From the Bottom, Up: Remodeling Maurice’s 4/3/2 Fluency Technique
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ABSTRACT
This paper proposes a variation on Maurice’s 4/3/2 fluency technique (1983; 1986; 1994) with the aim of helping English Discussion Course students generate more manageable and coherent chunks of language. In the “top-down” (TD) styles of 4/3/2 or 3/2/1, speakers continually decide which strands of content to extend or omit over three speech deliveries. While each time reduction provides basic facilitative pressure, it is difficult to overlook the tendency of some students to produce fractured utterances and tangled runs of speech. A practical solution, I will argue, is to scaffold this technique through a “bottom-up” (BU) approach – a rearrangement of the time sequence into four shorter deliveries that enables the speaker to better control and refine their output. In comparing the two techniques, I hope to outline a useful alternative to the effective, traditional 4/3/2 model.

INTRODUCTION
In order to understand the rationale behind a “bottom-up” (BU) approach, it is important to consider the characteristics and conditions that comprise the competing academic notions of “language fluency.” Let us begin by examining the consensus – or lack of – on what “fluency” and the idea of a “fluent speaker” are. What do these terms mean and how do the language teacher and learner recognize them? Because the speaker is articulating torrents of ideas and content, we know it must be more than being able to speak fast.

In support of an intuitive, layman-oriented view of fluency, we might point to the Oxford Dictionary’s choice of words “easily,” “articulately,” “gracefulness,” and “ease of movement and style.” Scholars, naturally, expose a more nuanced range of understanding beginning with Fillmore’s (1979) belief that fluency amounts to “the ability to fill time with talk,” distinguished by a lack of pauses and hesitations, while for Pawley and Syder (1983) it signifies “a native speaker’s ability to produce fluent stretches of discourse” (p. 91). But when we account for a learner’s inter-language and degree of discourse competency, we realize the need for a more concentrated view. To this end, Brumfit (1984), Rehbein (1987) and Schmidt (1992) position fluency as the automatic retrieval, performance, and operation of the speaker’s language system. More precisely, we can say that, “fluency means that the activities of planning and uttering can be executed nearly simultaneously by the speaker of the language.” (Rehbein, 1987: 104). In view of these descriptions, Nation (1989) determines that fluency can be measured by “the speed and flow of language production, the degree of control of language items, and the way language and content interact.” This interpretation appears solid and concise, but there is another aspect that is missing.

Lennon (2000) also writes about fluid and efficient movement of thought into language but introduces us to an obvious but underexposed dimension of fluency in interaction – that of the listener. Stating that “fluency reflects the speaker’s ability to focus the listener’s attention on his/her message by presenting a finished product, rather than inviting the listener to focus on the working of the production mechanisms” (1990: 391-392), Lennon gives us another angle from which to view a speaker’s competency and ability to be understood.

From these attempts to fine-tune a definition of this multidimensional skill, we can derive a more substantial view of language fluency. So to add to Oxford’s concise reading of the term, which reflects our lay understanding of fluency – and very likely the one our students
would reach for – the words that further inform the BU scaffolding approach to Maurice’s technique are: “flow,” “smooth,” “control,” and “product.” Fortunately, characterizing a fluency-building technique is less complicated, as we can be sure that for either TD or BU exercises to be valid, two conditions must be present: pressure to speak, and a meaningful topic to speak about.

**CONTEXT**

Nation has written extensively on the importance of fluency building, both in reading and speaking contexts (2007; 2001; 1993; 1989) and he maintains that, as one of the four strands, fluency should make up one fourth of a well-designed course. For Rikkyo University’s English Discussion Course, fluency building and the goal of working toward automaticity can be said to be a foundation principles. This is reflected in the organization and design of the syllabus and material, and most visible in the attention and time given to TD fluency techniques in a lesson. The value of these exercises extends to the presentation of target language, since the fluency question can be designed with this segment in mind so as to generate the ideas and background knowledge that gives the function phrases their context. Given the diverse range of learner levels in the EDC course, however, and based on instructor observations of Level 2, 3, and 4 student groups, the broad application of TD fluency activities is not without challenges, particularly with respect to how learners produce language, what motivates them, and how learning anxiety might affect this output.

Let us begin with the TD approach. Here, the inability of a sizable number of lower-level students to organize their output and produce enough language to form a coherent and whole idea brought about palpable discomfort in the 3-minute and 2-minute rounds. Some speakers would break eye contact with the listener, apologize for their “mistakes,” appeal to the listener or teacher for more input, hesitate excessively, or affect a contemplative stance while effectively giving up their turn until the next round began. This behavior clearly suggested the need to search for an alternative to the drawn out TD sequences of 180s/120s/60s or 120s/90s/60s.

In Levelt’s (1989) process of speech production, the speaker undergoes three simultaneous processes: conceptualization, formulation, and articulation of their communicative intention. For L2 learners, this process is complicated by the need to formulate and express meaning using whatever limited range of L2 language tools they have in place. To account for this, Ellis (2005) stresses the effects of rehearsal and planning. The idea of rehearsing, then, is evident in the BU model’s reversal and modification of TD’s 3-rounds. The provision of four deliveries of speech, divided conceptually between “practice” and “presentation,” ensures that students are producing more manageable, easily repeatable language. As each delivery in the practice rounds increases by 30 seconds, the speaker has the opportunity to repeat and refine their previous utterances before expanding further. And while the TD variants attend to primarily one strategy – reducing the spoken output with each delivery – BU seems to involve conscious planning for the 1-minute “presentation” round, with the positive pressure to build content, rather than cut it out. The challenges of formulating and articulating speech under pressure can leave some learners feeling frustrated or unsuccessful if they are unable to generate a clear idea or adequately express what they want to say. While they may not have a clear grasp of their actual fluency gains at the micro-level, the ability to say one idea well might contribute to an overall feeling of success and, consequently, a more positive view of fluency building exercises.

BU scaffolding also starts from the question of “how much can a student remember between 0-3 minutes?” Working on the notion that “less is more,” a BU approach aims to
generate less content, perhaps, but focus on a smoother delivery, while demonstrating a better grasp and more control of one simple idea. For learners with a lower communicative competency, this scaffolding approach helps to assimilate them by functioning as a sort of beginner stage of fluency development, a preparation for generating longer stretches of discourse over extended periods of time. Unlike higher-level learners, who appear to be more focused on complexity, I have observed lower-level students to be more focused on accuracy, as they want to refrain from making mistakes, employ target language more frequently, and work mainly with the tools at their disposal at that point in the language learning process. However, informal observations suggest that some prefer TD to BU, and visa versa. In addition, different groups of Level 2, 3, and 4 EDC students experience stretches of “dead air” at different intervals using both techniques – this is the point where the student feels the idea they have expressed has reached its logical end, or that they are unable to expand or develop further strands due to insufficient vocabulary or background knowledge, or a failure/inability to conceptualize their original idea better.

PROCEDURE

The BU approach (60s/90s/120s/60s) follows the same procedure as the traditional TD exercise but with two important distinctions: the additional delivery, and teacher talk in the set-up and summary stages of the exercise will emphasize a “practice/presentation” aspect.

Step 1: Teacher introduces the fluency topic and elicits background knowledge from students. Teacher explains how to perform the exercise in the speaker and listener roles.

Step 2: Students line up face-to-face in speaker/listener pairs. The fluency question is written on the board (question cards are a practical alternative here)

Step 3: First delivery – 60 seconds. Listeners ask the question, speakers generate ideas, talking for one minute.

Step 4: Second delivery – 90 seconds. Speakers rotate. Listeners ask the question and speakers generate ideas, repeating their first delivery, but talking for one and a half minutes.

Step 5: Third delivery – 120 seconds. Speakers rotate. Listeners ask the question and speakers generate ideas, repeating their first delivery, but talking for two minutes.

Step 6: Fourth delivery – 60 seconds. Teacher emphasizes increased speaking speed, fluidity, and clarity in this final round: “Presentation time. Try to say your idea quickly, smoothly, and clearly.” Speakers rotate and talk for one minute to the same listener as in the first delivery.

Step 7: Teacher briefly surveys the speakers as a way of reflecting on the practice and presentation stages: “Okay, let’s think about our presentation.” By a show of hands, speakers would have the multiple choice of “I Disagree,” “I partly agree,” or “I Agree” in response to the teacher statements, “I could say everything I wanted to say” and “I could say my idea smoothly.” Optionally, the teacher could include the listener in the feedback by substituting the first statement for “My idea was easier to understand than before” or “As a listener, I understood what the speaker was trying to say.”

Steps 8-11: Speakers and listeners switch roles and repeat the process.
Note that the speakers revert to one minute in the fourth delivery. While this satisfies the requisite conditions for a technique that measures fluency (time reductions, pressure to speak), the final one-minute “presentation” round also allows the teacher and student to monitor the progress made over 4 ½ minutes of “practice.” What constitutes “progress” over this period? Teacher and student perceptions may or may not differ, but we can say that comparing the final minute to the first allows everyone to notice changes or improvements in clarity, fluidity, speed, use of the language and, as Fillmore generalizes, the ability to fill time with talk. For the teacher, it would be worthwhile observing the student with the lowest communicative competence and considering the following statements: “The student appeared more/less anxious,” “The student made noticeably more/less pauses in the final minute,” and “The student finished the final minute with a more/less “complete” idea than in the first four minutes.”

VARIATIONS
The time constraints of an EDC lesson limit what can be explored or expanded in just one fluency-training session, but that is not to say the teacher is without options, the most immediate of which involves providing feedback on student performance, content, and understanding of this exercise. Students could be asked to share some ideas that they heard. This would accentuate the role of the listener in this exercise and might generate additional knowledge for the language function presentation to follow.

A noticeable disadvantage of the BU sequence is that some students “crash” around the 90-second mark of the third delivery. A possible explanation is that they have focused more on refining and repeating their initial idea, to the neglect of expanding the initial idea, exhausting reasons, or giving more examples. A practical solution might be to include a language formula on the board, for example “Opinion + Reason/Example” with a stronger emphasis on the “because” and “for example” as a way of building more flow-sustaining chunks of speech.

CONCLUSION
In the context of the EDC classroom, a bottom-up approach to Maurice’s widely implemented 4/3/2 technique involves speaking for 5 ½ minutes over shorter time blocks, the most noticeable feature being the rearrangement of time reductions into 30-second additions. Initially, I applied these changes in reaction to the noticeable anxiety and fragmentary output of a sizeable number of speakers. However, experimenting with a BU technique in Level 2, 3, and 4 classes has lead me away from the idea of BU fluency as a replacement for Maurice’s technique, and further toward BU fluency as an efficient scaffolding technique with a limited period of application.

Through informal observation, it is likely that a BU approach is most effective as a means of introducing learners to the idea of oral fluency, and that its value lies in conditioning them to manage the facilitative pressure of the longer top-down exercises (3/2/1 or 2/1.5/1, for instance). If applied in the early stages of the first semester BU scaffolding might affect a positive outlook toward fluency building, train students to effectively formulate ideas, and help automatize the first wave of function phrases (“I think... because... for example... if... ”). For a significant minority of students, it might also lessen the unease brought on by extended stretches of “dead air” and hesitation.

Above all, this activity would benefit from a more critical application and broad quantitative-based evaluation. Now that I have discussed the learning context and reasons for why a BU approach merits attention, the follow-up to this proposal will be to see if this variant yields any gains in what we might agree are two important strands in fluency: coherent output and smooth delivery. In view of this, two over-arching questions come to mind: one “Does a BU fluency sequence help learners formulate more coherent ideas?” and, more specifically,
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“Does a Bottom-Up approach to fluency reduce pauses in the final delivery?” By reaching some understanding in these areas, we could apply this technique more correctly to fluency training in the English discussion classroom.

REFERENCES
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