

Increasing Student Participation in 3/2/1 Fluency Activities

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ABSTRACT

Full participation in the 3/2/1 fluency activity, which is modified from Maurice's (1983) 4/3/2, may be challenging for low-level students. Pre-task discussion and planning may increase low level student participation in the 3/2/1 fluency activity. It is important for instructors to consider each class separately and take into account the students' ability levels and general preparedness for each class when planning the fluency activity for each lesson. By taking class time to ensure student comprehension and readiness for the fluency activity, instructors may be able to help improve students' self-efficacy and motivation to participate more actively in classroom activities.

INTRODUCTION

In English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University, increasing student speaking fluency is one of the aims of the course (Hurling, 2012). A simple definition of fluency can be the rate at which a person speaks a language (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998). Fluency requires learners to use the target language in the same way that they use their mother tongue (Brumfit, 1984). Essentially, this means that any time the students are attempting to use the target language as they would their native language, they are using the target language fluently.

In the EDC program, the classes are divided into four levels. Level I is for students with the highest level of proficiency using English, whereas Level IV is for students who are the least proficient using English during placement assessment. Within that context, it is important to keep expectations of fluency relative to each level. For second language learners, speaking fluency should be viewed from the perspective of the learners' most effective use of the target language system at their current capabilities (Brumfit, 1984). To increase fluency, language learners must focus first on the message they are communicating. The students' task is to communicate their ideas as best they can, without concern for grammar. Nation & Newton (2009) state that fluency activities are important because they meaning-focused.

In a typical EDC lesson, a fluency activity adapted from Maurice's (1983) 4/3/2 activity is included in every lesson. Students speak for durations of three minutes, two minutes, and one minute while repeating the same information to a different partner for each decreasing amount of time. After three speaking turns are complete, the speakers and listeners switch roles. Nation's (2007) fluency strand mandates language production under pressure is necessary to increase learners' speed of production. Repetitive tasks have been shown to be effective ways to build fluency in second languages. DeKeyser's Skill Acquisition Theory (2007) states that automaticity of language production is ultimately accomplished through repeated practice of the language.

Because the 3/2/1 fluency activity is typically the first major activity of each lesson, it sets the tone as the students prepare to participate in the lesson. The level of the students' engagement and enthusiasm during the activity can have a positive or a negative effect on student participation in the following activities.

In the first semester of teaching EDC, I informally observed that students seemed to have difficulty generating content to fill the three minutes speaking time. In response, I created new materials for each lesson to help ensure that students would be able to speak for the full amount of time. As this became very time consuming, I consulted with some more senior instructors to see how they approached this activity. After hearing several different ways that instructors conducted the 3/2/1 activity in their classrooms, I chose to use a three question format that allowed the students to directly use the text book to help them generate content for the 3/2/1 fluency activity.

Throughout the fall semester I used the same three question format to conduct the 3/2/1 activity in each of my classes. I used the same three questions for each class regardless of their ability level. The first question was always the same each week: “From your homework reading what was interesting or surprising to you?” “Why?” The second and third questions were taken from various sections of the specific chapter in the course textbook that was being studied that week. By using the textbook reading and the textbook questions as the source for the 3/2/1 activity questions, I was able to cut down on my preparation time and keep the focus of the activity on the topic for each lesson. Through the first few weeks of the semester, I was generally pleased by the students’ performance during the 3/2/1 fluency activity.

At the end of each lesson, I would write on the board the homework for the following lesson. This included the next week’s reading and page numbers, as well as a reminder for the students to underline or circle something from the reading that was surprising or interesting for them (question 1). I also would remind the students to look at the various questions in the chapter and take some notes to prepare for the next lesson. Research has shown that giving learners time to plan their output before engaging in a task can enhance accuracy and fluency of production (Ellis, 2008). In theory, if all the students took these steps, they would be fully prepared to answer the questions in the 3/2/1 activity before the class began.

Throughout the semester I noticed that some students did indeed have handwritten notes in the margins of their textbooks to help prepare for the various class activities. However, this practice was not followed by all students. This pre-class preparation was often the critical difference in the students’ ability to perform well during 3/2/1 fluency exercise as well as other class activities later in the lesson.

Around the fourth week of the semester it became apparent that one class in particular was having much more difficulty performing the activity than any other class. Compared to my other classes, some students in this class would have long pauses while they were supposed to be speaking. Other students would finish speaking well before the allotted time expired and some would stare at the question card and not be able to give an answer at all. I became very curious why this particular class was the only one that was behaving this way on a regular basis.

The class in question was a Level IV class, which in the EDC program is the classification for the lowest English language ability level. Typical TOEIC scores for this level class are between 230-250 points. The students in this particular class all belonged to the College of Community and Human Services. I had another Level IV class in the same semester that was part of the College of Arts. The College of Arts students generally performed better than the College of Community and Human Services students despite having roughly the same TOEIC test scores. The College of Arts students would regularly speak for the required amount of time in the 3/2/1 fluency activity. They would also speak with fewer pauses between utterances compared to the students in the other Level IV class. It was rare that any of the College of Arts students would stop speaking in the middle of an activity.

DISCUSSION

I decided to keep a teaching journal for this Level IV class in order to determine what was causing them to generally have more difficulties performing the 3/2/1 fluency activity than other classes seemed to have. A teaching journal can be a useful tool for language instructors to reflect upon their classes and identify patterns in student behavior (Farrell, 2007). I felt it was important to try to help the students improve their performance for two reasons. First of all, I didn’t want the students to feel that the activity was a waste of their time. Secondly, I didn’t want the students’ frustration with their performance from the first activity to carry over into the following activities. I was concerned that decreased student morale from this activity would greatly inhibit learning in

the remainder of the lesson.

In the sixth lesson, half of the class was absent. Two of the attending students seemed unprepared for the 3/2/1 fluency activity despite the weekly reminders to do so as homework. The other two students spoke more and spoke longer than they had in previous classes.

In the seventh lesson, I asked the class very specific comprehension questions about some of the lessons' target vocabulary they would need to know to answer the fluency questions. The students' responses indicated that some of them did not fully understand the vocabulary for that day's lesson. I took extra time to explain what the question meant and give example answers to ensure everyone would be able to participate. I felt that the students' general performance for the lesson was better than in previous weeks due to the extra time spent discussing the questions to ensure student comprehension (Krashen, 1985).

At the start of the eighth lesson I was prepared to spend extra time to discuss the 3/2/1 fluency questions before the students began speaking. I used my tablet to show pictures to help with comprehension of the terms gender role and changing gender roles. I felt using visual aids cut down on my teacher talking time and it also allowed the students comprehend the ideas more quickly. It was my perception that the students had much less difficulty speaking for the full amount of time than in previous weeks.

The ninth lesson was a discussion test lesson. I did not use the 3/2/1 fluency activity as part of my lesson plan this week.

By the tenth lesson I planned to spend several minutes ensuring student comprehension of the fluency questions and necessary vocabulary before the students began speaking in the 3/2/1 fluency activity. Most of my other classes were having some difficulty with the vocabulary involved in this lesson. I wrote some lesson specific statistics on the chalk board and showed the students a picture to help them understand the key terms they needed for the lesson. Despite my explanation before the activity, most of the students were unable to correctly use the vocabulary in this lesson. Despite this, I thought that the students had indeed improved their speaking time this lesson because many students were still speaking when the time limit expired for each portion of the activity.

In lesson eleven I devoted extra time for comprehension checks and provided examples before we began the student speaking portion of the activity. While student speaking time was good overall as a class, I noted speaking performance changes of two students in particular. One student, who had increased his rate of speech in the previous few lessons, had regressed into long pauses between utterances. I thought this student had finally overcome this behavior which was typical at the beginning of the semester. This student's regression served as a reminder that progress includes setbacks. In contrast, a different student spoke more than in previous lessons, which was encouraging.

Lesson twelve was a review lesson and lesson thirteen was a test. Neither of these lessons included a 3/2/1 fluency activity.

Lesson fourteen was the final lesson of the semester. The students seemed unenthusiastic at the beginning of the lesson. For the first set of speakers, two of the students needed my assistance to fill out the time during the three minute round of speaking. Another student needed assistance during the two minute round. After that, all students were able to speak for the allotted time on their own. Some students were still speaking after the one minute round was finished. After the exercise was finished, I thought that maybe they all just needed time to get warmed up and speak in English. I found myself wondering if it could be possible that the students in this class would benefit from a pre-task warm up activity before we actually began the 3/2/1 fluency activity. A pre-task activity could involve two or three minutes of writing answers to fluency questions before the students begin the actual speaking activity. I decided to consider including

such pre-task activities for low level classes in future semesters.

The Level IV class described above appeared to improve over the course of the semester as far as their general participation in the 3/2/1 fluency activity (everyone was speaking as much as their abilities allowed) and I perceived an overall reduction of pauses and non-speaking time during the activity.

My initial intention for writing a journal for this class was to track the students' ability to produce content to fill the allotted speaking time for each round of the 3/2/1 fluency activity. After completing the semester course, I now have reached some realizations about the 3/2/1 fluency activity, not only for the class described in this article, but more importantly, for all EDC classes regardless of their level.

Pre-task planning

Pre-task planning is beneficial for all students regardless of their ability level (Foster & Skehan, 1996). The type and amount of pre-task planning must be decided by the instructor based on the ability level and needs of each individual class. This could be as simple as teacher-fronted examples of possible answers or it can be more complex such as writing/brainstorming/note-taking to generate content. All language learners, regardless of their ability level, benefit from having some time to plan before they are required to speak.

Assumptions

It is unwise for teachers to make assumptions about student preparation before the lesson. Just because homework was assigned, it is not safe to assume that all the students read the textbook reading, understood the content, and are prepared to discuss immediately after entering the classroom. When making lesson plans, it is advisable to consider these questions: 1) Did all the students read the textbook story before the lesson? 2) Did they understand the vocabulary and content of the reading? 3) Can the students apply the information from the reading quiz to the 3/2/1 fluency activity? At the onset of the lesson, it would be wise for instructors to take a few moments to gauge each class's preparedness for the lesson.

Comprehension

Comprehension of the material and of the teacher's instructions must be checked before each activity can begin. The 3/2/1 fluency activity is the first opportunity for student interaction in each lesson. For many students, the tone for the 90 minute lesson is set by the positive or negative reaction the students have to the 3/2/1 activity. In my experience, no individual student will volunteer and say they have a question or that they do not understand something. Asking a few comprehension questions before beginning the fluency activity may prevent confusion during the activity.

Teacher assistance

EDC lessons are always a time management challenge. Allowing time to complete pre-task activities, to provide scaffolding, to define vocabulary, or any other forms of assistance may go a long way in giving students the confidence they need to participate productively in the lesson (Vygotsky, 1978). Ensuring that everyone is participating and feeling positive will likely increase students' willingness to learn new target language and to participate more vigorously during class discussions.

CONCLUSION

The 3/2/1 fluency activity is the first major activity of each class. The three minute speaking time can be challenging for many students, which can be especially true for lower level students. The original intention of the journaling process described above was to provide pre-task assistance to a Level IV class in which students were either struggling to generate enough content to fill the required speaking time, were pausing for unusually long periods of time during the activity, or were unable to participate due to lexical gaps. However, through this journaling process, I had four realizations that can be applied not only to the 3/2/1 fluency activity, but to other EDC activities as well.

First of all, pre-task planning is beneficial to all students, regardless of their ability level, in order to help them feel more prepared to begin speaking. Secondly, teachers should not assume that all students completed their homework and are fully prepared to undertake the lessons activities. Thirdly, student comprehension of vocabulary, questions, and instructions by all class members is necessary before commencing in-class activities. Finally, by offering extra assistance to students, teachers may help to give students the confidence needed to participate more productively in the lessons.

These four realizations will guide my lesson planning activities in future semesters at the EDC. Ensuring that students' different abilities and needs are properly taken into account for each lesson will help to ensure that lessons flow smoothly and student comprehension and participation can be at its highest levels.

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