Developing Fluency in English Speaking

For Japanese English Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the significance of developing fluency in spoken English based on the latest Japanese results of TOEFL speaking scores. There has been a lot of discussion concerning what would be useful in developing fluency in spoken English. Previous research has revealed some definitions of fluency that can be helpful for exploring how to develop fluency in spoken English; these definitions can be useful for both English teachers and Japanese English learners. For Japanese English learners, how to exploit English learning techniques and the English learning environment are vital factors for developing fluency in spoken English.

Why fluency is important

Developing fluency in English speaking is one of the most fundamental subjects Japanese English learners need to work on.

There has been a lot of discussion about how students and teachers should improve fluency in the classroom. One of the English proficiency tests, TOEFL, (Test of English as a Foreign Language), indicates the current situation of speaking for Japanese English learners. According to the internet-based TOEFL test data for 2010 released by Educational Testing Service, Japanese results of TOEFL iBT speaking show that Japan has the lowest mean score among 33 Asian countries (p. 10).

The speaking section of TOEFL measures one's speaking ability in academic settings. It includes 6 questions. The first two questions are called "Independent Speaking tasks" because test takers are asked about their own experiences and opinions. The other four questions are called "Integrated Speaking tasks" because questions are integrated with reading and listening ability both in and outside the classroom**.**

According to ETS, each of the six tasks is rated from 0 to 4. The sum is converted to a scaled score of 0 to 30. Independent and integrated speaking rubrics are as follows (TOEFL® iBT, 2004):

Rubrics for a score of 4 for independent speaking:

(1) General description

The response fulfills the demands of the task, with at most minor lapses in completeness. It is highly intelligible and exhibits sustained, coherent discourse.

(2) Delivery

Generally well-paced flow (fluid expression). Speech is clear. It may include minor lapses, or minor difficulties with pronunciation or intonation patterns, which do not affect overall intelligibility.

(3) Language Use

The response demonstrates effective use of grammar and vocabulary. It exhibits a fairly high degree of automaticity with good control of basic and complex structures (as appropriate). Some minor (or systematic) errors are noticeable but do not obscure meaning.

(4) Topic development

Response is sustained and sufficient to the task. It is generally well developed and coherent; relationships between ideas are clear (or clear progression of ideas).

Rubrics for a score of 4 for integrated speaking:

(1) General description

The response fulfills the demands of the task, with at most minor lapses in completeness. It is highly intelligible and exhibits sustained, coherent discourse.

(2) Delivery

Speech is generally clear, fluid, and sustained. It may include minor lapses or minor difficulties with pronunciation or intonation. Pace may vary at times as the speaker attempts to recall information. Overall intelligibility remains high.

(3) Language Use

The response demonstrates good control of basic and complex grammatical structures that allow for coherent, efficient (automatic) expression of relevant ideas. Contains generally effective word choice. Though some minor (or systematic) errors or imprecise use may be noticeable, they do not require listener effort (or obscure meaning).

(4) Topic development

The response presents a clear progression of ideas and conveys the relevant information required by the task. It includes appropriate details, though it may have minor errors or minor omissions.

Those rubrics for speaking do not use the word "fluency". It is feasible that the word "fluency" itself is too vague to define; however, one can say that fluency is linked to each category.

The internet-based TOEFL test data for 2010 neither shows which question types nor which speaking scoring category are particularly weak for Japanese test takers, but when one focuses on reading and listening mean scores, Japan does not show the lowest score among the 33 Asian countries. From this brief data it is logical to suggest that there is more room for Japanese test takers to work on their fluency in speaking.

Definitions of fluency

Fluency in speaking has been discussed by many researchers but there is no single definition. Segalowitz (2010, p. 4) claimed that "Clearly, the natural language term fluency is not well defined." However, Segalowitz stated that "One could examine that fact that in other languages, including English, there is a conceptual metaphor underlying the meaning of fluency, namely that "language is motion" (Kaponen and Riggenbach, 2000). In other words the word "fluency" originally had the meaning of movement or flow. Segalowitz also repeated the idea of Fillmore (1979) saying fluency consisted of these four abilities:

one is the ability to talk at length with a minimum of pauses. The second is the ability to package the message easily into "semantically dense" sentences without recourses to lots of filler material (for example, "you know," "the thing is that," etc.). The third is the ability to speak appropriately in different kinds of social contexts and situations, meeting the special communicative demands each may have. The fourth is the ability to use the language creatively and imaginatively by expressing

ideas in new ways, to use humor, to make puns, to use metaphors, and so on.

Segalowitz pointed out that those four belonged to different categories and must be "delivered with appropriate timing within the ever-evolving communicative situation; in this sense all four, as examples of kinds of fluency, are based on a temporal flow in the use of language" (p. 4). Also, fluency is related to intonation in the language learners speak. This means that "intonation is an integral part of the English language and that fluent nonnative speakers have acquired it" (Wennerstrom, 2000, p. 102).

Meanwhile, Pawley and Syder explained two linguistic capacities: nativelike selection and nativelike fluency; they explained this in order to elaborate ideas of what is going on behind fluency. Nativelike selection was defined as "the ability of the native speaker routinely to convey his meaning by an expression that is not only grammatical but also nativelike (p. 191). Nativelike fluency is "the native speaker's ability to produce fluent stretches of spontaneous connected discourse" (p. 191). "Fluent and idiomatic control of a language rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of 'sentence stems' which are 'institutionalized' or 'lexicalized'" (p. 191). Pawley and Syder added that the stock of lexicalized sentence stems mastered by mature ordinary English speakers is hundreds of thousands. More specifically, they gave an example of a 70 year old New Zealand man recalling his familys circumstances at the outbreak of WW Ⅱ by paraphrasing his narrative. As a result, his narrative became grammatical but generally unnatural. That means language learners who want to make their language nativelike should "learn not only a generative grammar as this term is usually understood – a set of rules specifying all and only the sentences of the language (p. 194); they also advocated that language learners should "learn a means for knowing which of the well-formed sentences are nativelike—a way of distinguishing those usages that are normal or unmarked from those that are unnatural or highly marked" (p. 194). Furthermore, Lennon said "More advanced learners will usually, however, start to automatize ready-made chunks of language so as to ease processing loads (p. 28). Thus, it seems that to improve fluency, one should consider how learners acquire the ability to control their language system using a nativelike stock of lexicalized sentences with appropriate intonations.

How to develop fluency in English speaking

To improve a learner's fluency, teachers can combine a teaching technique which takes into account the features of fluency. Developing fluency requires the following conditions, according to Nation and Newton (2009):

1. The activity is meaning-focused. The learners' interest is on the communication of a message and is subject to the "real time" pressures and demands of normal meaning-focused communication (Brumfit, 1984, pp. 56-57).

2. The learners take part in activities where all the language items are within previous experience. This means that the learners work with largely familiar topics and types of discourse making use of known vocabulary and structures. These activities are called "experience tasks" because the knowledge required to do the activity is already well within learners' experience.

3. There is support and encouragement for the learner to perform at a higher than normal level. This means that in an activity with a fluency development goal, learners should be speaking and comprehending faster, hesitating less, and using larger planned chunks than they do in their normal use of language. A fluency development activity provides some deliberate push to the high level of performance often by using time pressure.

Regarding 1, setting "real time" pressure seems vital. Nation and Newton wrote, in this context: "Fluency occurs because the learner is in control of the system of the language and can use a variety of efficient, well-connected, and well-practised paths to the wanted item" (p. 157).   Nation and Newton introduced activities which put an emphasis on repetition and rehearsal. They called these activities discreet activities (p. 161). Nation and Newton also suggested: 4/3/2 techniques, the best recording, an ask and answer technique, and rehearsed talks.

4/3/2 technique requires pair work: one student is the speaker and the other is the listener. First, a speaker speaks for 4 minutes on a topic and then switches to listener and the other student speaks for 3 minutes and then the listener and speaker again switch and the new speaker speaks for 2 minutes using the same information used for a four minute speech. Within diminishing time frames, learners organize their ideas better and process the information faster because of the time constraint.

The best recording method is done in a language laboratory. The speaker talks to the microphone to record his speech and other learners give him feedback as to how it could be better. Based on the feedback, the learner records his talk and repeats it until he is satisfied with the recording. As for rehearsed talks, the learner rehearses a talk with a partner first, then in a small group and ultimately speaks in front of the class.

All these activities focus on repetition and rehearsal and provide enough opportunities to reflect on students' speaking. Also, the more learners speak, the better they become because they are given a chance to perform in a rather objective way.

Nation and Newton also wrote about an ask and answer technique advocated by Simcock (1993), which is an activity followed by reading. Learners ask their partners questions about a teacher-prepared reading after they comprehend the text to a high level. Answers include a summary of the reading to promote their fluency. This could be a good way to practice chunk phrases often used by native speakers. At the end, learners can give presentations after rehearsing the speech in pairs.

When one takes into account the English learning environment in Japan, those 3 methods can be used for learners from beginning to advanced. For advanced learners, setting time limitations and recording methods can be used for people who want to speak English in academic and business settings. As to 4/3/2, teachers could have beginners memorize model dialogues and then practice them within a more limited time frame. Each student could correct his or her partner's speech during practice. Teachers could ask some pairs to demonstrate in front of the class to check the points they think students should correct. After teachers correct students' mistakes, students can do the practice again until the model dialogues are their own. This can be used not only in the latter part of the lesson but also at the beginning of the lesson to review the previous lesson.

The best recording methods can be effective to make learners aware of how they speak English. It's often the case that Japanese English learners have a problem speaking English with appropriate pronunciation, stress, and intonation even though they think they are speaking correctly. The best recording method gives students the opportunity to realize their own weakness in pronunciation. Proper feedback helps Japanese English learners understand the difference in producing sounds in Japanese and English. Teachers could encourage students to record their English speech for practice using digital gadgets such as mobile phones and iPhones.

An "ask and answer" technique might be challenging for beginners; however, teachers can use rather short stories written for native English speakers to provide some examples of the technique so that learners can know what they are supposed to acquire through the practice. It is particularly crucial for Japanese English learners to develop fluency practice focusing on repetition because the Japanese sound system is

different from that of English. For Japanese English learners, developing fluency is not only knowledge about language; students must also have physical exercise in the way to produce English sounds. For that purpose, these 3 methods can be used in the classroom learning environment. Also teachers need to speak in English even when the course focuses on single skills such as listening, reading, and writing. By accumulating this practice from the beginning of English learning, learners could be more comfortable in speaking English and be aware that developing fluency in English is not done only in speaking classes. That will help Japanese English learners to acquire native-like selection and native-like fluency because English knowledge is intertwined with the act of speaking.

Conclusions

To summarize, there is no single definition for English language fluency; however, fluency has a conceptual meaning of the language in motion. To flow smoothly, speaking should be delivered with appropriate timing within appropriate situations, and the speaker should try to speak with a minimum of pauses and convey messages semantically dense in a creative way with proper intonation. More importantly, language learners should acquire the ability to convey meaning that is not just grammatically correct but nativelike. To do that, language learners should be able to produce fluent stretches of spontaneous connected discourse considering sentence stems which are institutionalized or lexicalized. That means a grammatically correct sentence doesn't necessarily link to one's fluency. Starting to automatize ready-made chunks of language can also show one's fluency. Achieving fluency in listening, reading and writing English is not as simple as it seems, taking into account all the considerations above.

Having considered the discussions on fluency, English language learners could definitely use those learning techniques to approach language with repetition practice with the knowledge they have learned. These techniques could be used actively in the language classroom as well as by setting limited times and setting even higher goals in the language learning process. Speaking is more transient than the other three language skills; (listening, reading, and writing.) Therefore, recording helps learners to perceive their own speaking in an objective way. With this practice, language learners need others' feedback and enough reflection in each learning opportunity. TOEFL should be the test to measure one's ability of English in an academic setting; however, Japanese learners should be able to speak English at academic institutions at English spoken countries after 6 years of English learning at school before they get into college. Fluency can be learned at any level of learning. As Nation stated, practicing speaking with reading, that is to say, integrated with other skills, can be applied without any equipment installed in the classroom. Learners can also spend much more time on exploring genuine expressions from readings which would help them automatize ready-made chunks to improve fluency. Curriculums which put emphasis on learner's speaking fluency are necessary and should be designed. Given all these, it is possible that Japanese English learners can be more comfortable speaking English fluently and can get better scores in the TOEFL.

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