many times to think of what to say next or how to phrase it". As Fillmore goes on to show, this fluency will depend on a range of factors including having quick access to and practised control of many of the language's lexical and syntactic devices, being able to decide readily when it is appropriate and efficient to use them, as well as having familiarity with interactional and discourse schemata. Brumfit (1984) sees fluency "as the maximally effective operation of the language system so far acquired by the student". These definitions suggest that fluency can be measured by looking at (1) the speed and flow of language production, (2) the degree of control of language items, and (3) the way language and content interact.

From a teacher's point of view, activities to develop fluency are those which focus the learner's attention on the message that is being communicated and not the language forms. Brumfit describes such activities in the following way: "The emphasis in making the accuracy/fluency distinction is on the mental set of the learner . . . language work focused predominantly on language is always accuracy work, however 'fluently' it may be performed, whereas language work which entails using the target language as if it is a mother

tongue is always fluency work . . ." Canale (1983) makes a similar distinction between knowledge-oriented and skill-oriented activities.

The goal of fluency-directed communication activities is to enable the learner to integrate previously encountered language items into an easily accessed, largely unconscious, language system as a result of focussing on the communication of messages. Such activities are essential to language learning if the learner is to be able to *use* the language. Some teachers, for example Allwright (1979), argue that activities with a message focus are *all* that are essential for language learning to occur.

Swain (1985) presents evidence to support her belief that in order for native-speaker fluency to be achieved in another language, learners need to be "pushed" towards "the delivery of a message that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed precisely, coherently, and appropriately." In addition, she suggests that the move from semantic to syntactic processing is necessary in order for a learner to master a language for production. This move can come from the need or pressure to *produce* language or from being "pushed" to produce well.

"Being 'pushed' in output . . . is a concept parallel to that of the $i + 1$ of the comprehensible input. Indeed, one might call this the 'comprehensible output' hypothesis."

The 4/3/2 technique, described by Maurice (1983), incorporates these requirements with the aim of improving speaking fluency.

THE 4/3/2 TECHNIQUE

The 4/3/2 technique involves the following steps. A learner spends a few minutes preparing a talk on a given topic. During this time the learner just thinks of what she will talk about and does not make notes. Then the learner pairs up with another learner and she talks on that topic for four minutes. The listener does not interrupt and does not ask questions. The listener's job is just to listen. Then they change partners. The speaker now talks again on the same topic to the new listener, but this time she has only three minutes to give the same information. When this has been done the learners change partners again. The speaker gives the same talk for the third time to her new partner, but this time she has only two minutes. So, the speaker gives the same talk to a different partner with less time to do it each time.

This technique has three important features. (1) The speaker has a different audience each time she speaks, so her attention will be on communicating the message. If partners did not change, there would be pressure on the speaker to add new information to keep the listener interested during the repetitions. The speaker might also be encouraged to focus more of her attention on formal features of her talk, which would reduce the value of the technique as a fluency activity. (2) The speaker repeats the same talk. This means that she will develop confidence in her ability to deliver the talk and will have less difficulty in accessing the language she needs to deliver the talk. The repetition provides an ideal

opportunity to develop fluency. (3) The time available to deliver the talk is reduced each time the talk is given. This is another encouragement to fluency. It also means that as the speaker delivers her talk more fluently there is no need to think of new material to fill the available time.

STUDYING THE 4/3/2 TECHNIQUE

Does the 4/3/2 technique increase fluency? One way of trying to answer this question is to carefully observe what speakers do during the activity. With this aim, six advanced adult learners were recorded doing the 4/3/2 activity. Each learner spoke about an interesting event that happened to them. One of the learners did the activity two more times, once retelling a picture story and once describing a number of simple unrelated pictures. These recordings were transcribed and then they were analysed to see how the activity affected fluency, grammatical accuracy, and control of content.

Fluency was measured by calculating the number of words per minute spoken during each of the three deliveries of the talk, and by calculating the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts per 100 words for each delivery.

Accuracy was measured by calculating the errors per 100 words for each delivery of the talk. For both fluency and accuracy, the difference between the first and third delivery was divided by the figure for the first delivery and this was multiplied by 100 to get a percentage.

Control of content was assessed by examining the ways in which speakers reduced the material in each section of their talk to fit the reduction in time available to deliver the talk.

Although the number of learners involved is small, the consistency of the results indicates that their gains from the activity would be typical of other learners.

FLUENCY

In the eight case studies, the rate of speaking in the third version ranged from 84 words per minute to 196 words per minute. In all except one case study there was an increase in the rate of speaking from the first to the third delivery. For example, speaker P spoke at a rate of 86 words per minute (wpm) in her first delivery, 100 wpm in her three minute version, and 127 wpm in her third version which lasted two minutes. This represents an increase of 48 per cent from the four minute version to the two minute version. The increases in speed from the first to the third version ranged from 4 per cent to 77 per cent.

The number of false starts, hesitation items like *um, er,* and *ah,* and repeated words as in *then I, I said* decreased in each case study from the first to third delivery of each talk. For example, speaker P made 4.64 false starts etc. per 100 words in her first delivery, 5.05 in her three minute delivery, and 3.54 in her third. This is a decrease of 24 per cent. All the other case studies showed a decrease in the number of hesitations from the first to third version, ranging from 1 per cent to 67 per cent.

A one-way analysis of variance showed that the two measures of fluency gave results that were significant at the 0.025 level.

There is evidence then that the 4/3/2 technique affects speaking fluency as measured by speed and occurrence of hesitation procedures.

ACCURACY

Repetition of a talk may have an effect on the grammatical accuracy of the language used in the talk in two ways. (1) Repetition may result in a feeling of confidence and the provision of more time for monitoring, thus bringing about an overall decrease in errors, even in newly introduced material. To check this, a count was made of the number of errors in each delivery of each talk. Four of the eight cases showed a reduction in the number of errors in each delivery of each talk. Four of the eight cases showed a reduction in the number of errors from the first to the third delivery, three showed an increase, and one showed no change. In all cases the changes were not impressive, for example, a drop from 8.5 errors per 100 words to 7.0 errors per 100 words, or a rise from 5.8 to 6.6. (2) Repetition may have a local rather than a general effect, allowing monitoring of repeated items. To study this, the second accuracy measure looked only at errors where the same grammatical context occured in both the first and third deliveries of the talk. For example, in the first delivery of one talk, speaker V made this error:

> but all the college there are about a thousand

but in her third delivery exactly the same grammatical context did not occur:

> so altogether we have one thousand.

In the following example, however, the same grammatical context occurred in both the first and third deliveries:

> that where I came from (1st delivery)
> that's where I came from (3rd delivery).

In each talk there were between three and six instances where errors occurred and the same grammatical context occurred in both the first and third deliveries. Here are the instances from speaker S. The first three instances are those where the error in the first delivery was corrected in the third delivery:

> reading on—reading out
> next the door—next to the door
> got down the bench—got off the bench.

There were between one and three instances of such correction in all except one case study. The next three instances from speaker S are errors which were not corrected and which occurred in the same context in the first and third deliveries:

> look (instead of looked)
> check (instead of checked)
> start (instead of started).

There were between one and four instances like this in each case study. Most of them involved plural *s*, the past tense, or third person *s*.

There were six instances in the case studies where an item which was correct in the first delivery was incorrect in the third delivery.

> when she got married—after married
> is very beautiful—is a very beautiful.

It seems then that the 4/3/2 technique can result in some small improvement in certain aspects of grammatical accuracy during the activity, particularly for errors not involving inflections, where the speaker repeats the same grammatical context.

CONTROL OF CONTENT

Besides speaking faster, there are other ways of fitting the talk into the reduced time available. These include omitting pieces of information and changing the grammatical constructions so that the same information is presented more efficiently. Let us look at some of the case studies to see how this was done and what effects it had on fitting the talk into the time.

In her third delivery Speaker S used 354 words to present the same part of her talk that took 453 words in her first delivery. This reduction of 99 words was achieved in the following ways: 14 phrases or clauses totalling 144 words were simply omitted from her third delivery. Most of these were omissions of unimportant detail such as the size and composition of the class involved in her school ghost story, and repetitions of previously mentioned detail. Although omission was speaker S's major reduction strategy, she did not follow this ruthlessly. She made seven additions totalling 66 words to her third delivery. Most of these did not add important information. She made 20 changes of construction, five of which added 30 words, one made no change to the number of words, and 14 required a total of 55 fewer words. Here are some examples of this last type:

> back in the year 1981—in 1981
> I was in one of the rooms in the second floor—I was here
> I was reading on the dictation test . . . to the class and of course the teacher was sitting on one of the benches—in front of the class sitting on the bench reading out a dictation test.

A reduction strategy of this kind, if it was consistently applied by a speaker, would indicate that the 4/3/2 technique would be a useful way of encouraging learners to make fuller use of the complex rather than compound constructions of English.

Analysis of the other talks showed that in all except one case omission was the major reduction strategy. In most cases the omitted information was not important. In each of these talks two or more of the changes of construction resulted in an increase in complexity. The increase in complexity was the result of embedding a finite or non-finite clause. Here are some examples.

There are about 6000 population in the village—In the village where I teach there about 6000 people

The student in Form 1 the teacher has to speak Mon—So every teacher has to know the Mon language especially the teacher who teach in grade1

We stay in the youth hostel that night. By that time it was very late—That night we had to stay in the youth hostel, because we reach there very late

We went to Mona Vale. It is a . . . —We also visit Mona Vale which is . . .

The only case where omission was not the major strategy involved a description of several simple small pictures. The repetition of this activity resulted in a very efficient telegraphese. For example:

Picture seven—Seven.
The tallest candle is on the right and the shortest candle is on the left—The tallest candle on the right and the shortest on the left

So, the 4/3/2 technique has some effect on the way information is arranged in sentences. If an increase in complexity is seen as an indication that learners are being encouraged to make the fullest use of their interlanguage, then this technique is a useful activity for the development of that interlanguage.

LEARNING FROM 4/3/2

We have looked at three aspects of language use—fluency, accuracy, and control of content—in relation to the 4/3/2 technique. There was evidence that the technique increased the fluency with which the speakers delivered the talk. For some speakers this was shown by an increase in the rate of speaking, although one problem in using words per minute as a measure of fluency in such a technique is that it may be a measure of pressure rather than skill. For all speakers there was a reduction in the number of false starts, repetitions and spoken hesitations. There was also evidence that accuracy improved as a result of repeating the talk. The improvement was noticeable where there was a repetition of the same grammatical context. A count of all errors did not show dramatic improvement for the speakers in this study. Clearly the improvement that did occur was not the result of a general feeling of confidence or of familiarity with the topic, but came from repetition of the same items. This improvement did not usually occur with inflectional suffixes like plural *s* or the past tense *ed*. The errors that were corrected were only a small proportion of the total errors in the third delivery of a talk, but they were about half of the errors in repeated grammatical contexts. This suggests that adapting the 4/3/2 technique to encourage repetition of the same forms would have a good effect on accuracy. This adaptation could involve the use of brief notes to aid verbatim recall or the use of annotated pictures.

The value of the technique can be seen clearly if we look at a case study of one learner. During the 4/3/2 activity, P spoke to three different listeners for a total of nine minutes. She spoke with unaccustomed fluency, eventually speaking 50 per cent faster than her usual rate with a 25 per cent reduction in hesitations. She spoke with fractionally more grammatical accuracy than usual and used three more complex constructions than she would

normally have done. The nine minutes were clearly profitably spent. Her performance was typical of others in the study.

We can see that the 4/3/2 technique gives learners the opportunity to perform at a level which is superior to their normal performance even though they are focussing on the message under a time constraint. The assumption is that having the opportunity to perform at this higher level will result in an improvement to their normal level of performance.

OTHER TECHNIQUES

The 4/3/2 technique has three important features—repetition, reducing time, and a change of audience. As we have seen, these features directly affect fluency in encouraging a focus on the message while providing an opportunity for monitoring and learning to occur. There are other techniques which make use of some of these features and which may also have the same effects that have been looked at in this paper.

Techniques which involve repetition and a change of audience include Marketplace and Messengers. In Marketplace, the learners are divided into buyers and sellers. The sellers are told what they are selling. It might be holidays, furniture, books or anything else. Each seller then prepares a sales talk to deliver to the buyers. The buyers then circulate around the various sellers listening to the sales talks and finally making a decision about which holiday they are going to buy. Each seller has to deliver their sales talk several times to the different buyers.

In Messengers, the learners are divided into describers, messengers, and makers. The describers have a model, a tangram, or a diagram to describe. It cannot be seen by the messengers or the makers. A messenger listens to a describer and then goes to a maker and tells the maker what to do. Because the task is complicated, the messenger will need to return to the describer several times for the same information. One describer can work with two or three messengers.

Other techniques include using a time delay as a challenge to repeat the same story, retelling with minor substitutions, and rerecording in order to produce the best possible recording.

There may be some advantage in allowing learners to make some brief notes before talking, perhaps in the form of headings or a concept diagram. This would make the learner confident about filling the time allowed for speaking and would increase the likelihood of the second and third deliveries being similar in useful ways to the first delivery.

With all of these techniques it is possible to record what the learners say and to analyse it to see what opportunities are being provided for learning to occur. In this way we can evaluate the techniques we use and decide if they meet our learning goals.

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