Impact of Fluency Activities on English Discussion Skills

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ABSTRACT
According to the English Discussion Class Instructor's Handbook, the main role of the English Discussion Class is to facilitate the development of students' speaking fluency and communicative ability in a discussion context. One activity in the curriculum to achieve this aim is the fluency activity, whereby students speak to a partner without interaction, and repeat the speech to new partners in shorter and shorter time intervals. This activity is non-interactive by nature in contrast to discussion, which demands interaction. As a pilot study, I investigate whether fluency activities help or hinder development of interaction skills such as asking questions and making comments.

INTRODUCTION

Fluency Activities

A common fluency activity is the "4-3-2" activity devised by Maurice (1983), which involves, following a few minutes thinking preparation, speaking three times, first for 4, then 3, and finally 2 minutes, each time to a different partner without interruption by questions. Research shows fluency activities can improve fluency (increased number of words spoken and reduced number of repetitions, hesitations, and false starts), accuracy (fewer errors), and control of content (by how much material is reduced to fit diminishing speaking times) of English learners (Nation, 1989).

Nation (1989) carried out his study with 6 advanced adult learners, analyzing the changes in fluency between the first and third speeches in a single 4-3-2 fluency activity. He found that there was a significant increase in fluency (i.e., increased speaking rate, and fewer false starts and hesitations), a small improvement in accuracy (i.e., grammar), and reduced content in most cases, supporting that the 4-3-2 activity benefits advanced learners in a one-off fluency activity.

De Jong and Perfetti (2011) carried out a fluency study with 24 high-intermediate level students to investigate whether fluency activities produce long-lasting improvements (i.e., "proceduralization"). Students either did a 4-3-2 fluency activity repeating the same or different stories each time, in 3 consecutive weekly sessions. To measure change in fluency, students performed 2-minute speeches before and after the 3 sessions. The authors argue their findings show that fluency activities produce lasting results, although the detailed results seem mixed.

Both Nation's (1989) and De Jong and Perfetti's (2011) studies employed higher level learners, evaluating non-interactive speech. English Discussion classes focus on developing interaction skills. Here, as a pilot study, I investigate whether fluency activities help or hinder development of interaction skills in English discussion such as asking questions and making comments.

METHOD

My Focus

I focused on fluency of speaking and interaction skills within the context of discussion, collecting data that could be relatively easily quantified without access to sophisticated software or analysis tools. For fluency, I focused on smoothness of speaking in terms of length of speaking turn (the longer, the higher the fluency), and number of repetitions of words or word

strings, hesitations (for example, "er", "uhmm"), Japanese words, pauses longer than 1 second (the lower the number, the higher the fluency), and seconds of silence per turn. For interaction, I focused on the number of questions and comments by listeners (the higher the number, the greater the interaction) per turn. A turn was considered the introduction of a new idea that was then expanded on, otherwise a comment.

Table 1 *Classes and talking activities*

Class	Weeks 2-5 (Test 1, Week 5)	Weeks 6-9 (Test 2, Week 9)	Weeks 10-13 (Test 3, Week 13)
Saturday Period 1 (*"only fluency group"*) -Communication major; 5 males, 3 females -Students laid back, but good participation and exchange of ideas -Generally slow speaking pace in discussions with long pauses and silences	Fluency activity	Fluency activity	Fluency activity
Saturday Period 2 (*"mostly fluency group"*) -Tourism major; 2 males, 6 females -Students very interactive in discussions, often switching to conversational mode -Generally the males spoke much more than the females in discussions (possible gender issues)	Fluency activity	Fluency activity	Pairwork activity
Friday Period 1 (*"mostly pairwork group"*) -Economics major; 6 males, 2 females -Students very interactive in discussions, often switching to conversational mode -Generally a lot of short turn taking	Pairwork activity	Fluency activity	Pairwork activity
Friday Period 2 (*"only pairwork group"*) -Sociology major; 3 males, 4 females -Students very interactive in discussions, rarely diverting off topic -Generally high level of participation by all members in all combinations in discussions	Pairwork activity	Pairwork activity	Pairwork activity

DATA COLLECTION

As my sample, I selected four B classes of similar GTEC scores, one given the fluency activity only ("only fluency group"), one given a pairwork activity only of equivalent time ("only pairwork group"), and two classes given a combination of fluency and pairwork activities ("mostly fluency group" and "mostly fluency group", respectively). See Table 1 above for more details of each class.

The data was collected by means of recording the three test discussions (Test 1 at Week 5, Test 2 at Week 9, and Test 3 at Week 13) using a voice recorder. Initially I had planned to compare the three tests. However, due to time constraints, I compared only Test 3 with Test 1. Data was quantified by transcribing the recordings, including number of turns, and all word or word string repetitions, hesitations, Japanese words, pauses of longer than 1 second, and time per turn in seconds. Questions and comments per turn were also counted as a measure of interaction.

The Fluency Activity

In the 4 selected classes, I carried out a fluency or pairwork talking activity as shown in Table 1. The talking activities were related to the topic to be discussed for a particular lesson. For example, for the topic gender stereotypes, the students were asked to talk about their stereotypes about men and women, and what jobs are popular with men, women, and both men and women.

I conducted a shorter fluency activity, a 2-1-0.5 (2 minutes-1 minute-30 second) pattern, instead of the 4-3-2 pattern for two reasons: firstly, I wanted to make sure all students would successfully participate; and secondly, I wanted to make sure I could include the fluency activity each lesson (the 2-1-0.5 pattern takes up around 7 minutes compared with 18 minutes for the 4-3-2 pattern).

In the fluency activity, the students lined up in two rows facing each other, with one line assigned as the speakers and one line the listeners. The speakers spoke 3 times, changing partners each time. Listeners listened and could make reactions, but could not ask questions. The speakers and listeners then changed roles. In the event of an uneven number of students, I would participate as a listener. The pairwork activity involved the same questions as the fluency activity, but students interacted together, exchanging ideas and asking questions. For the pairwork activity, the students spoke for the same total time (7 minutes), changing partners half-way (i.e., after 3.5 minutes), on the assumption that when students talk in pairs they will talk half the time and listen half the time. In the event of an uneven number of students for this activity, there would be one group of three.

The fluency and pairwork activities were held after the quiz at the beginning of class. Attendance was generally high. While some students were absent one, two, or three times out of the twelve lessons, only one student out of all four classes stopped attending after Test 1 (his data is omitted).

Table 2 Summary of comparison between Test 3 and Test 1

Test Group		Ttl Trn #	Turn time (s)	Spkr time (s)	Avg time/ turn	Words only #	Word speed (per s)	Word rep #	Word rep %	Words + Hes #	Hes #	Hes %	Jp #	Pauses > 1s #	Pauses %	Lsnr Qs #	Lsnr cmts #	Sil (s)
Talking Activity: FFF (Saturday Period 1 Class)																		
Averages	**Test 3**	2.6	196.1	168.9	65.7	117.3	0.7	5.9	5.0%	121.6	4.3	3.5%	1.9	24.4	14.5%	1.1	1.0	7.4
(7 students)	**Test 1**	3.0	165.1	150.3	50.1	122.4	0.8	4.9	4.0%	139.9	12.1	8.7%	0.6	24.7	16.4%	0.1	0.3	3.4
	Comp.	-14%	19%	12%	31%	-4%	-15%	21%	26%	-13%	-65%	-59%	225%	-1%	-12%	700%	250%	117%
Talking Activity: FFP (Saturday Period 2 Class)																		
Averages	**Test 3**	3.0	186.5	152.6	50.9	150.3	1.0	8.9	5.9%	159.0	8.8	5.5%	0.6	23.3	15.2%	1.5	1.4	0.8
(8 students)	**Test 1**	3.1	188.4	155.5	49.8	178.4	1.1	10.0	5.6%	194.3	15.9	8.2%	2.1	17.1	11.0%	3.3	0.0	1.6
	Comp.	-4%	-1%	-2%	2%	-16%	-14%	-11%	5%	-18%	-45%	-33%	-71%	36%	38%	-54%	(140%)	-54%
Talking Activity: PFP (Friday Period 1 Class)																		
Averages	**Test 3**	4.1	185.9	152.9	37.1	141.5	0.9	10.0	7.1%	160.6	19.1	11.9%	2.1	20.8	13.6%	0.9	1.1	1.6
(8 students)	**Test 1**	3.6	173.6	139.6	38.5	151.3	1.1	11.0	7.3%	171.8	20.5	11.9%	0.9	20.6	14.8%	1.9	0.9	2.3
	Comp.	14%	7%	9%	-4%	-6%	-15%	-9%	-3%	-6%	-7%	0%	143%	1%	-8%	-53%	29%	-28%
Talking Activity: PPP (Friday Period 2 Class)																		
Averages	**Test 3**	4.6	194.6	125.3	27.4	155.1	1.2	12.6	8.1%	164.1	9.0	5.5%	1.0	21.6	17.2%	2.9	2.6	3.0
(7 students)	**Test 1**	3.9	167.7	134.0	34.7	149.9	1.1	12.1	8.1%	161.7	10.9	6.7%	1.4	15.4	11.5%	3.0	1.0	1.6
	Comp.	19%	16%	-7%	-21%	4%	11%	4%	0%	2%	-17%	-18%	-30%	40%	50%	-5%	157%	91%

Ttl Trn, Total turn; Spkr, Speaker; Avg, Average; Rep, Repetitions; Hes, Hesitations; Jp, Japanese; Lsnr Qs, Listener Questions; Lsnr cmts, Listener Comments.

RESULTS

The results are summarized in Table 2. Regarding fluency, both the only fluency and only pairwork groups showed greater increase in turn time between Tests 1 and 3. However, while turn time was similar, the only pairwork group had more turns marked by fewer silences. Both fluency groups generally showed fewer word repetitions and hesitations compared with the pairwork groups.

Regarding interaction, the only pairwork group showed higher counts of listener questions and comments for both Test 1 and Test 3. While there were hardly any questions or comments in the only fluency group in Test 1, this increased dramatically in Test 3, closely matching the mostly pairwork group. Further, the mostly fluency group surprisingly had more questions and comments than the mostly pairwork group in Test 3.

The results suggest: (1) fluency activities may help students develop fluency in discussion in terms of fewer word repetitions and fewer hesitations; (2) pairwork activities may help students develop their interaction skills more in terms of asking more questions and making more comments on others' ideas; and (3) fluency activities do not necessarily hinder development of interaction skills.

DISCUSSION

In general, the findings appear to support that fluency activities may help English learners speak more fluently in discussion in terms of fewer word repetitions and fewer hesitations, and do not appear to hinder development of interaction skills, such as asking questions and making comments.

The main limitation of this pilot study was the small sample number, complicated by the fact that all classes are different, individuals are different, and that discussion depends on interaction, which changes according to the individual participants and also the topic discussed, and may include gender issues. Furthermore, this pilot study was carried out in Semester 2 with students who had already completed one semester of English Discussion Classes, further complicated by the fact that Test 3 was carried out after the two-week Winter Break, which may have affected student performances in Test 3. Other English classes (for example, presentation or writing classes) or English-related extra-curricular activities may also have impacted individual performances.

In spite of the above issues and basic data analysis, the findings suggest it is worth exploring the impact of fluency activities on English Discussion skills on a larger scale, which may reveal more concrete results. I am planning a more extensive study in the 2012/13 academic year in Semester 1, when all students are new to the program. I also will further review literature on fluency research and will review how to better quantify, evaluate, and analyze fluency and interaction in discussion.

CONCLUSION

Current research indicates that fluency activities can develop English learners' fluency in English. The findings in this pilot study suggest that before employing fluency activities on a large scale in any program, it may be useful to investigate the impact of the fluency activities in terms of how they may help or hinder achievement of the aims of a particular program. Such empirical evidence would provide concrete support as to whether or not fluency activities should be included in the curriculum of an English language program.

REFERENCES

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