

A Comparison of the Effects of Teacher's Speaking Accuracy Vs. Fluency on EFL Learners' Oral Skill

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Abstract

Speaking a language involves more than simply knowing the linguistic components of the message, and developing language skills requires more than grammatical comprehension and vocabulary memorization (Chastain, 1988). In teaching-learning processes, some methods which teachers use and the teachers' own speaking accuracy and fluency in the ELT classes for the foreign language students especially in Iran may have some positive and negative effects on ELT students' speaking fluency and accuracy. This study attempts to probe one of the main concerns of language learners, that is, how to improve their speaking components, e.g. oral fluency and accuracy through comparison of the effects of teacher's speaking accuracy vs. fluency on EFL learners' oral skill. The current study was designed as a true experimental research and the data were gathered from 60 ELT students of English language and literature in Iran. The data were the recorded speaking transcripts which were analyzed to show the probable progresses after four-time (10 weeks) treatment. The factors to be considered in present study were the numbers of filled and unfilled pauses in each narration, the total number of words per minute, mean length of utterance, and number of stressed words. The results were compared and their temporal and linguistic measures were correlated with their fluency scores. They revealed that the speech rate, the mean length of utterance, phonation time ratio and the number of stressed words produced per minute were the best predictors of fluency scores, and thus, students' speaking fluency increased, whereas the students' speaking accuracy decreased in some areas of speaking abilities and oral communications.

Keywords: teacher's speaking, EFL learners, oral skill, accuracy, fluency

INTRODUCTION

There has been a big change in attitude towards language learning and teaching throughout the second half of the 20th century. The communicative approaches have developed towards an emphasis on fluency, rather than accuracy, and the focus has moved from the teacher to the student (Harmer 2001 and Richards 2006). Krashen

(2002) points out three different types of learners: the ones who feel the need for accuracy to the extent that it inhibits the communication, the ones who have acquired most parts of the language and speak without knowledge of rules or fear of being incorrect, and finally, the ones who integrate acquisition with learning and use rules in written and prepared speech, and fluency during unprepared speech. Individual differences in how we learn a second language call for language teaching to be flexible and adapted to suit all different types of individuals. Working in groups, using role play and working in different projects are all methods within CLT that will encourage personal development (Richards, 2006).

There was a change in focus from the unreachable long term goal of passing the English course, to the reachable short term goal of finishing this part of the course, for the students in the fluency group. The students have been successful in their task as it was encouraging and confidence building. This is in agreement with Harmer (2001).

Speaking is one of the most important and essential skills that must be practiced to communicate orally. By speaking, people are able to know what kinds of situations the world. People who have ability in speaking will be better in sending and receiving information or message to another. Speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the uses of verbal and non-verbal symbol in various contexts. Speaking is a productive necessary skill to communicate effectively in any language, especially when speakers are not using their native language. Language learners often think the ability to speak a language is the *product* of language learning; however, this skill is also an important part of the language learning *process*. It is worthwhile for students to know when they learn how to speak; they can use speaking to learn. There are some components of speaking skills which should be considered in effective English speaking performance, such as accuracy and fluency. According to Foster and Skehan (2005), pronunciation, vocabulary, and collocations are singled out as important factors to be emphasized in building fluency for EFL speakers. Drawing on Tam (2007), providing a variety of situations and frequent speaking tasks for learners plays a significant role in the improvement of learners' fluency and accuracy in speaking.

The importance of accuracy

The extent to which written CF on linguistic errors can play a role in helping L2 writers improve the accuracy of their writing over time continues to be an issue of interest to researchers and teachers. While there is growing empirical evidence that written CF can successfully target some types of linguistic error, it is unclear whether some linguistic error domains and categories are more treatable than others.

Additionally, the extent to which the linguistic proficiency level of an L2 writer might determine the effectiveness of written CF in treating certain domains and categories has also been under-explored. Some attention has been given to investigating whether certain types of written CF may be more effective than others, but the findings are not conclusive. Addressing these issues will require time and commitment on the part of a

number of researchers. The study being reported in this article is one contribution to this agenda.

The first aim of the present study was to extend previous research on the role of written CF in treating errors in the use of two functional uses of the English article system: the referential indefinite article “a” for referring to something the first time (first mention) and the referential definite article “the” for referring to something already mentioned (subsequent or anaphoric mentions).

It remains unclear whether these methods are also suitable for L2-medium students as little is known about the difference between learning of specialized vocabulary. To date, most evidence regarding L2 vocabulary acquisition has come from studies that did not use an L1 baseline. This is due to practical difficulties of directly comparing vocabulary acquisition through L1 and L2 (Gablasova, 2014) mainly caused by two factors:

First, most words learned by L2 users are already known to L1 speakers of the same age, making it difficult to compare acquisition of the same set of words. Second, learning through L2 usually involves the mapping of a new L2 word form onto an already existing L1 concept or word (Jiang, 2007) rather than acquiring both a new concept and a new form simultaneously, as is common in L1 learning. However, this is not the case with the acquisition of low frequency, subject specific vocabulary (e.g. coniferous or gnosticism). These words are typically acquired in the study of academic subjects and involve learning of a new word meaning along with a new form. This is true equally of the students learning the subjects through their first as well as their second language, enabling researchers to study L2 vocabulary learning in direct contrast to L1 learning.

Since technical words combine language and subject knowledge (Bravo & Cervetti, 2009), findings from this study will be of interest not only to vocabulary researchers, but also to subject specialists involved in teaching content through students' second language. By exploring differences or similarities found between native and non-native speakers of the language of instruction this investigation will contribute to more targeted pedagogical approaches to the teaching of subject terminology than has been possible so far as L1 and L2.

Importance of fluency and accuracy in speaking

I have been working as an English teacher at a vocational college with 16-19 year old students for nearly five years. This has been a constant battle against the low level of knowledge that more and more students have as they start their education with us. When Swedish students finish compulsory school, they are all tested using standardized national exams in some core subjects.

English is one of the topics. Most students are given a 'pass' grade in English when they leave compulsory school, even if, in reality, they have not reached the criteria for the pass grade. This is a problem that has been highlighted by the Swedish Teaching Union and the Swedish media. Large discrepancies have been found between the results of the

national exams and the final grades given to the students. Skolverket is starting an inspection of some of the schools where the discrepancies have been most abundant. The percentage of students that were given a higher grade than their national exam result varied between 1.9 % up to 18.7% in the different schools. (Corren, 2011 and Skolvärlden, 2012).

Why do teachers in compulsory school pass students that have not reached the appropriate level of English? Therefore, to change their attitude towards learning English is a challenge, and I believe it is important to find teaching methods that will help increase the students' self-confidence and motivation.

Objectives of the fluency

Fluency is a flow in which words are joined together while speaking quickly (Cumming, 2003). It is a characteristic of the speaker. To Tamo, " a person is a fluent speaker when he is capable of using the language structure accurately" (2009: 31). Mahfouz & Imedeh (2011) familiarized fluency by attaching it to the creative and imaginative use of the language. Brumfit (2005) blended it to the natural use of language. It is also defined as the features which give speech the qualities of being natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, body language, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions".

In addition, Schmidt (2005) called fluency an automatic procedural skill while Richards et al (2005) referred to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently. The final goal of fluency (good text comprehension at an appropriate rate) is affected by the skills readers possess in each component. Moreover, influential components for fluency differ according to the developmental stage of second language learner (Halse, Schuh & Alessi 2009).

Furthermore, acquiring English language fluently is very important both academically and generally because it is a key factor of failure and success of the students in their practical life. The pedagogic problem in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use the language. It is sequential arrangement of words of a specific language to convey a message orally.

Moreover, Alexander (2005) said that fluency in FL can be adopted by the students. To understand L2 in a better way, students can be involved to narrate any event from their past life. They can be given the model of narration as for this purpose. Many FL teachers complain that fluency in oral skills is very difficult to develop in learners. Marianne Celce-Murcia & Lois McIntosh (2005) have already endorsed this idea that:

- 1- Fluency in speaking is probably the most difficult of all second language skills to develop.
- 2- Because speaking practice crosscuts so many other classroom activities.

Accordingly, language fluency seems to include both accuracy and speed factors (Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2005 cited in Blake, 2009). Fluent language learners are those who can

comprehend a text's meaning smoothly and effortlessly at an appropriate rate. Reading slowly with a lot of halts and repetitions does not represent fluent reading even if the reader achieves higher levels of comprehension. Surprisingly, little empirical research attention has focused on the role of CMC on language fluency.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

The considered task is oral presentation by learners and the focused features in speaking ability are fluency and accuracy.

To do so, the present study tries to seek answers for the following questions:

1. Does students' oral presentation influence their speaking fluency?
2. Does students' oral presentation influence their speaking accuracy?

In what way do task demands influence the occurrence of attention?

Hypothesis 1: Dual-task condition disturbs learners' attention to linguistic form compared with a control condition.

Hypothesis 2 (1): The reasoning demand condition disturbs learners' attention to linguistic form to the same extent as the dual-task condition does.

Hypothesis 2 (2): Learners' attention to linguistic form in the reasoning demand condition is superior to that in a control condition.

According to Bahous (2011), one way of increasing motivation is to use communicative methods. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to compare accuracy-based tasks and fluency-based tasks and their effects on student self-motivation and self-confidence, as well as accuracy and fluency. The test group were all the students in the college that started year 1, and on paper had the grade pass from compulsory school, but in reality had not reached that level. To change their goal, from gaining a pass in English to wanting to learn the language because it is fun and useful in real life, was an important issue. Bahous (2011) and Rubinfeld, Sinclair and Clément (2007) suggest that the student's goals are directly linked to the success of second language learning. The hypothesis to be tested was that both the Fluency Based Task and the Accuracy Based Task will increase the student's level of self-confidence, accuracy and fluency, but only the Fluency Based Task will enhance motivation. Since Schmidt (2008) challenged Krashen (2007) view that a second language (L2) is fundamentally acquired by an unconscious process, the role of attention has evoked a great deal of controversy. Schmidt claimed that L2 acquisition is impossible with subliminal learning, and learners must consciously pay attention to formal aspects of a language in input and a notice them to acquire the language (noticing hypothesis).

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were sixty students from Jieroft Payam-e-Nour university in intermediate level, ranging age from 20-28, participated in this study. Three tests were used to measure participants L2 language proficiency in terms of reading comprehension and productive language skills. Based on their scores, participants were divided into two groups balanced for L2 proficiency (fluency and accuracy of speaking). Students divided based on their scores to different levels. The first group of participants (referred as the control group or the L1 instructed participants) received all materials in their L1 and the second group (the L2 instructed participants) received the materials in their L2.

Instruments

A set of interview questions designed by the researcher was used as the basis of oral pre- and post-test interview. In designing the questionnaire, eight everyday topics were considered and about ten questions were constructed around each topic; some of these topics were chosen from students' course book. The performance of students during the test sessions was recorded for further analysis. The considered criteria in this checklist are fluency and accuracy of ELT students.

The checklist was composed of four rows. Each row included one of the mentioned criterion related to speaking ability, and five sentences described the performance of a speaker related to that criterion. Sentences were ordered according to the least native-like to the most-native like. Each sentence was given a value, started from 1 for the least native-like, to 5 for the most native like. One sentence which described the performance of a participant was chosen by the observer. Finally, values of the chosen sentences were summed up and a total score, out of twenty, was given to each participant. This checklist was used by an observer and the teacher in pre- and post-test sessions in order to judge students' performance.

Data analysis

This study was an attempt to examine the role that variation in task type may play in the speaking fluency and accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. After gathering data, the recordings of pre- and post-test sessions were transcribed and reviewed carefully. To measure accuracy, all the main clauses plus subordinate clauses attached to or embedded in them were counted as T-units. Only those T-units that contained no syntactic, grammatical, lexical, or spelling errors were counted as error-free T-units. In other words, the number of error free T-units are divided by the total number of t-units in order to calculate accuracy (Pishkar, 2015). To measure fluency, the number of correct words which each participant produced in one minute was counted. In other words, fluency was calculated by counting the number of words per minute. After measuring fluency and accuracy of students in two test sessions, the results of pre-test was compared with the results of post-test by paired-sample t-test in SPSS. In addition,

the outcome of checklists' analysis in pre- and post-tests were compared to see if the judgments showed improvement or no change in speaking performance of the students; t-test was used for this purpose. The outcome of these two comparisons was compared with each other again; these comparisons were done in order to see whether the findings are in the same line and approve students' improvement in speaking ability after treatment sessions. The students were made aware that fluency was more important than accuracy in their study for oral communication and that the purpose with correcting some of their errors was to help them in spotting mistakes and learn from them. This study clearly shows that the students copy and imitate the teachers' ways of teaching and their methods of oral communication for improving their fluency and accuracy of speaking. The fluency can be improved according to the teachers' practical performance that they do in their classes. As the accuracy improved for all the students in the fluency group with this method, it can be concluded that it has some effect, but more studies need to be done to compare error improvement in different methods.

The results from the two different tasks of oral communication used and performed by teachers and students in this study all show an overall increase in accuracy and fluency. It was only the fluency task that appeared to increase the student's motivation. The researcher has to keep in mind that the accuracy task only had two subjects that completed the study and therefore does not seem very reliable. The fact that this group was thirty (from sixty) participants to start with, but that only two remained, speaks for itself. It was not an encouraging motivating task. The experimental fluency group did not have any drop outs, but some of other the students were very hard to reach. Harmer (2001, p.37) mentions the negative effect that inhibitions due to past experiences can have on language learning. This seems very true in the case of many students at my school. Both the fluency based task and the accuracy based task contained many of the features that according to Richards (2006) provide a good learning environment. Both tasks contained interaction through communication and encouraged the students to use their language skills. They accounted for individual differences and were done with the student in focus and the teacher in the background. While the accuracy based task was more focused on grammar and being correct than the fluency task, the students in the fluency group practiced their writing by summarizing the other group member's texts in a journal. The journal was also used by me to highlight some of their grammatical errors. This was done in a way that did not inhibit the students' writing fluency as Pishkar (2015) suggests that 'correcting students' speaking assignments will contribute to mental blockage and inhibit fluency and accuracy of speaking which have been inspired from their teachers' in their speaking and oral skill classes .

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study attempts to probe one of the main concerns of language learners, that is, how to improve their speaking components, e.g. oral fluency and accuracy through comparison of the effects of teacher's speaking accuracy vs. fluency on EFL learners' oral skill. The results were compared and their temporal and linguistic measures were

correlated with their fluency scores. They revealed that the speech rate, the mean length of utterance, phonation time ratio and the number of stressed words produced per minute were the best predictors of fluency scores, and thus, students' speaking fluency increased based on what the teachers have done in their classes for the students and they were a good model of accuracy and the fluency of speaking for improving the students' oral skills. According to feedbacks that have been gathered from these classes and based on the data about improvement of the students' oral skills, this study showed that the students speaking accuracy and fluency can be better if their teachers have the ability for conveying a good model of an accurate and fluent speaking on EFL students' oral skills

Results of the study proved that teachers should use a lot of English speaking activities that motivate learners to study and speak in foreign language, and teachers should be as providers and increase learning classroom environment. According to Richards & Renandya (2002) effective instructions inferred from the teacher's careful analysis of this area, together with sufficient language input and speech-promotion activities will gradually help learners speak English fluently and appropriately. The another result of this study is this that fluency and accuracy based tasks can on the contrary be presented many positive comments such as; good communication way among students in the speaking classes based on teacher's activities for improving their accuracy and fluency of speaking, a good way of learning, new friends (because of their new attempts for more communication with other students in their classes), fun, new ideas, good variation, and learnt much. The negative comments on the fluency and accuracy based tasks were related to difficulties with the language, the time factor and frustration with other students not being prepared.

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