

# Assisting Fluency Development through Task-Based Activities

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The underlying premise of this paper is that language instruction should deliberately and thoughtfully assist the development of fluency in speech, in listening, in processing, in thought, and in interaction. The paper opens with an introduction to fluency and its impact on communication. The discussion then dissects fluency into distinct yet interconnected conceptual elements by means of a review of the literature. This allows for the identification of concrete building blocks of fluent language use as well as the description of a number of pedagogical approaches proposed by different researchers and educators in the field. Due to the relative dearth of detailed instructional plans available, the paper closes with a presentation of a series of simple task-based instructional activities that integrate the most immediately valuable components of language use with the more salient and uncontroversial features offered by the approaches discussed.

Fluency can be characterized in many different ways. According to Nation (2001) and Adolphs and Schmitt (2004), being fluent implies that up to 90%–95% of the speech produced by an English speaker is bound to be composed out of the same 2,000 high frequency word families, that is, a comparatively small subset of the English lexicon. According to Ellis (2001), McLaughlin (1990), and Lewis (2002), fluent speakers also rely on automatic knowledge of common collocates, frames, and other structures

in order to avoid improvising language anew every time they speak.

Being a fluent English speaker means that when we utter a sentence like “He talks a lot”, we do not need to construct the sentence from scratch by consciously searching through the lexicon for adequate words, selecting suitable grammatical rules, and finally synthesizing this information into a coherent phrase. Instead, we possess the frames and collocates that allow us to produce the sentence without the need to resort to metalinguistic consideration. If, however, we are not fluent speakers of a particular language, uttering the equivalent of “He talks a lot” requires explicit lucubration of the grammatical forms involved, together with deliberate selection of vocabulary, before we finally come to decide on how to assemble all the elements together. To make matters worse, the creative process we undergo due to our lack of fluency in the language might force us to produce a grammatically correct sentence that, nonetheless, sounds strange, or perhaps incomprehensible, to fluent speakers. The reason may be as simple as having inadvertently chosen, for example, a low frequency word where a common collocate is expected.

Fluent speakers rely on a database of memories of utterances, as Ellis (2001) puts it, on prefabricated linguistic material, as Lewis (2002) and Schmitt and Carter (2004) observe, on internalized lexical phrases and chunks, as Nation (2001) explains. Furthermore, it can be said that, to a large extent, the fluency manifested by speakers of a language is a function of how automatic their production is, not only in content, but also in timing. Naturally, that we rely on automatic knowledge of a language to express ourselves successfully and with agility does not negate the necessity for a modicum of improvisation. Yet, the creative aspect of language production comes with a high processing price that requires verbal dexterity. This is precisely the skill learners lack and the situation learners are in

when acquiring a language. That is to say, as learners we are forced to be creative, we are forced to improvise nearly all of the time.

### **Elements of fluency**

The elements that constitute fluency can be conceptually grouped into four strongly related categories: linguistic, cognitive, interactional, and affective.

The linguistic element identifies a concrete subset of the language, namely, high frequency words and collocates as well as productive frames and lexical phrases. According to a study undertaken by Adolphs and Schmitt (2004), up to 90%–95% of daily spoken discourse is constructed from the 2,000 most frequent word families in English. This fact alone cannot be dismissed at any level of language education and is paramount when addressing fluency. The implications should be clear. From words we move to collocates, building larger and larger blocks as pointed out by McLaughlin's (1990) restructuring theory. Further along, productive frames and lexical phrases are, again, built out of the same relatively small subset of the lexicon.

The cognitive element identifies internalization and retrieval as the fundamental cornerstones that make fluency feasible. Without a database of linguistic structures to draw from and without the capacity to retrieve them in a timely fashion, fluent speech is not possible. Fluent use of language does not rely on grammar in the sense of abstract rules but, rather, on a huge collection of previously experienced utterances (Ellis, 2001). Word knowledge is not just composed of phonological and semantic poles but also includes collocational knowledge. Moreover, our receptive and productive experience with the lexicon enhances word knowledge with specific frequency information so that fluent speakers are able to intuit that “to chew” is far more frequent than “to masticate” and that “chewing well”

is a far more conventional construct than “abundant mastication”.

The interactional element identifies the effective collaboration as both listener and speaker to be the product of concrete patterns that go beyond the linguistic elements previously mentioned. Successful fluent communication between interlocutors requires parties to conform to certain expectations. Speaker interaction relies on topic management and turn taking strategies, as well as the timely delivery of, among other things, appropriate and fixed linguistic responses, namely, adjacency pairs (Hedge, 2000).

Lastly, the affective element identifies the psychological factors that aid and impede the realization of fluency. Self-esteem, inhibition, language ego, extroversion, empathy, stress, etc, have been singled out by researchers such as Brown (2000), Guiora et al. (1972), and Schumann (1999) to be influential, if not crucial, to performance regardless of the level of proficiency. The speech of a fluent speaker, even one with exceptional verbal dexterity, can be rendered halted, broken, even incomprehensible, by feelings of insecurity, negative self-perception, or self-doubt. Conversely, feelings of confidence, self-assurance, or lack of inhibition can disguise shortcomings in the speech of a speaker of moderate fluency and capacity.

Summing up, one cannot produce fluent speech without the adequate words, collocates, and frames, without the ability to retrieve these in a timely fashion, without the know-how to manage interaction, and without a certain psychological disposition.

### **The linguistic element**

As mentioned, the linguistic element is clearly delimited by the 2,000 most frequent word families in English. If these words are not known, whether in semantic or phonological form, and further, if it is not known how they collocate and combine productively, fluent speech as it is understood by

fluent speakers is not possible. It is conceivable, of course, to speak using a different lexical set but the language produced would be considered highly irregular, possibly incomprehensible. Again, “chewing well” makes sense immediately while “abundant mastication” gives reason to pause.

Language use is a profoundly convergent process, that is, it strongly tends toward redundancy and replication. It may appear strange, for some, that language use is so formulaic but the data is unequivocal. As will be discussed later, Gass’ (1997) input and interaction theory assumes this observation as it relies on an inherent tendency of learners to conform to the input they receive in order to further development. Just as a fluent speaker produces the phrase “take a deep breath” automatically, the exposure to the phrase provides learners with a prompt to do so themselves. Again, although learners are forced to improvise most of the time, they are nonetheless as implicitly aware as fluent speakers are of the desirability of conventional forms over improvised ones. It is, in fact, this convergent and inherent drive within fluent speakers that makes a phrase such as “take a deep breath” to be formulaic since, otherwise, fluent speakers themselves would divert and improvise phrases of equal meaning when wanting to say “take a deep breath”. In other words, fluent speakers naturally tend toward convention and so do learners.

It simply makes sense. Multiple reencounters with a frequent collocate, for instance, signal to the fluent speaker – and learner – that one may as well store the chunk as a whole, rather than continue to improvise it when wanting to express the thought. It is with this in mind that Schmitt and Carter (2004), Nation (2001), Lewis (2002) and others, make the observation that prefabricated linguistic material is the basis of fluent language use.

## **The cognitive element**

The cognitive element involves automatizing receptive and productive retrieval as well as strengthening associations within the boundaries of a single word and across words. McLaughlin's (1990) restructuring theory proposes that learned responses are the product of consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials. Nation (2001) explains that "restructuring occurs when learners reach a high degree of automatised through practice" (p. 337). Similarly, Ellis (2006) posits that each encounter serves to strengthen the association previously made, building a memory storage of concrete utterances. It is a familiar theme in usage-based theories of language acquisition where it is observed that, as children, we acquire language by means of exposure rather than explicit instruction.

Of importance here is the issue of reinforcement. While it may seem intuitively so that immediate reinforcement is the most desirable circumstance for learning, situations that distribute reencounters over time are noted by Nation (2001) as leading to more secure learning when compared to those that focus on sporadic intensive exposure. A possible explanation lies in Baddeley's (1990) speculation that since long-term learning depends on physical changes in the brain, spacing repetition allows time for rest and regeneration.

## **The interactional element**

The interactional element comprehends the dynamics involved in collaborative acts of building meaning with others as, for example, when negotiating a resolution, progressing towards a goal, reaching a compromise, or simply sharing information. Hedge (2000) explains that "the ability to respond coherently within the turns of conversation, to link the words and

phrases of questions, [...] and to do this quickly, [...] is what constitutes fluency” (p. 54). In particular, four skills are identified: the ability to act as collaborator, the ability to take the role of both listener and speaker, the ability to adjust to listener and situation, and the ability to indicate interest and understanding.

As mentioned earlier, there are specific sequential structures that determine the course and outcome of interaction and that influence, to a large extent, what one speaker can respond to another. In particular, adjacency pairs – that is, sequences of coupled actions – are most salient, taking the form of question-answer pairs, invitation-acceptance/refusal pairs, greeting-greeting pairs, and so on (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). When a speaker says something, a preferred response is expected not only in terms of content but also in terms of structure. For example, to reply to a greeting with a refusal is unexpected as greetings create a slot for the next person to fill with another greeting. To deviate from a preferred response signals that the conversation has taken an unexpected turn and that the exchange has special meaning. When this is not intended, as when a learner improvises a response that is unexpected, conversation can be brought to a halt.

### **The affective element**

The affective element encompasses a plethora of psychological factors that remind us, as Brown (2000) points out, that learners are not abstract entities but human beings with feelings about themselves and the people they come into contact with. Overlooking this elementary observation does not mend feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and inhibition in learners and can derail the interactive aspects of even a well-crafted instructional plan. The issue is further complicated by the language ego (Guiora et al., 1972), as learners engage in the process of developing new identities in the target

language. A learner's self-image may be strongly dependent on a mode of expression that relies on specific descriptors and semantic notions that cannot be transferred until a certain level of competency is achieved. It is evident that this process can be stressful.

When someone feels stress, there are definite, almost palpable, physical changes taking place. Schumann (1999) attributes the cognitive connections between affect and language learning to a particular section of the temporal lobes. Brown (2000) elaborates on this by explaining that when learners are required to respond in ways they perceive to be beyond their capabilities, their brains send signals to indicate that the stimulus is unpleasant, unmanageable, and a potential threat to self-esteem.

### **Assisting fluency development**

There are a number of pedagogical approaches – or, simply, techniques – designed to assist the development of fluency or some of its components.

The collection of insights and activities outlined by Nation (2001) can be informally summarized as doing a lot with little. That is, whatever amount of linguistic knowledge a learner has at a given time can be maximized via restructuring which, in turn, furthers along the process of automaticity. The idea is that learning new forms can burden and even impede the full use of already known vocabulary and grammatical features. It does not imply, however, that new knowledge is not desirable and that acquisition of, for example, new vocabulary should be interrupted. Rather, it is posited that these two activities, acquisition of new forms versus restructuring, deserve and can benefit from independent treatment. The proposition is that activities that assist the development of fluency should draw from already known vocabulary and grammatical forms, so that these structures



are further entrenched in the mind of the learner. Therefore, the content of activities should provide for combination and recombination of known lexical forms, contextualization and recontextualization, encounters and reencounters, etc. In this way, knowledge of known forms is deepened and continually reinforced. Additionally, tasks that impose different demands in terms of timing are favored, including those that are effectively designed around time constraints.

Since the amount of known vocabulary and grammatical forms is kept as steady as possible while targeting fluency, there is a preference for meaning-focused input and output. Nation (2001) points out that “meaning-focused input can best occur if learners are familiar with at least 95% of the running words in the input they are focusing on” (p. 2). Transparent, redundant, and heavily contextualized model input is, therefore, favored. Likewise, the stimulation of meaning-based output requires the design of activities that emphasize negotiation, cooperative planning, etc, in other words, communication. Breaking the flow of conversation with teacher-initiated corrections, explanations, or lecturing, forces students to watch the form their language takes, discouraging them from participating and distracting them from getting their message across.

Consequently, Nation (2001) proposes that fluency development requires activities where students speak and listen for at least several minutes. When performed in groups, rehearsal is especially suitable as it presents opportunity for practice of both skills. A concrete example is the pyramid procedure which involves learners preparing a talk individually, rehearsing it with a partner, practicing it in a small group, and then presenting it to the whole class.

The pedagogical approach proposed by Gass (1997) conceptualizes the development of fluency as revolving around input and interaction. Within

this framework, classroom tasks facilitate student awareness of target language forms and meanings as well as the discrepancies between what they themselves construct and the language they are confronted with. In other words, model input operates as a selective attention device which can increase the likelihood of input becoming intake. Thus, similar to Nation (2001) yet from a different perspective, restructuring is brought about by exposure to linguistic samples. Moreover, Gass (1997) proposes that correction take the form of example and use rather than metalinguistic explanation. In other words, if a learner says “I mistaked”, the teacher preference within this framework would be towards the selection of input and ensuing interaction that would expose the learner to “I made a mistake” rather than interruption of the exchange with an explanation regarding the correctness of either form. As Gass (1997) explains the theory hinges on the idea that “second language acquisition is shaped by the input one receives and by the interactions in which one engages” (p. 161).

In Gass’ (1997) framework, fluency building activities are task-based where task is defined as a “piece of work that must be completed and that involves oral exchange [...] between learners” (p. 152). Tasks begin with some kind of input, whether in the shape of a model reading or conversation, a topic or list of topics, or a hypothetical situation, etc. Following is the actual task operation where the learners engage in discussion in an attempt to produce an outcome such as an accomplishment, a resolution, a description, etc. Again, cooperation and negotiation among students is, therefore, singled out as means to assist fluency development.

Samuda’s (2001) pedagogical model rests on the premise that language processing capacities develop through contextualized use. As before, task-based learning is the preferred approach. In particular, two kinds of tasks are identified: knowledge-constructing tasks, on the one hand, and, language-

activating/fluency stretching tasks, on the other. The former are concerned with the establishment of new form-meaning connections. Of particular interest to this discussion, the latter are used primarily to activate, stretch, and refine interlanguage resources and processing capacities. The proposition is that activities should be designed so as to maximize opportunity for negotiation of meaning while at the same time taking advantage of learners' existing knowledge.

Samuda (2001) compares the role of the instructor to an advisor, chairperson, monitor, language guide, and facilitator. Task and teacher are essentially complementary, in that the task provides learners with opportunities for the formulation and negotiation of meaning while the teacher leads from behind, supporting students by providing assistance on demand. This support can take the form of getting the task going and, for example, rescuing it from stalling if necessary. Additionally, the support of the teacher ensures not only that the task stays on course without excessive deviation but that instructional targets of special relevance are properly emphasized and dealt with.

There are a number of methods that address specific levels of linguistic structure worth mentioning due to their potential application to overall fluency development. In particular, methods that target pronunciation, such as those presented in Morley (1999), Kjellin (1999), and Fraser (1999), are especially interesting because of their wide range of application. Briefly, Kjellin's (1999) perceptual processing model, a prosody-based method inspired by research in the fields of perception physiology and first language acquisition, proposes a three-step training structure: model, rehearsal, production. Morley's (1999) pedagogical approach is founded on the idea that pronunciation is an integral part of communicative competence and proposes that instruction should incorporate three modes of practice:

controlled, rehearsed, and extemporaneous. Last, Fraser's (1999) critical listening approach emphasizes the cognitive element and the importance of instruction and practice in meaningful communication contexts, proposing a training process that includes: model, negotiation, interaction, reflection, and performance. All three methods identify the need for a model to serve as input and all three methods use this input as source material for subsequent tasks. These can take the form of negotiation, discovery, interaction, and/or rehearsal depending on the method.

### **Assisting fluency development: The elements**

Having identified the elements of fluency and having described several pedagogical approaches that assist the development of fluency, we move on to see how the techniques available serve the linguistic, the cognitive, the interactional, and the affective.

The linguistic element of fluency is possibly the least problematic. High frequency words, common collocates, and grammatical frames, are the basics from which to design materials that assist fluency development. Models should distribute these in different contexts so that existing knowledge is strengthened and collocational knowledge is deepened through the establishment of new relationships. Fortunately, frequency lists are numerous and easy to obtain. Examples are the General Service List (West, 1953), the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), the JACET 8000 (大学英語教育学会の基本語改訂委員会), BNC-based lists, and so on. Freely available profiling tools such as BVProfiler (<http://www.nufs.ac.jp/~gilner/profiler.html>), Range (<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation/nation.aspx>), JACET 8000 Level Marker (<http://www01.tcp-ip.or.jp/~shin/J8LevelMarker/j8lm.cgi>), and VocabProfiler (<http://www.lexutor.ca/>), make the process of profiling instructional materials based on predefined wordlists a manageable

undertaking.

Taking heed of Nation's (2001) observation, the number of unknown words and structures should also be kept to a minimum if the desire is to allow students to focus on restructuring that facilitates internalization and automaticity. Naturally, if first year university students knew the most common 2,000 word families, they would be able to understand and produce 95% of the speech of fluent speakers and this is clearly not the case.

Evaluating the amount of high frequency vocabulary that is actually known can be accomplished via analysis of student productions and vocabulary levels tests. Informal assessment and monitoring of student productions over the last 10 years provide anecdotal evidence of a general lexical profile of Japanese students entering university. Briefly stated, this student population tends to exhibit a slope of familiarity that starts with relatively solid knowledge for the 500 most frequent words, often receptive versus productive for the following 500 words, and spotty knowledge beyond the 1,000 most frequent words. All in all, therefore, vocabulary targets can be effectively identified. Similarly, collocations and frames that arise from known vocabulary should be accessible to students provided that the resulting combination is not far fetched. For instance, the phrase "dragon's breath" is obviously inappropriate no matter how lyrical and evocative while the phrase "take a deep breath" is common, useful, and relatively transparent in meaning.

Assuming a given group of learners with little or no exposure to the phrase "take a deep breath" and assuming that the individual words are known to them, according to Gass (1997), the presentation of the phrase may serve as a correction of an improvised form that the learners constructed on their own, and, according to Nation (2001) and McLaughlin (1990), as input to guide the restructuring of their own knowledge of the individual

words to include this particular collocational information.

The cognitive element is addressed by a number of the techniques previously outlined, each offering a perspective depending on which understanding of learning and targets a pedagogical approach adopts. Nation (2006), for example, seeks to deepen learners' word and form knowledge by means of chunking, proposing meaning-based activities and highlighting the importance of timing. Students are challenged to produce faster than they normally would in the course of training. As stated earlier, a preference for known vocabulary and forms allows learners to focus their efforts on restructuring and automaticity. As mentioned, Gass (1997) posits that noticing gaps in understanding leads to learning and proposes interactive task-based activities that provide opportunity for discovery and that rely on self-awareness. Cooperation and negotiation towards an outcome are, therefore, meant to reveal discrepancies in learner understanding. Samuda (2001) proposes that interlanguage resources and processing capacities are the foundation for future learning, in general, and the development of fluency, in particular. Thus, contextualized use of existing knowledge in activities that stretch the existing fluency level are favored. In line with Gass (1997), Samuda (2001) identifies task-based activities as most suitable, going a step further and detailing the role of the teacher as facilitator. Last, Morley (1999), Kjellin (1999), and Fraser (1999) propose learner active engagement with the model, as in controlled practice, and with learner produced material, as in planning and rehearsal.

It is possible to see a common trend. Assisting fluency in terms of the cognitive element entails the implementation of activities in which the learner is listener and speaker in the context of collaboration rather than listening to a lecture and answering isolated questions when prompted. Negotiation, planning, rehearsal, etc, are particularly beneficial collabora-

tive activities.

The interactional element is embedded into all pedagogical approaches presented. That is, it is considered to be necessary as a medium for the linguistic element as well as the cognitive element. The interactional element, therefore, benefits from many of the activities presented so far, yet none explicitly addresses the development of skills required to effectively manage interaction. The implication seems to be that learners can, on their own, learn to adopt the role of speaker and listener, act as collaborator, adjust to listener and situation, indicate interest and understanding, and so on. While this is true, to some extent, it would also be beneficial to identify concrete factors with which to aid the process. Conversational analysis provides some of the relevant concepts such as turn-taking strategies, topic management, adjacency pairs, openings and closings, sharing the floor, etc. Therefore, it would be interesting if the models used for input and instruction were to implement and utilize some of these structures.

The affective element is perhaps the most complex to address. Of course, as Kjellin (1999) proposes, students should be encouraged to participate as well as be reassured, empowered, put at ease, etc. Morley (1999) speaks of establishing positive affective involvement on the part of the learner by, for example, shifting the responsibility of learning from teacher to student via self-monitoring. The list goes on and the theme is clear, it is up to the teacher to behave in a manner that reveals a certain disposition so that learners can overcome inhibition, stress, fear, discomfort, insecurity, etc, and pursue interaction to their full potential without psychological blocks. It makes intuitive sense.

Complementing teacher disposition, the structure of an activity can also be employed to assist positive affective involvement. Since promoting language development is the ultimate objective, Gass' (1997) mention of

surreptitious instruction provides an interesting and useful conceptualization of a common occurrence. The insight, in essence, is that while learners engage, discuss, negotiate, etc, in order to accomplish an outcome, they are focusing on meaning and the target instead of on the language practice they are engaged in. Elaborating on this notion, overt tasks that appear manageable to learners can reduce stress and frustration as learners perceive themselves as immediately successful. If the goal of an entire instructional session is known and perceived as manageable, learners can relax and rely on previous successes from the go. A balance is achieved by including covert activities that learners may not be aware of but are, nonetheless, required to engage in.

### **Putting it into practice**

What follows is a concrete example of an instructional design that targets the elements of fluency described above. The example is based on a combination of certain aspects of the activities and methods previously presented and a desire to maximize simplicity of implementation. Specifically, it is a meaning-focused task-based approach with a simple and straight-forward structure. The procedure starts with model conversations that students participate in which is then followed by a task where students work in small groups to produce an original conversation of their own and culminates in an enactment for the whole class.

By their very nature, the model conversations need to reflect the structure and dynamics of the conversation that the students will be charged with producing. The example presented in Figure 1 was designed with four participants in mind (three students + instructor) and gives each participant a chance to interact on equal footing and with equal number of turns. That is, the model is intentionally balanced and does not discriminate against a



participant or allow any two of them to dominate the exchange.

A: So what do you guys want to do tonight?  
B: What about going to see a movie at the new cinema?  
C: I don't really feel like a movie.  
D: How about karaoke?

A: Not a bad idea.  
B: I'm not really in the mood for karaoke.  
C: Why don't we go have dinner and listen to some music at the Pub?  
D: Sounds good to me.

A: Me, too.  
B: Hey, what if we eat at the Italian restaurant that just opened next to the Pub?  
C: Yeah, I heard they have a cheap pizza and drink bar set.  
D: Let's do it.

Figure 1. Sample model conversation (as given to the students)

Although more difficult to design, the desire for simplicity of implementation makes sequential ordering of turns the most suitable approach. This is so because role rotation is much harder to do if the conversation jumps around. Rotation is important for, at least, three reasons: first, it allows students to hear the instructor read each and every line, providing pronunciation clues as well as prosodic information that delineates prefabricated linguistic boundaries; second, students have several opportunities to discover on their own the formulaic language used throughout the models; last, as only the group reading the conversation has the script, it gives the rest of the class several chances to understand its intention and content.

As the entire class is divided into (3 + 1) groups, each with its own model conversation, participation in this part of the session is guaranteed

for all students. Furthermore, as the reading is not interrupted with correction and there are no explicit demands other than reading a line in turn, students are allowed to be immediately successful. This success is aided by content that is not outside their level of competency and sets the tone for the rest of the session.

Of relevance, the model input is not received passively via, for example, a recording. Rather, students have a chance to participate in the model by adopting the role of a person giving and receiving advice, by adopting the role of a person agreeing and disagreeing, etc, in other words, by interacting at the appropriate time with the appropriate response. If, in the past, a student has been confronted with a question such as “What about going to see a movie?”, he or she may have had to improvise, perhaps only being able to reply with a “yes” or “no”, responding in a way that is perceived as somewhat abrupt by fluent speakers. The interaction with the model allows the student to do what a fluent speaker would do, namely, respond in a manner that conforms to expectations in a stress-free situation where all he or she has to do is to read a line. Consider that, at some point in the future, the student may become fluent and when faced with the same question will reply the way a fluent speaker does, that is, with a “I don’t really feel like a movie” if that is what he or she wants to convey. Again, the model conversation makes this possible by giving each student the chance to adopt the role of someone that knows what to say and when to say it, that is, by giving each student the chance to adopt the role of a fluent speaker.

Thus, the first task is overtly simple for students. The content of the model conversations is faithful to Nation’s (2001, 2006) vocabulary requirements, and contains the kind of structures identified by Lewis (2002), Schmitt and Carter (2004), and Hedge (2000). It also provides comprehensible input

as suggested by Gass (1997), Kjellin (1999), Morley (1999), and Fraser (1999) while giving students practice in listening and speaking for several minutes as suggested by Nation (2001).

Figure 2 illustrates the features of interest. The conversation is composed of words with which students are likely to be familiar, as indicated by the subscripts corresponding to the frequency of occurrence of each word in the language at large. As shown, most words in the conversation are among the 500 most frequent words in English. The conversation illustrates conventional means of opening and closing casual conversations (up and down facing-perpendicular diamond). Each utterance contains common collocations and chunks (underlined) and/or productive frames (connected

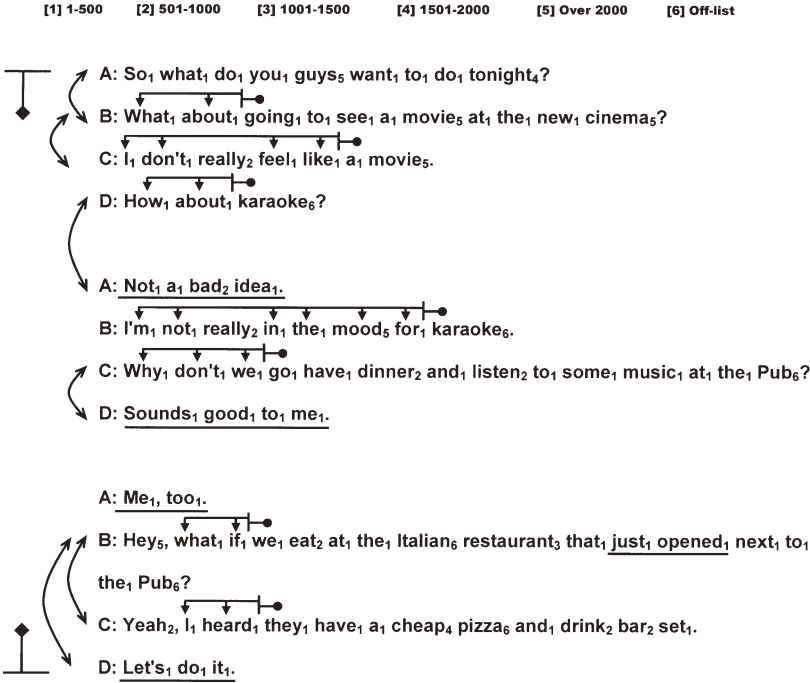


Figure 2. Sample model conversation highlighting features of interest

arrows above the text) that typify daily conversation while at the same time illustrating a range of expected responses (left-margin arrows). Multiple readings/listenings present opportunity for deepening word knowledge, increasing familiarity with prosodic patterns, and developing flexibility in the roles of speaker and listener.

Having concluded the first activity, students get to work in small groups to create an original conversation of their own. As explained earlier, the task-based nature of this activity emphasizes the pursuit of a manageable goal. In order to accomplish it, however, students must negotiate, plan, and anticipate. In other words, they have to use and practice with the language, elaborating and revising their work. Negotiation takes place as students discuss and reach an agreement regarding the topic of the conversation they want to put together. In the course of preparing the conversation, planning and anticipation come into play as students propose and consider a range of possible scenarios. Following, elaboration and revision occur as students draft, evaluate, and amend their work in preparation for the enactment. Rounding off the task, rehearsals receive different levels of attention depending on the instructor's approach and teaching style.

Thus, the second task is also manageable and achievable. Again, the rationale comes from a number of the approaches previously discussed. Oral exchange is necessary to carry out the task, as proposed by Gass (1997), as is collaboration in order to produce an outcome. From Nation (2001), the emphasis is on negotiation and cooperative planning as well as the repetition brought about by rehearsal. Revisiting Samuda (2001), this task allows students to stretch their fluency level by recycling known vocabulary and other interlanguage resources.

The class comes together one last time for the third task, the enactment. Having worked on the conversation (suggested time approximately

30 minutes), students are quite familiar with its content and delivery. The rehearsal process has allowed them to practice with sound patterns and prosodic information following the instructor's readings or advice. This process can be taken further and include memorization, gestures, and even props so that the end result is more like a performance. The enactment task encourages group cohesion and allows students to learn from and about each other.

In this manner, the third task is well within the capacity of students and, again, ensures everyone's participation. The entire procedure, from the first to the third task, is somewhat cyclical as students engage in listening and speaking practice, first with model conversations devised by the instructor and, last, with (what have become) models manufactured by the students themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Fluent language use is dependent upon an array of factors. The conceptualization adapted for this discussion has described fluency in terms of some of its linguistic, cognitive, interactional, and affective attributes. In breaking down the construct of fluency into these elements, we have been able to identify concrete aspects to target with instruction. A survey of the literature on fluency building techniques and pronunciation instruction has served to highlight certain activities and approaches that seek to increase fluency by activating and expanding learners' previous experiences and knowledge. Arising from the techniques offered in the literature, a simple instructional procedure has been detailed, providing an example of how meaning-focused task-based activities can deliberately and thoughtfully assist the development of fluency in speech, in listening, in processing, in thought, and in interaction.

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