Fluency and Learning

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Role of Fluency Activities

This paper looks at activities for developing fluency in classrooms where the learners have little or no opportunity to make use of the foreign language outside the classroom. In such situations work done in the classroom has to move learners on in their knowledge of the language as well as to develop the fluency to make effective use of this knowledge.

The goals of learning in language classrooms can be divided into four groups, namely Language, Ideas, Skill, and Text or discourse (Nation, 1990). In this paper the focus is on an aspect of skill learning, fluency, which can be loosely defined as having ready access to what you already know (Brumfit, 1985). The importance of fluency in language use is highlighted in first-language research on the relationship between vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. One of the several possible explanations for a lack of success of many studies in showing that pre-teaching vocabulary results in improved comprehension is that it is not sufficient just to know the meanings of new words in a text. It is also necessary to be able to retrieve these meanings quickly and fluently when their forms are met in the text. Many learners of English as a foreign language experience this difficulty. Their language knowledge of vocabulary and sentence patterns may be substantial, the result of several years' learning, but their ability to access and use this knowledge fluently is extremely low. The aim of the fluency activities described in this paper is to make language knowledge become readily available for use.

Nature of Fluency Activities

The main idea behind this paper is that fluency activities depend on several features to achieve their goal. These features can appear in a variety of techniques over the whole range of language skills. By looking at these features we can judge whether an activity will develop fluency in an efficient way and we can devise other activities that will. Let us look first at a well-researched activity. The 4/3/2 technique was devised by Maurice (1983). In this technique, learners work in pairs with one acting as the speaker and the other as listener. The speaker talks for four minutes on a topic while her partner listens. Then the pairs change with each speaker giving the same information to a new partner in three minutes, followed by a further change and a two-minute talk.

From the point of view of fluency, this activity has these important features. First, the user is encouraged to process a large quantity of language. In 4/3/2 this is done by allowing the speaker to perform without interruption and by having the speaker make three deliveries of the talk. Second, the demands of the activity are limited to a much smaller set than would occur in most uncontrolled learning activities. This can be done by control by the teacher as is the case in most receptive fluency activities such as reading graded readers or listening to stories, or can be done by choice, planning or repetition by the learner. In the 4/3/2 activity the speaker chooses the ideas, language items and way of organizing the talk. The 4- and 3-minute deliveries allow the speaker to bring these aspects well under control, so that fluency can become the learning goal of the activity. Note that the repetition of the talk is still with the learner's attention focused on the message because of the changing audience. Third, the learner is helped to reach a high level of performance by having the opportunity to repeat and by the challenge of decreasing time to convey the same message. Usually this level would be measured in terms of quantity and rate of production rather than quality. However the research by Nation (1989) and Arevart and Nation (1990) shows that, in the case of 4/3/2, increase in rate as measured by words per minute is accompanied by improvements in the quality of the talk as measured by hesitations, grammatical accuracy and grammatical complexity. This is a very important effect of fluency activities. Improvement in fluency is not simply improvement in speed of access. Speed of access to be of value

must be able to occur under a variety of conditions and contexts and this means that the development of fluency will also involve the enrichment of knowledge of language items as known items are processed in new situations.

Let us now look at how the fluency activity features of quantity, limited demands and high level of performance apply across the range of language skills.

Fluency Activities across the Four Skills

Fluency is important in the receptive skills of listening and reading as well as in the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Listening: (1) *Listening to stories* that contain very few unknown items is an excellent way of developing listening fluency. It can be done in this way. The teacher chooses a simply-written but interesting story. I have found the graded readers in the Beginning (Longman Structural Readers, Upper level) and Animal Farm Men (Heinemann Guided Readers, Upper level) and Animal Farm (Longman Bridge Series) to be particularly good. The story is then read to the learners for a few minutes in each lesson as a kind of serial. Initially the story is read quite slowly with repetitions of phrases or sentences that might cause the learners difficulty. In addition, words that the learners might know in their written form but have difficulty recognizing in spoken form are written on the blackboard without too much interruption to the story. As the story continues, the repetitions and writing on the blackboard are reduced, and the speed of presenting is increased. Interest in the story and before keep the learners involved.

(2) *Controlling the teacher* involves the teacher reading a text of 100-200 words to the class. The learners have been told that, when the teacher reaches the end of the text, there will be a test on the language and ideas in the text. In order to encourage the learners further to get the teacher to repeat parts of the text, a list of phrases such as "Please read more slowly", "Please go back to the beginning", "What was the word in front of ...?" is put on the blackboard and the teacher deliberately reads some parts too fast or not clearly. This activity has an additional benefit of teaching the learners strategies for controlling spoken communication. Allowing the learners to control the presentation of the material is one way of limiting the demands of a task.

Speaking: (3) *The 4/3/2 technique* has already been described. It combines the features of quantity of production (the same text several times. There are several ways of doing this. One way is to set the learners a new task to do each time so that each reading is for a different purpose. The tasks would become more demanding with each repetition. Another way is to set a time goal for reading the text, say, 3 minutes for a 500 word text. The learners reread the text until they can do it in the set time. An even simpler goal is to get the learners to reread the text a set number of times. Research suggests that 4 or 5 times is most effective (Dowhower, 1989).

(4) *The best recording* is a useful fluency activity involving a tape recorder or the language laboratory. The learner speaks to the tape talking about previous experience or describing a picture or set of pictures. The learner listens to the recording noting any points where improvement could be made. Then the learner re-records the talk. This continues until the learner is happy with the recording. This technique can involve planning and encourages repetition through the setting of a quality-based goal.

(5) The *ask and answer* technique (Simcock, 1990) is a follow-up to reading. The learners read a text to a high level of comprehension and then they work in pairs with one learner questioning the other about the text from a list of teacher-prepared questions. The answers to these questions provide a summary of the text. The goal of the activity is for learners to perform ideas in the text. The learners read a text at a high level of fluency, so each pair practises asking and answering several times before doing their class presentation.

Reading: (6) *Speed reading* and *extensive reading* of graded readers provide fluency improvement through the features of limited demands because of language control, and quantity of processing. To be effective, speed reading courses need to be written within a limited vocabulary so that learners can focus on the reading skill without having to tackle language difficulties. Speed reading courses also have the added benefit of involving the learners in keeping a running record of their speed and comprehension scores. Research on graded readers (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988) shows that reading only a few books at one level would provide the learners with contact with almost all the words at that level. This shows that graded reading can provide a reliable basis for systematic coverage of vocabulary for fluency development.

(7) *Repeated reading* is one approach to developing fluency

in reading (Dowhower, 1989; Rasinski, 1989). The learners read the same text several times.

Writing: (8) *Continuous writing* is an activity where learners are given a set time (usually 5-10 minutes) to write with the aim of producing a large quantity of writing within the time. The learners can record the number of words they wrote on a graph. The teacher responds to the writing not by correcting errors but by finding something positive in the content of the writing to comment on briefly.

Making Fluency Activities

Fluency activities make use of a limited range of features and there are various ways to make sure that these features occur. Table 1 lists these features which have been described earlier in this paper and lists ways of producing them. All of these ways are exemplified in the activities described in the previous section. It is not difficult to think of ways of making other fluency activities working from the list in Table 1. For example, fluency activities for writing can involve repetition (the same information is written for different readers), seeking feedback (polishing a piece of work for publication), and preparation (spoken rehearsal of the ideas that will be written). Fluency activities for listening can involve preparation (reading before listening), a high rate of output (listening to faster and faster deliveries of the same material), and repetition (retelling from "blown-up" books).

Fluency and Language Learning

There is considerable evidence to show that fluency activities result in language learning gains as well as skill gains. The study

by Elley and Mangubhai (1981) is a good example of this. By dramatically increasing the quantity of material children read, the researchers found that "the average pupil made one-and-a-quarter year's progress in 8 months in Reading Comprehension, and improved almost as much in Listening Skills and English Structures. Growth in Oral Sentence Repetition, Word Recognition and Written Composition was marginally better than that of the Control Group" (p.26). The more narrowly focused studies by Arevart and Nation (1990) and Nation (1989) also show improvement in control of language items when the main learning goal is fluency.

TABLE 1
Features of Fluency Tasks

Features	Ways of producing the features
Quantity (processing a large amount of language)	set a goal of time or quantity
Limited demands (focusing only on fluency without having to cope with too many new language items or unfamiliar ideas)	teacher control: controlled or supported material learner control: choice of topic, language, organization
Preparation, planning, seeking feedback	set a goal of quality
Repetition by the learner	a new audience for each repetition a new goal for each repetition
High rate of output	limited time a running record, e.g. a graph

Fluency and the Syllabus

Research on vocabulary statistics shows that only a relatively small amount of knowledge is needed for successful language use (Nation, 1990). It is important that this knowledge is available for use and therefore a part of class time should be given to fluency activities. Brumfit (1985) suggests "Right from the beginning of the course, about a third of the total time could be spent on this sort of fluency activity, and the proportion will inevitably increase as time goes on."

If fluency activities are included in each lesson and make use of new language items taught in that lesson, then these items should occur at a low density in the fluency material. In reading material this means that at least 85% of the words (Dowhower, 1989) should be very familiar to the learners. A second alternative is to include fluency activities in each lesson that make use of items learned several days or weeks before. It is likely that the optimal spacing of fluency activities agrees with Pimsleur's (1967) memory schedule, where repetitions are spaced further and further apart. A third alternative is to periodically give large blocks of time to fluency activities. This suggestion corresponds to Brumfit's (1985) "syllabus with holes in it". These holes or gaps are times when no new material is presented and there are fluency directed activities.

One of the biggest obstacles to fluency in a foreign language situation is the lack of opportunity outside the class room to use the foreign language to communicate. As teachers we should believe that every problem can be solved through informed and imaginative pedagogy. The purpose of this paper has been to suggest that teachers can not only help learners learn the language but can also help them reach a high degree of fluency in using it.

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