



A Review Study on the Enhancement of Oral Fluency in L2: An Investigation into Processes and Didactics

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Abstract

This paper principally endeavors to grant a thorough understanding of the cognitive and expressive mechanisms perpetually involved in the production of speech. It must be noted that oral fluency has proven to be one of the major skills that almost all EFL learners strive to achieve through conscious mental efforts and constant exposure. Oral fluency is then a cognitive process that requires the learner to use their meta-cognitive skills to both enhance the effectiveness and flow of speech, and simultaneously avoid speech errors.

Keywords: Oral fluency, Acquisition, Cognitive skills, Expression, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Language is an essential constituent of communication. Accordingly, questions about the evolution of language, and more precisely the human language ability are closely linked to considerations about the evolution of social life. In fact, one answer to the question of why there is language at all is often to refer to the functions of language that have a positive effect on survival (Derwing, Munro & Thomson, 2008). Because oral fluency is inherently inseparable from language coherence, its research has important theoretical and practical significance. However, compared with studies in other fields of second language acquisition, the exploration of fluency is still relatively insufficient. In this regard, some researchers have conducted descriptive studies on the temporal indicators of fluency, non-fluency and other phenomena (Matthews, 1994; Bailey & Savage, 1994), but the cognition of fluency is still mainly in theoretical discussion, and empirical research is relatively rare. One should know that the exploration of the cognitive level of second language fluency is conducive to exploring the underlying mechanisms and processes of second language fluency driven by theory, and it can domesticate a large number of fluency appearances and discover its rules, which is ultimately conducive to solving descriptive research. In fact, the problem of how to determine speech characteristic objects and how to achieve optimal operability will help compare the results of many studies horizontally, confirm the conclusions with each other, and eventually promote the development of the theory of second language acquisition fluency (Bailey & Savage, 1994). These authors (1994) clarified the concept of cognitive fluency and absorbed the achievements of cognitive science, social psychology and other disciplines, and put forward the theory of second language fluency. This framework has promoted the development of empirical research on cognitive fluency, but domestic introduction and research in this area are still very scarce. Thus, since the 1990s, pedagogical approaches promoting interaction between learners, such as the communicative approach and its most recent extension, as well as the task-based approach, which have received much attention and have been the subject of numerous studies (e.g., Derwing, Rossiter, Munro & Thomson, 2004; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Freed, 1995; Lennon, 1990; Riggenbach, 1991; Rossiter, 2009).

2. Literature Review

The investigation of the relationship between cognitive fluency and second language ability stresses whether second language cognitive fluency can predict or strengthen second language fluency and overall, second language ability. Although there are few such empirical studies, the evidence from several existing studies proves that cognitive fluency is related to and predictive of second language ability. Wray (2002) examined the relationship between attention control and second language ability. The semantic classification task is used to examine the efficiency of vocabulary access, and the attention control is examined by the attention transfer consumption of the language in the alternate switching paradigm, and the performance of one language is used as the baseline. The main finding of the study is that the response speed of the second language attention control of bilinguals can explain the difference in the language ability to a considerable extent, and the second language attention control is significantly related to the bilingual ability. It is worth noting that albeit the coefficient of variation as an indicator of processing efficiency is considered to be a manifestation of automation, in this study, attention was paid to the conversion speed instead of the conversion efficiency.

The relationship between cognitive fluency and expressive fluency explores the relationship between cognitive fluency and expressive fluency. In effect, the existing research on cognitive fluency covers longitudinal and horizontal research, and the research content covers the relationship between cognitive fluency and expression fluency, second language ability and related factors, such as the influence of environment and memory, but the number is not in fact substantial. The improvement of second language learners' expressive fluency can be traced back to the corresponding development of cognitive fluency (Dudley, 2007). Some scholars have carried out longitudinal research to investigate the development of oral fluency in second language from the perspective of cognitive fluency, and explore the impact of the learning environment.

In this regard, Gathbonton and Segalowitz (2005) examined the role of learning environment in second language acquisition, and are the first to directly examine the relationship between expressive fluency and cognitive fluency. The research contends that the speed and efficiency of second language cognitive processing will be reflected in oral performance. The research found out that oral ability, cognitive ability and language contact have significant interactions and relationships. Similarly, the research examined different indicators of progress



in oral performance, especially the progress in oral fluency, including time and hesitation, and explores the relationship between these progress and specific cognitive indicators of the second language. The cognitive indicators measured in this study are the speed and efficiency of vocabulary access and attention control, respectively taking response time and its coefficient of variation as indicators. The study found that cognitive ability is significantly related to oral fluency. The speed and efficiency of vocabulary access are positively correlated with the average speech flow length (excluding filler words), and the efficiency of attention control is negatively correlated with speech speed.

Likewise, Koponen and Rigganbach (2000) studied the impact of the learning environment on fluency development. She tracked and investigated the differences in oral fluency and second language specific cognitive development of the two groups of Spanish learners whose mother tongue is English. The cognitive tasks used in the experiment include attention control tasks, semantic classification tasks, and picture naming tasks. The study revealed that overseas learners have made greater progress in fluency than domestic learners. In terms of cognition, the vocabulary of overseas learners is faster in the second language, while the vocabulary of the mother tongue is slower. However, there is no significant diachronic difference in second language semantic extraction among domestic learners.

Thomson (2008) emphasized the aspects of second language fluency that can predict second language cognitive fluency, and explored the extent to which L2 language knowledge and processing skills strengthen second language cognitive fluency that can explain expression fluency. The study uses three knowledge tests to measure the participants' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Cognitive processing tasks include image processing tasks for measuring the speed of vocabulary extraction, sentence grouping tasks for measuring the extraction of morphological and syntactic knowledge, and delayed picture naming tasks for measuring the pronunciation speed of speech plans. Research results show that language skills have the strongest correlation with average syllable duration, which can explain 50% of individual differences, while average pause duration has little correlation with language knowledge and processing skills. In general, all indicators of expressive fluency are related to one or more indicators of latent cognitive fluency (linguistic knowledge and processing skills).

From the perspective of psycholinguistics, fluency is related to the ease of language expression. Ejzenberg (2000) believes that the characteristic of fluent speech is that the mental language process of speech planning and output operates easily and effectively. Koponen & Rigganbach (2000) also believe that producing fluent speech is an automatic programming skill that does not require much attention or processing effort. Samuda and Bygate (2008) confirms that fluency should be divided into three aspects: perceptual fluency, discourse fluency, and cognitive fluency, corresponding to the subjective judgment, objective measurement, and the operation of the internal mechanism of speech output respectively. The three levels of fluency are closely related. Discourse fluency is the basis of judgment for perceptual fluency, and it is also the external manifestation of cognitive fluency. Therefore, in the final analysis, the discussion of fluency should be based on the performance characteristics of the discourse itself.

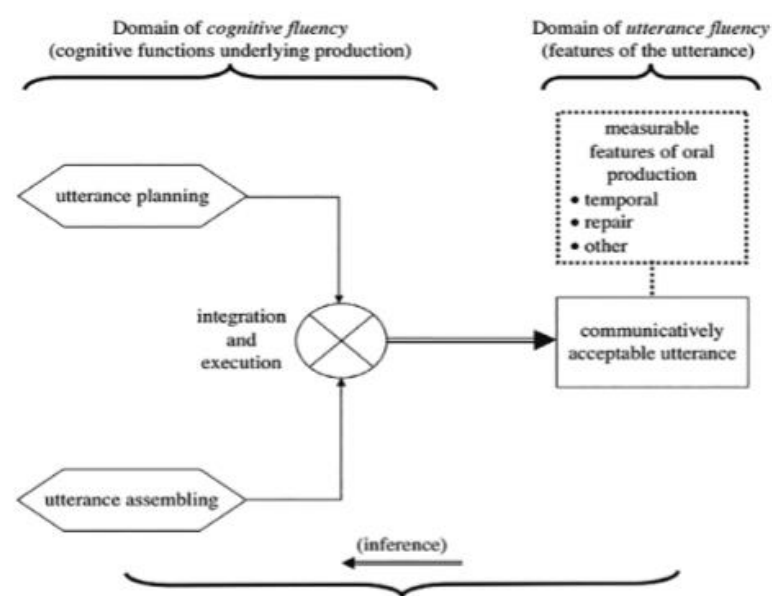


Figure 1: Domain of perceived Fluency (Segalowitz, 2005)

2.1 Fluency between Subjectivity and Objectivity

Lennon defined oral fluency as “the rapid, smooth, accurate, lucid, and efficient translation of thought or communicative intention into language under the temporal constraints of on-line processing” (1990, p. 28). There are subjective and objective ways to measure fluency in interpreting. Subjective measurement means that the listener makes a judgment on the fluency of interpretation based on subjective impressions, which is generally reflected in the form of scoring. Objective measurement refers to the quantitative statistics of a series of indicators. Meara (2006) proposed that discourse fluency can be measured in three dimensions: speed, interruption and correction. This distinction points the way for the measurement of fluency. Speed fluency refers to the speed of expression, generally measured by speaking rate and articulation rate. Breakdown fluency refers to the frequency, length, and distribution of vocal and silent pauses in discourse; repair fluency focuses on the frequency and distribution of modification and repetition of discourse. This study will use subjective and objective methods to determine the fluency of interpreters.

When measuring fluency, researchers have been controversial about the definition of the stopping points. Some researchers follow the tradition of one-language research when studying second language fluency. Meara (2006) is one of the leading figures in the study of one-language pauses. In her research, pauses of more than 0.25 seconds are regarded as silent pauses. Her explanation is that 0.25 seconds is enough to distinguish the pause caused by hesitation from the pause caused by pronunciation. Dudley (2007) also used 0.25 seconds as a pause boundary when studying the fluency of simultaneous interpretation. One of the strictest demarcation points is the 0.1 second used by Schmidt (2001). Another common pause cutoff point is 0.3 seconds, which was first proposed by Nattinger and De Carrico (1992). The most detailed definition is Matthews (1994). He divided the pauses into three types: micro-pauses below 0.2 seconds, hesitation pauses 0.3-0.4 seconds, and no-fill pauses 0.5-3 seconds, and further divided micro-pauses and hesitations. Pauses are divided into two categories. In some studies, the limitation of measurement technology has also become the reason for setting the cut-off point. For example, Wray (2002) takes 0.28 seconds. In addition, the accuracy of the pause is also different.

2.2 The Didactics of Oral Fluency

Oral fluency has long been less in the teaching of foreign languages, especially FFL. Traditional methods dealt exclusively with the text and the written language. They only used orality during the reading aloud sequences and some grammatical exercises, as Wray (2002, p. 177) notes, when he says that "the history of didactics shows contempt for the grammar-translation method towards oral instruction, always placed on the side of the spontaneous, the playful, the unbridled expression, source of heckling". Orality would therefore be seen as a source of heckling, that is to say a source of disorder compared to the written word which is considered to be normative where an order is inscribed. Gathbonton and Segalowitz (2005) raise another aspect of the question when he speaks of the problem encountered by oral didactics. A concern which, according to him, arises for the educational institution as a whole and which concerns "the articulation between school knowledge and social knowledge" (p. 23). That is to say that the question of oral communication in the school setting needs to be worked on in conjunction with communication in society. Moreover, could it be otherwise, knowing that we learn the language in order to communicate in society, and that learners obviously introduce the social practice of the language in the school setting.

2.3 Oral Fluency Purposes

2.3.1 Communication Purpose

The English language must be regarded as a communication tool for students and the teacher must strengthen their learning of this language in order to be able to communicate effectively and proficiently. Learning the English language should therefore be viewed as a subject used for communication, and not as a merely additional academic mastery. Communication is the essential purpose of learning a foreign language, and any act of communication presupposes the existence of a sender and a receiver. Understanding an oral message is hence essential for learning oral production because one has to understand the message in order to be able to react.

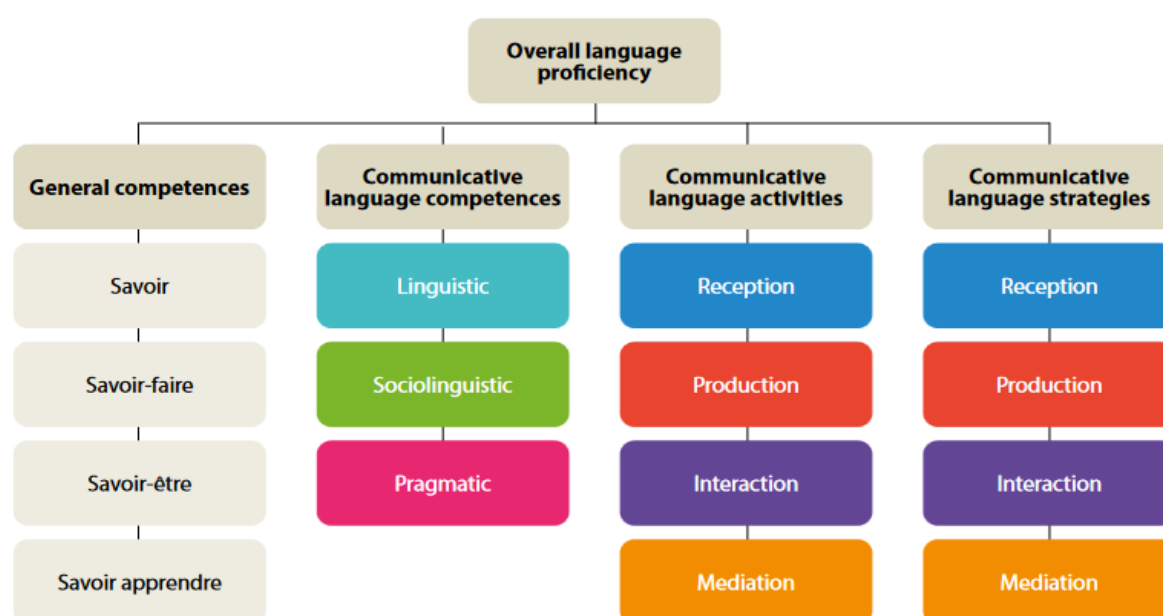
2.3.2 Linguistic Purpose

What matters when it comes to working on the oral comprehension skill is first of all to identify the message and to be able to both understand and interpret it. When listening to this oral message, what is essential is that the learner accesses the message that is being transmitted, and not that he perceives the grammatical structures that help to convey it. Thus, the linguistic purpose must be at the service of language communication, and not the other way around. However, any oral message is constructed with linguistic constituents; hence the facts of the language are found in each oral document. That is why, when the teacher intends to introduce a particular linguistic element, he sometimes has to plan a specific activity to train learners to locate in the oral message those language points that he wishes to study.

2.3.3 Cultural Purpose

In every society, language is the most enduring and dynamic feature of civilization. This reality justifies the presence of a cultural purpose inseparable from the linguistic one in the teaching of a foreign language, such as English. In the course of the language, the cultural purposes and the linguistic ones come into synergy since, in fact, the competences and linguistic and cultural knowledge are not dissociated in the foreign language: They combine in an approach which aims at improving the enrichment and the diversification of their competences. The cultural specificity resides in the language itself. This is to say that importance must be given to the lexicon and linguistic peculiarities of the language which can explain cultural facts. And conversely, cultural exposition can strengthen the acquisition of the linguistic skills required to understand a specific language. Audio and video documents are particularly suitable to introduce a cultural objective.

2.3.3.1 The Structure of the CEFR Descriptive Scheme



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2.4 Problems of Oral Fluency

Compared to writing, the first peculiarity of oral fluency is its ephemeral nature. When we are in front of a written text, we always have the possibility of proofreading or modifying. Concerning orality, when we are in a situation of communication of everyday life, we can ask the interlocutor to repeat, however it is impossible to do this all the time. On the other hand, if it is a question of understanding information broadcast on the radio or television, it is impossible to resort to repetition. To speak of an oral system, it is necessary to take into account several factors arising both from the speech emitted and from the communication situation in which it is emitted.

Listening has specific obstacles: intonation, accent, flow, rhythm, and so forth. This is what linguists call the feeling of insecurity in the practice of a language. This feeling can hinder the learning of a foreign language. Working on orality also involves working on this aspect of the problem. The teacher of a foreign language is supposed to develop in the learners an active listening which is, according to Bailey

and Savage, “a conscious listening, carried out in vigilance, and which brings into play the double functioning of the perception of speech, that is to say a treatment of speech according to two modes, one of global type, the other of type analytic” (1994, p. 51). Usually, listening is done in a brisk and effective manner in the mother tongue. In the process of learning a foreign language, it becomes difficult and risky, if not impossible. It is external to the individual who must put in an effort to understand it and speak it. Listening objectives in a situation of learning a foreign language are, according to Koponen and Riggenbach (2000, p. 72), to listen, to hear, to detect, to select, to identify, to recognize, to raise ambiguity, to reformulate, to synthesize, to do and finally to judge.

2.5 Effects of Translation Errors on Oral Fluency

When the non-native language has not been proficiently used to a certain degree, the process of translation is indispensable, and this is also a major factor affecting fluency. Sometimes, learners pause or repeat what they have just said because they have encountered obstacles in the process of translation from one’s mother tongue into English, and they have not completely freed themselves from the shackles of word-to-word translation. In fact, many non-native speakers of English use blunt or wrong expressions when translated into English (idiomatic expressions, for example). Therefore, if there are learners who are currently having such problems, the only way out is to accumulate more and practice more in peacetime, and gradually achieve the ability to organize the language directly in English.

In the process of narration or discussion, logical clarity and language continuity are one of the main characteristics of fluency. Therefore, if a learner is negligent in the use of conjunctions, it is easy to cause logical confusion, which will lead to an impact on fluency. This shows that the meaning of conjunctions is extraordinary. Learners need to categorize and accumulate to achieve the goal of a habitual use and an accurate use.

3. Conclusion

Oral fluency primarily demands the presence of various interactive components, such as an encouraging learning environment, sound pedagogy, constant genuine exposure and the student desire to learn beyond the class content. In actuality, there seems to be little understanding of both teachers and students about all the complexities involved in the development of oral fluency in L2, despite the fact that teachers adopt certain procedures, intuitively, without totally relying upon the mental and phonological capacities of their students. Finally, it is necessary to clarify that cognitive, interactive, physiological and emotional aspects are together intertwined for the production of oral fluency. EFL learners need to perpetually invest in oral fluency activities. Teachers must think of using innovative and engaging teaching methods and approaches, as well as designing genuine and positive fluency-oriented activities.

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