

# Examining Planning for the 3/2/1 Minutes Fluency Activity for Students with Low Proficiency

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is a reflection of examining students' attitudes toward 3/2/1 fluency tasks and pre-task planning. To help students develop oral fluency, 3/2/1 fluency tasks are widely used in the EDC curriculum. However, 3/2/1-minute activities are not always easy for some students. In order to help them feel more confident prior to the speaking task, I implemented pre-task planning. I observed and took notes on students' behavior during the planning time and during the fluency tasks. The participants were from the lowest level (level 4). The observation shows insight about how students do different type of planning. Future suggestions on how to implement pre-task planning for low-level learners will be discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the main course objectives for EDC courses is that students will be able to become a fluent speaker of English. To achieve this goal, a 3/2/1 activity is implemented in the unified curriculum. In the 3/2/1 activity, students form pairs with a classmate. One of the partners is designated as a speaker, and the other one is assigned as a listener. The speaker narrates the same topic to different partners at intervals of three minutes, two minutes and one minute. Because of time pressure and task repetition, the students are expected to express their ideas more fluently and efficiently (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011). Therefore, learners are able to have proceduralization during the tasks (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011).

However, this simple task can prove to be a challenging for some learners. In my class, students are expected to listen to their partners quietly without any follow-up questions and comments, which often makes speakers feel pressure that they need to speak continuously. Speakers talk about two given topics within the allotted time. In the first semester, I observed a few students who were struggling with speaking fluently during the 3/2/1 minute tasks. These students had a lot of pauses, they could not come up with the right vocabulary, or they finished speaking about the given topics too early. I observed that their disfluency was more salient during the first three minutes. In particular, students in the lowest level class (level 4) were more likely to have pauses and repetition of speech compared to students in the advanced level classes. To help students in the lowest-level classes develop their oral fluency, I wanted to explore more effective ways to assist students increase their fluency and self-confidence toward the speaking tasks.

To solve the problems mentioned above, I decided to implement pre-task planning prior to the 3/2/1 fluency task. Many researchers have investigated the effectiveness of pre-task planning and have suggested that it is useful to improve learners' oral fluency and complexity (Ortega 1999, Foster & Skehan, 1996; Kawauchi, 2005; Mehnert, 1998). In this project, three different types of pre-task planning were implemented. Individual brainstorming was introduced first. In this type of planning, students were instructed to brainstorm whatever they wanted to talk about. The second type of planning was pair-work. For this type of planning, students could ask follow-up questions with each other. Teacher-led planning was the third type of planning where a model passage was provided to the students. Each week, students used a different type of planning prior to the 3/2/1 minute task.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Students' initial behaviors**

The reasons why I have been interested in exploring this topic is because quite a few students in the first semester could not continue speaking for three minutes during the 3/2/1 minute activity. In particular, I could observe this trend more often in the lower level classes. It seemed that higher level learners could somehow manage to accomplish the fluency task with on-line planning, in which they could plan and talk at the same time. On the other hand, lower level learners encountered problems such as long pauses, frequent repetition, and false starts. When the disfluency happened to the lower level students in the first semester, I chose to make the future less challenging. For example, I allowed listeners to ask speakers follow-up questions. Instead of a full 3/2/1 minute activity, I sometimes implemented a 2/1.5/1 minute activity. These solutions were successful to certain extent as they kept speakers engage in the talk with external assistance (e.g., time and follow-up questions). However, I realized the main reason why the lower level learners accomplished the task was due to minimization of the speakers' time, not through their own improvement. After I had conferred with the program managers in the first semester about how I could complete the full 3/2/1 minute task, I realized the importance of including the full 3/2/1 minute activity.

In the second semester, I really wanted to help lower level students improve their fluency and to feel self-efficacy about their fluency. Therefore, I decided to seek some pre-task planning activities to enable learners to improve fluency.

### **Students in the lower level class**

The lowest level class (level 4) was selected for observation. The students in the class were from the College of Arts, majoring in history or education. The class consisted of eight students (three male students and five female students). Their language proficiency was lower intermediate. It seemed that students did not have confidence in their English. Compared to other classes, the students in this class have low proficiency, lack of vocabulary and lack of confidence in speaking English. I thought observing this class would be beneficial and meaningful to understand further about their reactions toward the 3/2/1 minute fluency tasks and planning.

### **Pre-task planning**

I started implementing the pre-task planning from Week 2 in the second semester so that the students could be exposed to the different types of planning. Each week, the students used a different type of planning before the 3/2/1 minute fluency tasks. Because I already knew what I wanted to explore before the semester, I decided to start implementing the pre-task planning from Week 2. The students engaged in the following different types of planning:

No planning. Students started a three-minute fluency task without any planning. I showed the task questions right before they started the 3/2/1 minute activity. Therefore, I observed that some students were not ready for the fluency activity without planning. For example, I noticed that some students needed to reread the questions and took longer to comprehend the questions before starting speaking. This caused a false start in some situations. In addition, some students finished the two given topics earlier than the allotted time. It appeared that students had not generated enough ideas, which led them to repeat the same content over and over.

Brainstorming. Students were given a handout to write down their ideas (Appendix A). The planning time was four minutes. They were instructed to use the boxes on the handouts as they wished. In addition, they were allowed to add more boxes if they felt it was necessary. Most of the students were able to write down as many ideas as they could. Students usually finished brainstorming both for the given topics within the allotted time. After they brainstormed, I

collected their brainstorming papers so that they did not have access while they talk during the 3/2/1 minute tasks. Overall, they talked about the ideas they have written on the handout. In a few instances, I observed that a student could not write down ideas quickly. The student ended up brainstorming only one topic out of the two given topics. When that happened, the student paused longer during the actual fluency tasks since they insufficiently brainstormed enough for the second topic. After they brainstormed, I collected their brainstorming papers so that they did not have access while they talk during the 3/2/1 minute tasks. Overall, they talked about the ideas they have written on the handout. However, students sometimes forgot what they wrote, which made them pause longer than usual.

**Pair work.** Students were given an instruction paper to work with a partner (Appendix B). They were given four minutes to ask each other questions related to the topics. For example, a student explained his or her ideas to a partner (e.g., “In my opinion, studying English is important for me”). The partner was instructed to ask as many follow-up questions as possible related to their partner’s opinion (e.g., “Do you like English? / Have you been to an English conversation school?”). The difference between a pair work planning and the actual fluency task is whether or not the students asked questions. During the actual 3/2/1 minute tasks, the speakers narrated monologues. This pair-work planning could function not only as a rehearsal but also it could elicit some necessary information. I observed that listeners enjoyed pair-work planning by asking many each other as many questions as possible. However, one problem of this pair-work planning was that students could not finish both topics during planning. Sometimes, students asked too many questions about the first topic and they could not progress to the second topic. Another problem was the equal amount of speaking. Although a pair was given four minutes for this pair-work, it did not guarantee that each pair could equally divide speaking time. In spite of these issues, students were engaged in this planning to elicit more information from each partner.

**Teacher-led.** Students were given a teacher-model passage (Appendix C). While I read this passage aloud, students followed the passage on the handout. The primary aim was to provide students the ideal structure for their task performance with examples and experiences and also accuracy. I observed that during the actual fluency task, some students shared a similar opinion that I read from the teacher-model passage. On the other hand, one student reported that this planning was difficult because she could not follow the given passage to understand fully.

### **Observed changes**

Based on my observations, the students performed slightly better when they had a pre-task planning conditions compared to non-planning conditions. For example, students had fewer pauses and appeared to organize their speech slightly better by using more examples and their experiences. Without planning, students sometimes listed ideas but did not provide support with the reasons or other examples. At the beginning of the semester, it seemed hard for them to continue speaking all by themselves. As the semester progressed, they gradually seemed to gain confidence to accomplish a speaking task within the first three minutes. More and more students were trying to use examples or experiences to support their ideas during the fluency task so that they could have longer sentences. Because listeners could not interrupt the speakers, speakers needed to utilize some strategies about how to continue speaking.

Some of the students in this class stated that they appreciated the planning activity. For example, if the topic was unfamiliar, it was a good way to organize about what they wanted to say. One female student reported that the 3/2/1 minute task was the hardest activity throughout the 90-minute class. However, as time went by, she became used to speaking in the monologic tasks. I realized that I have been thinking that the 3/2/1 minute is a valuable warm up activity, but for some learners in the lower level class, it is such a challenging activity for them.

The students seemed to gain more confidence when they were placed in planning conditions, compared to being placed in non-planning conditions. When there was no planning, they said “Oh, no planning today?” and showed their disappointment. Pre-task planning helped them to comprehend what they were expected to talk about more fully. While they planned, one of the students asked for my assistance to understand the topic question. She said she misunderstood the meaning of the question. She said that planning time was necessary for her. Therefore, with planning, it seemed beneficial for lower level students to have more readiness and self-efficacy toward the topic.

## CONCLUSION

Based on my observations, I would suggest the following pedagogical points for low-level learners and possible research questions. First, as challenging as they appear, full 3/2/1 minute monologic tasks can be beneficial, in which the listeners are expected to listen quietly during the tasks. A three-minute speaking time seems very long for low-level learners. However, as time went by, students were gradually increased the duration of the speaking time without pauses. The flexibility of adapting this activity is dependent upon on the students’ needs. I heard that some instructors use this type of activity to provide practice towards listeners’ reactions and follow-up questions. Possibly, future research could investigate learners’ oral performances during the 3/2/1 task, comparing monologue tasks or interactive tasks.

Second, planning helps students with low-proficiency to have readiness prior to a fluency activity. As I observed, the students were not always ready for the speaking tasks without planning. For example, without planning, they invested too much time, focusing on what they would talk about, which caused false starts. In addition, students could better prepared for the task by using the pre-task planning time to comprehend the fluency topics.

Third, topics can be adapted based on students’ needs. Sometimes, students struggled with topics that were unfamiliar to them. To solve this problem, students’ needs should be taken into consideration. Ideally, by previewing the fluency questions in advance (e.g., a week before), teachers can understand the degree to which students are familiar with topics based on their students’ reactions. This will allow teachers to modify a topic question as necessary. Students could also choose from a list of familiar topics in order to speak more confidently (e.g., “If you don’t watch foreign movies, you can tell about foreign music or foreign food”).

This semester, I tried to include full 3/2/1 minute fluency tasks in each class regardless of the schedule. I was surprised that a student mentioned that it was the hardest activity throughout the 90-minute class. At the same time, I thought, as an instructor, I wanted to make the most use of this activity to help improve the students’ proficiency. The 3/2/1 minute activity is not merely a great activity for a warm up; it can be useful to help students gain fluency and to improve their metacognitive skills about how to be a more fluent speaker of English.

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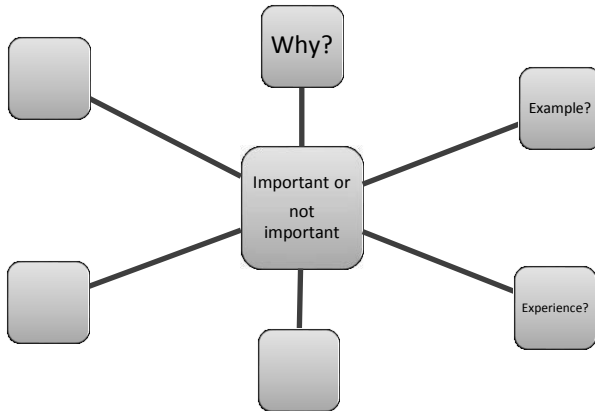
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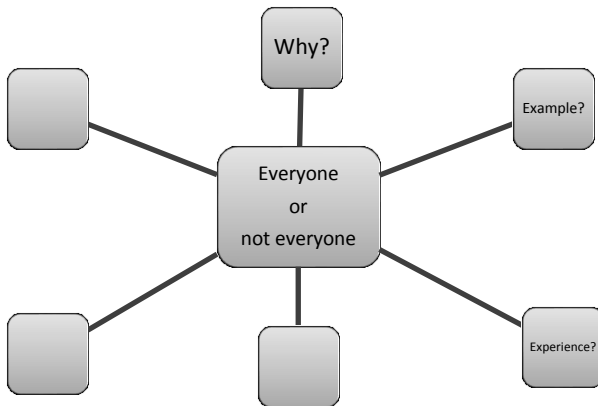
## APPENDIX A

### Brainstorming planning

Topic 1: Is it important for you to learn English?



Topic 2: Do you think everyone in Japan need to study English?



## APPENDIX B

### Pair work planning

Topic 1: Is it important for you to learn English?

- Why?
- For example?
- Experiences?
- Other questions?

Topic 2: Do you think everyone in Japan need to study English?

- Why?
- For example?
- Experiences?
- Other questions?

## APPENDIX C

### Teacher-led planning

Topic: Is it important for you to study English?

- I think (I don't think) it is important for me to study English. One reason is I want to travel to an English speaking country. For example, I want to visit Hawaii. I have some friends living in Hawaii, so I want to go there and talk to my friends in English. They are Japanese but they were born in Hawaii. They cannot understand Japanese. Another reason is that I want to use English for my job in the future. For example, I want to work at a big company such as Toyota or ANA in the future. I think we need to use English to communicate with other workers from different countries. So, I want to study English for my future career. For example, I can improve my English by studying TOEIC. TOEIC is very useful when I get a job. Many companies need employers to have higher TOEIC scores. If I have higher TOEIC scores, I might work abroad such as New York or London. I really want to work abroad in the future.

2) Do you think everyone in Japan should study English?

- I think everyone should study English in Japan. One reason is internationalization. For example, in Tokyo, we have many tourists from different countries. If we want to have more tourists, everyone should study English. Another example is that Tokyo Olympics is coming in 2020. I am very excited to have many athletes from all over the world. But, I am worried because not many Japanese people can speak English. If many foreign tourists

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want to ask you in English, they might not be able to communicate very well. So, I think everyone should study from elementary school children and older people to study English. I think if you can speak English, you can have more friends. That's a wonderful thing.

- I think (NOT everyone) should study English. For example, elementary school children need to focus on other subjects such as Japanese or Kanji. Also, even university students can choose to study English. For example, my friend major in art. In my opinion, studying art does not really need English. If you really want to use English for your job or for your future, you can study English.