

Raising Fluency Awareness

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses reflections recorded in a teaching journal based on 11 weeks of one Level 2 English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University in Japan. A focus on increasing fluency was arrived at after initial student needs assessment. While increasing fluency is a goal of EDC classes, a compulsory program for all first-year students across all departments, and a portion of each EDC class is devoted to fluency, students and instructors alike often find it difficult to gauge improvements. It soon became apparent that what was required was an overall raising of awareness so that fluency could rejoin discussion phrases at the forefront of classroom practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the first lesson of the second semester, when the students in one of my classes were asked what their most important English language goals were, the majority mentioned improving fluency. But when asked how to improve fluency, or what it meant to improve fluency, they were unable to answer. I asked them if they ever spoke English outside of classes. They said no. I asked if anyone had spoken English during the summer holidays. They said no. I suggested that if they wanted to improve fluency, they could try speaking English with their friends or family members as much as possible outside of the classroom. For example, they could go to a cafe and pretend they were in an English-speaking country and speak English to each other for a couple of hours. I challenged them to use English outside of classes and report back in the second lesson. The following week, none of the students said they had used any English on the outside.

In this increasingly globalized world, Japan is still relatively monocultural and monolingual. Consequently, students lack opportunities to use English in their own time and are unable to improve fluency through the pressure of 'real' situational use. Therefore, it is essential that classrooms provide ample practice. Nation & Newton (2009) recommend that if English is not used outside the classroom, up to a quarter of class time should be spent on fluency activities. English language education in Japanese schools, however, was originally based on the Grammar Translation Method. Its main focus was on passing reading and writing entrance examinations. From my experience of teaching in private secondary schools, there has been progress in making classes more interactive and communicative, but large class sizes still make it difficult to provide effective feedback and track individual improvement. In addition, while the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT), is currently implementing new guidelines for Active Learning in schools (McMurray, 2018), improvements in overall communicative skills may take some time to appear, and they will probably only occur if there is an adequate focus on fluency. In order to reflect on these issues, I decided to make fluency the focus of this PD Project (Teaching Journal) and experiment with different ways of establishing goals and reporting progress and performance in terms of speech rate, smoothness, and flow (Thai & Boers, 2015).

Increasing fluency through a modified version of Maurice's (1983) 4/3/2 activity is one of the original EDC course's aims (Hurling, 2012). "To enable students to improve their discussion skills, we see fluency development as being the most important aspect of language to develop in classes" (p. 1-2). Fluency itself, however, is not explicitly assessed in regular lessons or in discussion test lessons. Over time, fluency has been approached as a warm-up exercise, a way to reconfirm homework reading, and a brainstorming activity designed to generate discussion content. Most importantly, the typical 50-60 minutes of S-S interaction time each class contributes

to the aim of developing fluency. But gains in fluency are not as straightforward to assess as the use of target phrases, and students are perhaps unaware of how or what it means to improve fluency. In the first semester, most of my post-discussion feedback was about the use of target phrases. I have since come to believe improving fluency is important because it can not only improve discussions in class, allowing for greater use of target phrases, but also benefit overall communicative competency.

The class on which my journal was based contained seven students from the Department of Law and Politics. Three boys and four girls. TOEIC scores ranged from 580 to 610, which grouped students into a Level 2 intermediate EDC class, although TOEIC scores are based on listening and reading only and not on speaking skills.

DISCUSSION

In Maurice's (1983) original Fluency Workshop, the 4/3/2 technique "... was designed to help intermediate and advanced students improve their abilities to speak more fluently in the target language" (p. 29). While the shortened 3/2/1 form may not offer as many opportunities for higher level students to expand upon their ideas and hone their skills (Thai & Boers, 2015), in the EDC context, the full-length form might prove too difficult for the majority of students but may also be more time-consuming. Nation and Newton (2009) recommend some form of planning and preparation before beginning the activity so that the topic is familiar enough not to impede production while students search for content or lexical resources. In EDC classes, planning and preparation generally take the form of pre-reading for a quiz and some thinking time after completing the quiz. Taking the initial listener role also provides half the students with a model. The activity is performed near the beginning of each lesson, and students are familiar with the procedure. Before the three-minute speaking turn, they are encouraged to speak as much as possible and not to worry about making grammatical or lexical errors. Although no correction is given between speaking turns, students are encouraged to repeat as much as possible of the same information in the shrinking time frame to improve their fluency. But what does it actually mean to improve fluency?

My initial journal entries confirmed that although students wanted to improve their fluency, they were unsure about how to go about it or what it actually meant to improve fluency. Early on, one student was noted as saying, "If I want to go abroad I will have to improve my English fluency." From my previous teaching experience, this is a common attitude in Japanese English language classrooms, where students are focused on accuracy over fluency. This is partly because English education in Japanese secondary schools is still based on the Grammar Translation Method, and although MEXT is attempting to reform the system there is still a long way to go (Tada, 2016). The implication is that students feel they have to improve their communicative skills first *before* setting out to use them, but this is actually a false dichotomy because the best way to improve communicative skills, such as fluency, is *by* using them: "Fluency in language learning includes the ability to make the most effective use of what is already known" (Arevart & Nation, 1983, p. 297). This is an important distinction because it shifts the focus from knowing to doing.

The students' own initial assessment of their fluency performance was confirmed as accurate during early lessons: they certainly needed improvement. For example, when going first, the least fluent students struggled to complete three and sometimes two minutes even after being reminded to give reasons and use examples to extend their speaking turns. If the second group contained more fluent speakers, they were able to speak for three minutes, but it was noted that their speech seemed, "deliberately drawn out almost to a drawl as if too conscious of trying to fill the time." Students who went second also had the advantage of listening to the other students first. This may have allowed them to formulate more ideas. Having stronger students speak first

provided weaker students more opportunity to plan their narratives, but this produced only marginal increases in output. Most turns still contained numerous filled and unfilled pauses, hesitations, revisions, and repetitions possibly related to anxiety and confidence as much as ability. A similar pattern was noted during discussions, where less fluent students seemed unable to relinquish the floor because they were trapped in a nervous spiral attempting to round-off ideas.

As the semester progressed, I continued to reflect on student performance as well as research the 4/3/2 activity. I concluded that students would most likely make small gains in fluency throughout the semester but at the very least raising awareness of fluency was an important step towards them achieving more autonomy. I set out to do this by attempting to simplify the range of comments and feedback I gave the students between rounds into a set of questions that they could internalize in order to better understand what it meant to be more fluent. For instance, I wrote on the board: Breakdown, Repair, Smoothness, Speed. And after the three-minute turn, I pointed to Breakdown and Repair and asked, “Did you stop?” and “Did you make any mistakes?” or “Did you have to fix anything?” With the three-minute turn, and occasionally the two-minute turn, the goal became filling the time with minimal breakdown or repair. Smoothness and speed were increasingly linked to improving the final one-minute turn because the three- and two-minute turns contained such a large amount of breakdown and repair. When students said they made a mistake after their three-minute turn, I asked, “What kind of mistake (e.g. grammar, vocabulary)?” and “Did you try to fix the mistake?” or “How did you fix it?” Then after the two-minute turn, I asked, “Did you make the same mistake?” An example recorded in my journal was one student reporting that, “I like use ...” became self-corrected as, “I like *to* use ...”

While this approach was successful in helping students categorize barriers to fluency, asking them to expand shifted the focus back towards grammatical accuracy, which contradicted the initial impetus to *not* worry about grammar. Nation and Newton (2009) may have believed that, “... developments in fluency are related to developments in accuracy” (p. 152), but Thai and Boers (2015) soon discovered, in one of the few detailed studies of 3/2/1, that unless students were corrected between turns “... the vast majority of the errors that were made in the first delivery of the talk were preserved unmodified in the subsequent talks” (p. 383).

To avoid dwelling on grammar, itself a barrier to fluency, I decided to streamline the questions I asked and only use closed (Yes/No) questions. After the three-minute turn, I would ask, “Did you stop?” And if the answer was no, “Did you speak smoothly?” or “Did you repeat something that wasn’t clear?” Then, after subsequent turns, I would ask, “Did you speak more quickly?” or “Did you speak more smoothly?” This was done without eliciting reasons or making corrections. It may have risked reinforcing some grammatical or lexical errors, but this was countered by my general observation that students appeared less self-conscious and were sometimes speaking more rapidly, although genuine speech rate gains were not being accurately monitored.

Halfway through the course, from one lesson to the next, my journal mostly focused on streamlining approaches to feedback for the 3/2/1 fluency activity. This helped students shift their focus from grammatical accuracy and show some relative fluency gains. However, some said that vocabulary was still holding them back. Therefore, I recommended trying to find a different word to express the same meaning or saying it in a different way. Students were aware of paraphrasing themselves and others as a way to clarify or confirm meaning but they found it difficult to balance using this skill with the demands of increasing their speech rate. Rather than moving on, they appeared to get stuck trying to navigate their way around lexical items.

In week seven, I noted that some students were also struggling to complete a timed discussion skills practice activity because their speaking turns contained numerous pauses and breakdowns. At the time, I simply reminded them to speak more quickly, but on reflection I

realized that I should have been applying the same approach to fluency in 3/2/1 to all other aspects of S-S interaction including practice, preparation, and the two discussions.

In the following lesson, before beginning the practice activity, I encouraged the students to, “speak more quickly and smoothly, like you did in fluency.” While some students still struggled to complete the activity, I noted that, “they displayed an extra sense of urgency and purpose.” At the end of each practice round I also asked them if they had spoken more quickly and more smoothly. They all reported that they had.

Similarly, during the first discussion in week eight, some students seemed reluctant or unable to easily relinquish the floor at the end of a speaking turn. I noted that, “it’s as if they’re doing the first three minutes of fluency.” This led to an unbalanced discussion, where all students had fewer opportunities to use the target language. In post-discussion feedback, I encouraged the students to think of the one-minute round of 3/2/1 during discussions so that everyone had a chance to speak equally. They attempted this in the second discussion, but some tended to wind down their points with unnecessary conclusions such as, “So, I think ...”

As the next week was a discussion test lesson, I gave students a gentle reminder that by thinking about fluency they would have better discussions: “more balanced, like playing catch ball, where everyone gets a turn.” I was reluctant to shift the entire focus to fluency at this stage because some students were still struggling with the target language phrases. From week ten, however, fluency feedback was integrated throughout all stages of lessons.

Students responded well to the integration of fluency feedback throughout the remaining lessons because it had been a gradual process that began with 3/2/1. The feedback consisted of the same closed questions used in the 3/2/1 activity alongside general encouragement. The result was that students were more aware of fluency, their discussions were slightly more balanced, and individual 3/2/1 performance itself was marginally better than at the start of the course.

Without the detailed kind of analysis conducted on one occasion with a single group by Thai and Boers (2015), it is difficult to make anything other than this general assessment of overall fluency improvement throughout the course. For example, in the last lesson, some students spoke for three minutes in the first round, although they still seemed to be deliberately slowing their speech as a time-filling technique, while some were still unable to speak for two minutes or even one minute on subsequent rounds. Those who filled three minutes produced the same content more quickly in less than two minutes and were then left speechless running down the clock. They were then only able to reproduce 50% of the content in one minute.

When I asked the students what they still found difficult about the fluency activity, they returned to grammar and vocabulary. They said the most difficult thing about 3/2/1 was forming ideas correctly in English and assessing appropriate vocabulary. One said it was because, “Vocabulary in English is difficult!”

Extending homework and preparation time, as well as adding lengthy corrections between rounds, may help avoid these obstacles. Thai and Boers (2015) concluded that unless students are supported between speaking turns in the 3/2/1 activity, the immediate repetition of narratives may increase speech rate and smoothness but it may also further fossilize common errors and entrench new ones. Conversely, it may also further entrench the kind of self-consciousness the activity is designed to overcome, which is its main strength. Integrating fluency into all stages of EDC lessons, can potentially increase speech rate and smoothness, while at the same time meet the assessment criteria through the internalization of discussion skills target language. The first step towards this goal is raising fluency awareness.

CONCLUSION

Fluency gains throughout the semester may have been marginal, but awareness of obstacles and

strategies to overcome them was raised. This awareness in turn improved discussions by encouraging more succinct speaking turns that allowed for more balanced responses and greater use of the target language. In the coming year, I will continue to research and develop ways to incorporate the aims of increasing fluency within the requirements of the EDC assessment criteria. I will also continue to improve practical approaches to reporting performance and progress. Embarking on a detailed course-long analysis of student performance in a particular adaptation of the 4/3/2 activity, such as that which Thai and Boers (2015) undertook with one class on one occasion, could pose a logistical challenge, but the EDC's current unified curriculum does present a unique opportunity for such an endeavor and the outcomes could provide beneficial and enlightening insights for the wider academic fields of TESOL and applied linguistics.

Overall, my experience of keeping a teaching journal was a positive one. The act of focusing on a specific aspect of problematic student behavior and then regularly writing about it after classes enabled me to reflect more creatively and deeply on the topic. The disciplined process of writing itself helped stimulate alternative approaches, connections, and ideas that may not have occurred otherwise. As Farrell (2007) notes, "Journal writing gets teachers thinking about things that are unconsciously going on in the mind" (p. 115), and that is certainly true of my experience in keeping a journal for this semester. Ideally, the next stage would be to build upon this initial foundation and to begin devising action plans for the future (Murphy, 2014).

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