Improving Student Engagement with 3/2/1 Fluency Activities
Chris Whiffin

ABSTRACT
This paper looks at methods for improving student engagement with a 3/2/1 fluency activity for a single class that had shown an early lack of such engagement. Several reasons for the lack of this engagement are proposed. These are poor activity management, lack of student awareness of activity goals, and inadequate levels of preparation. Over the course of a semester, a series of interventions were planned and implemented with the intention of tackling each of these postulated reasons for lack of engagement. Observations on the results of these interventions were catalogued in a teaching journal. The results suggest that preparation may be key to helping students engage more effectively, in particular by moving the fluency activity to the end of the lesson instead of the beginning where it usually occurs.

INTRODUCTION
English Discussion Class (EDC) is one of several compulsory classes for first year students at Rikkyo University. It is a 90-minute class that meets once a week for 14 weeks. At the beginning of these discussion classes, after a brief quiz based on homework reading, students are required to complete an activity designed to increase fluency (Hurling, 2012). This activity is a slightly modified version of the 4/3/2 activity developed by Maurice (1983). In this activity, students are paired as speakers and listeners. At first, the speaker talks on a topic for four minutes and their partner listens. After four minutes, the speaker swaps to a new listening partner and repeats their talk in three minutes. Finally, the speaker swaps to a third listening partner and repeats their information in just two minutes. Speaker and listener roles are then reversed. In EDC this activity is slightly shortened so that the speaker talks for three minutes, then two, then one. Also, rather than having a single topic to speak on, students are generally given two to three question prompts to respond to. Additionally, listeners are often allowed to ask questions during the initial three minute round in order to assist the speaker in generating content.

According to Nation and Newton (2009), fluency activities such as these are effective because they are meaning-focused, experience tasks that encourage learners to perform at a higher than normal level. In the case of the 3/2/1 activity, this is achieved through the swapping of partners that allows the speaker to concentrate on authentically communicating their message, whilst having the speakers generate their own content, ensures that all language falls within their previous experience. The reducing time limit also places pressure on students to speak faster and with less hesitation than they normally would.

In order for the activity to be effective, speakers must speak for a full three minutes during the first stage to be able to have enough content to repeat whilst feeling time pressure in subsequent stages. They must also respect the time pressure aspect of the activity and genuinely attempt to repeat their entire message during the ever-shortening stages.

Whilst observing a video of one of my classes taken during lesson 3 of the fall semester, I noticed that several students were not engaging with the fluency activity in what could be considered a serious manner. Their behavior during the activity involved long periods of silence punctuated by intermittent L1 chatter and the occasional use of brief English sentences. This behavior continued through all three stages of the activity. As such, it could be said that the students were receiving no benefits from the activity, certainly not in terms of fluency gains. I resolved to attempt to increase student engagement with this part of the lesson over the following weeks.

The class itself consisted of nine Level III students. For EDC, students are split into four proficiency levels by TOEIC score, Level I being the highest and Level IV the lowest. Level III includes students with a combined TOEIC score of 280 to 479. The students in this particular class all had similar TOEIC scores of between 355 and 375, yet showed a remarkable variation in their performance in the fluency activity, with some students responding seriously to the demands of the activity whilst others did not.

Murphy (2014) tells us that reflective language teaching can help teachers to examine and change what is happening in the classroom through three different dimensions: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action refers to the minute-to-minute decisions a teacher makes in the classroom, whilst reflection-on-action is that reflection which comes after a lesson is finished when a teacher has time to consider what has occurred. Reflection-for-action involves the development of action plans for future lessons, supported by insights gained from the previous two dimensions.

One method of engaging in reflective language teaching is through the keeping of a teaching journal. Farrell (2007) tells us that teaching journals can be used as a "problem-solving device" (p. 108) in which teachers can "set goals for remedying problems" (p. 109) as well as helping teachers to step back and recognize patterns in their classroom that they may otherwise be unaware of.

As such, I decided to keep a teaching journal for the remainder of the semester as I attempted several interventions intended to improve student engagement with the fluency activity. In this paper, I will discuss those interventions along with their results and my reflections upon them.

DISCUSSION

As noted above, student engagement in the fluency activity during Lesson 3 was less than satisfactory. I initially speculated that there may be several reasons behind this unsatisfactory level of performance. Firstly, due to some aspect of activity management that I had not hitherto considered. Secondly, due to the possibility that students were not fully aware of the reasons for performing the fluency activity and therefore did not share the affective goals of the course (Hurling, 2012). Thirdly, I speculated that students may be suffering due to a lack or an inadequate amount of preparation. This was indicated by frequently low scores on the homework quiz, which is based on homework reading that thematically connects to the lesson contents, including the 3/2/1 fluency prompts. I decided to attempt interventions in the following weeks to address each of these possible causes and observe the results. Interventions began in Lesson 6 of the semester, as there was no fluency activity carried out during Lesson 5 due to testing.

During Lesson 6, I intended to address the first two of the postulated causes for the poor performance. Firstly, and simply, I started to refer to the 3/2/1 activity as a fluency activity, instead of a speaking activity as I had been doing previously. This was intended to begin to raise student awareness of why the activity is carried out each lesson.

The other aspect I attempted to address was activity management. Since there was an odd number of students in the class, I would typically join the activity as a listener during the first group of speakers' turns. This left me unable to effectively monitor most of the group during this round of the activity, removing what might otherwise be a motivating factor for students. Also, by allowing students to choose their own partners for the activity, it left open the possibility of two less motivated students from pairing up for the crucial initial three minute round during which speakers generate the message to be repeated and listeners assist with questions.

In order to ascertain whether this was one of the causes of the problematic behavior, I decided to start assigning students to particular groups. Since I was unable to properly monitor the

first group that spoke, I assigned what I perceived to be the weakest students to be listeners first so that I could monitor them when it was their turn to speak. This had a two-fold effect. First, as intended, I was able to fully monitor this group of students, and make students aware of my monitoring. This seemed to prevent them from using their L1, at the very least. However, a second, unintended outcome of this intervention was that the weaker students had the opportunity to listen to the speech of the stronger students, which effectively acted as a model for their own speaking turn. This helped to address the third postulated cause of poor performance, lack of preparation. As a result, student performance during this lesson was much improved with the weaker group able to produce more elaborated responses to the prompts based on the stronger students' models.

Unfortunately, not all students were present during Lesson 6, including the student who I perceived to be the weakest based on behavior during the observation video. As a result, during Lesson 7 I decided to continue with the same method in the hope of improved attendance. I also continued to build on the previous week's awareness raising aspect by explicitly stating that the purpose of the activity was to "improve our fluency" and that fluency means "speaking quickly, so let's practice speaking quickly!" Performance was improved as during the previous week, although several students struggled to fill the initial three minutes with ideas. The activity was also marred by the late arrival of several students.

During Lesson 8 I decided to administer a mini-quiz on the topic of fluency (see Appendix A) prior to the usual activity. This was intended to be the culmination of the awareness raising interventions from the previous lessons, with the aim of making students fully aware of the reasons and benefits behind the activity with the hope of them coming to share the affective goal of wishing to improve their own fluency. Surprisingly, despite previous efforts at awareness raising, almost half of the class did not know what fluency was and a majority of students did not know how to improve it. This quiz, then, represented a good opportunity to make explicit both of these factors and link them to the fluency activity.

In addition, prior to this week's activity I talked through the fluency questions and provided a brief model of each answer. This seemed to help students as many of them picked up on the ideas in my model answers. This represented a first step at addressing what I perceived was a lack of preparation on the part of students to answer the fluency questions. Previously, I had left a copy of the fluency questions on the students' desk prior to the lesson so that they could look at them if they arrived early or finished the homework quiz before the allotted time. However, I found many students did not make the most of this opportunity and often went into the fluency activity cold.

Unfortunately, once again the conducting of the fluency activity was negatively affected by the late arrival of students, with students arriving both during and after the activity. This undermined the interventions I was undertaking to improve student engagement. It occurred to me that the consistent late arrival of students may have been a deliberate attempt to avoid participation in the activity itself. Regardless, in an attempt to increase student numbers, I resolved to shift the fluency activity from the start of the lesson to the end during the next session.

At the beginning of Lesson 10, when the fluency activity would ordinarily have been conducted, there were only five students present. By moving the activity to the end of the lesson, student attendance was raised to seven. Once again, I made explicit the purpose of the activity prior to conducting it. Student performance during this fluency activity was substantially improved over all previous weeks, with even the weakest students able to talk for the full first three-minute phase. This was more remarkable given that I had found that other classes, even stronger ones, had struggled to speak for that length of time using the question prompts for Lesson 10. Doe & Hurling (2015) have investigated the effects of moving the fluency activity to the end of the class and found evidence to suggest that students benefited from such a move through increased

repetition of vocabulary from the preceding lesson's activities. This seems to have been the case during this particular lesson, with students able to re-use ideas from that lesson's discussions to help them speak for a full three minutes.

However, it should be noted that there are at least two potential drawbacks to moving the fluency activity to the end of the lesson. Firstly, the fluency activity is intended to prime students for the following discussions and not vice versa. By moving the fluency to the end of the lesson, the risk is that students will be less well prepared for the lesson's discussions. Secondly, the moving of the activity was initially intended to counter student lateness. By moving it to the end, the rest of the lesson's stages are all moved forward, meaning student lateness may disrupt more critical stages of the lesson such as the introduction of the lesson's target language.

During Lesson 10, the preceding discussion activities had appeared to act as an extended preparation for the fluency activity, with seemingly good results. As such, I determined to investigate further the possibly positive effects of preparation on students' performance. For Lesson 11, I returned the activity back to the start of the lesson but provided students with space beneath the question prompts in which to make notes prior to speaking. I gave them two minutes solo thinking time in which to do this. I monitored student behavior during this preparation time. I noticed that while stronger performing students made good use of the time and made as extensive notes as the time allowed, the weaker students in the group did not. They wrote very little, often just one-word answers, which reflected their spoken output during the activity itself. Conversely, the stronger students were able to speak for the full three minutes with relative ease.

These results were discouraging after the excellent performance in the previous week. I considered that perhaps simply providing students with space and telling them to make notes was not necessarily conducive to the generation of ideas. Ellis (2009) tells us that the greater the task structure, the greater the gains to fluency along with both complexity and accuracy of speech. Therefore, I decided during the following week's lesson to provide a more structured form for making notes (see Appendix B) in the hope that this would help to provide a possible model for the students' output. Given the more extensive nature of the notes to be made, this time I gave students three minutes to complete them. Once again, I monitored student behavior during this time. Unfortunately, the results were much the same as during the previous week. Stronger students made good use of the time, completing most parts of the form with extended answers, while the weaker students wrote only a few words for one or two of the prompts. This was again reflected in student performance during the activity, with stronger students having plenty to say during the activity and weaker students struggling to fill the time.

These results are disappointing, but as Ellis (2009) notes "it cannot be taken for granted that learners do actually plan […] when given time to do so" (p. 505). Ellis (2009) goes on to cite Tajima (2003) who found that only students who hold a positive attitude towards planning performed more fluently when given a chance to plan. This matches my own observations during the lessons in which students were given such an opportunity to plan. Students who made good use of the planning time showed apparent gains in fluency, whilst those who did not failed to do so, although it must be noted that no objective measure of fluency was made during these lessons.

CONCLUSION

One aspect highlighted through the course of these interventions is the fact that students may be unaware of the purpose of the fluency activity. Therefore, this should be made explicit to students as early as possible in the hope of encouraging them to see the benefit of engaging in the activity in a more whole-hearted fashion.

Another aspect is that of preparation. It appears that student performance in 3/2/1 fluency activities may be improved through certain kinds of preparation. Simply giving students time to

prepare by themselves prior to the activity had mixed results, with those students who made good use of planning time showing improved performance while those who did not showing none. However, two other forms of preparation had appeared inadvertently to have benefited weaker students. Firstly, making weaker students the listeners for the initial round of the activity gives them a chance to listen to stronger students model answers to the question prompts. Secondly, by moving the fluency activity to the end of the lesson students receive, in essence, an extended 70 minutes of preparation for the activity in which they have an opportunity to acquire vocabulary and ideas which they can repeat during the fluency activity. While both these methods appeared to have benefited students' performance, the second of these was perhaps the most beneficial. This should be balanced against the fact that the first method is a simpler and less disruptive method of improving student performance.

This raises the question of what the potential negative effects of moving the fluency activity to the end of the lesson are. Perhaps there may be some impact on students' ability to hold extended discussions on lesson topics, given the absence of the priming fluency activity. As Doe and Hurling (2015) suggest, more research may also need to be carried out to determine in a quantitative manner whether there are any real benefits to fluency from a lesson final fluency activity over a lesson initial one.

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APPENDIX A – Fluency mini-quiz

1. What is fluency?

    a. The ability to speak English quickly and smoothly.

    b. The ability to speak English without making mistakes.

2. How can we improve our English fluency?

    a. Practice speaking English quicker and quicker.

    b. Say one or two sentences then stop talking.

APPENDIX B – Lesson 12 fluency prompts plus notes

1. Is your hometown a safe place to live?

    My hometown is _____.

    I would say it is/isn't a safe place to live. (circle)

    It's mainly because _____.

2. Is there a lot of crime in Japan?

    I would say there is/isn't a lot of crime in Japan.

    One reason is _____.

    Another reason is _____.

3. Is there a lot of crime in other countries?

    I would say there is/isn't a lot of crime in other countries.

    One reason is _____.

    Another reason is _____.