

# Speaking Fluently: A Study of Developing Conversational Competence

流暢に話すこと：会話能力の発達に関する研究

By Damon E. Chapman  
& Jon Clenton (*Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Hiroshima University*)

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## Abstract

The paper offers a detailed evaluation of a language program facilitating development of second language (L2) speaking competence. Looking at the self-directed learner (the focus of this paper), the long-term goal is communicative competence within an L2 community, based on first-hand interactions, beginning with systematic task-based language sessions. To do this evaluation, this paper offers a framework for the program evaluation based on principles from Second Language Acquisition Theories. Following that theoretical framework, the paper describes the learner and program portion. The program design is then measured against the principled framework presented earlier. Finally, the program strengths and weaknesses are summarised, with suggestions for improvement.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to evaluate a language program facilitating development of an aspect of second language (L2) speaking competence. The long-term goal of the self-directed learner (the focus of this paper) is communicative competence within an L2 community. This goal is to be pursued over years of interaction with a variety of people in a community, beginning with systematic task-based language sessions with committed local native speakers (NS, tutors). Previous work by Chapman and Williams (2001) argued for increasing student autonomy in second-language classes at the university level. This work can be seen as an extension of that by evaluating L2 learning *outside* of the classroom, focusing on the ultimate level of autonomy: the self-directed learner.

The learner in this paper is a beginner who has spent 100 hours in language sessions, acquiring about 700 basic words receptively. His goal is to learn how to link his ideas together in speaking, while continuing to widen his range of listening comprehension. This skill development will happen through learner-led semi-structured lessons involving verbal interaction and visual scaffolding.

We begin by presenting a framework through which the program can be evaluated and is created through principles from Second Language Acquisition Theories which explain how L2 speech develops. While there are competing theoretical explanations of speech development, it is not within the scope of this paper to address these here. Instead, this paper presents an L2 theoretical framework, and then

describes the learner and program portions. The program design is then measured against the principled framework presented initially. Finally, the program strengths and weaknesses are summarised, with suggestions for improvement. We begin with six core principles, which underlie the development of L2 speaking competence.

### **Core Principles within the Development of L2 Speaking Competence**

*Comprehension First.* In second language acquisition (SLA) the ability to speak emerges from language comprehension which has been gained through meaningful listening (Winitz, 1981)-that is, through hearing, observing and experiencing language used in L2 contexts. The ability to understand and respond to L2 concepts and linguistic structures precedes the ability to use these features in speech (De Jong, 2005; De Keyser, 2015). In order to take part in a simple conversation, the learner must be able to understand far more than he can say. He may be able to utter only a few phrases, but he must be able to recognise a wide range of possible replies produced in variable ways (Nord, 1980). Languages are vast: the average adult easily knows 35,000 words in his native language (L1) (Coxhead, 2010) not counting the depth and range each word represents (Nation, 2001), and not counting the myriad variations of frequently-used, predictable 'chunks' of language from which at least 70% of ordinary conversations are created (Wray & Perkins, 2000). The learner needs to actively seek ways to encounter new domains of language in context-rich, meaningful ways, in order to broaden his base of understanding of life in the L2 community.

*Cognitively Restructure.* While steadily gaining this base of listening comprehension, restructuring will happen in the learner's mind (Grosjean & Li, 2013). His linguistic map will begin softening its borders to allow in distinct features of the L2. During the first days of learning a new language, the learner will notice different sounds (phonemes, the prosody or music of speaking, etc.), different ways of referring to people and daily actions. His mental borders need to realign in order for him to become alert to meaningful cues in L2 speech, so that the stream of noise becomes a stream of meaningful speech (Carroll, 1999). According to insights from the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, the learner needs to learn how to think in L2-like ways in order to speak in L2-like ways (Flege, 2009; Han, 2008). During his first months of exploring the language, the learner will encounter many categories that differ from his L1 systems. For example, differences might include how to refer to sequences of actions. This might be expressed in ways similar to or very different from his L1: through the use of particles ('and, but'), through verb-inflections, or by adding clauses expressing intentions (Bennett, 2004; Overstreet & Yule, 1997). As the learner tries expressing his thoughts, non-native-like speech (mistakes) will give listeners a glimpse into his interlanguage (the evolving linguistic structure his mind creates as it is constructing the L2) (Han & Tarone, 2014). His mistakes will pinpoint aspects of the L2 linguistic system he currently frames from his own (non-L2) point of view (Han, 2008). The learner's interlanguage-creating mechanisms need more convincing evidence of the reality of the conceptual boundaries in L2 so that, as he plans how to express his own thoughts, he will learn to conceptualise them in L2-like ways (Han, 2014). As the learner gains experience with the language, the new components will not just add to his linguistic system, they will change it structurally (Larsen-Freeman, 2014). A prime means to promote this change is for the learner to actively use his language resources in conversation.

*Speak in order to speak.* It is not enough to have a growing base of listening comprehension which is enabling conceptual restructuring; speaking actually requires different mental processes than listening comprehension (De Jong, 2005; Lightbown, 2008; Sharwood-Smith, 1986; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Thus one can only learn to speak by speaking. In listening to a stream of speech, a listener benefits from the fact that language contains many redundant features, so he is able to grasp the general meaning as it flies by without needing to clearly perceive every feature. He will have the impression that he understands more than he actually does. In contrast, a speaker must formulate what he wants to say before he says it. Thus he must link the ideas together in some way (Levelt, 1989; Skehan, 1998). Ease in L2 speaking requires access to implicit L2 linguistic competence (Segalowitz, 2010). As the learner tries to express his own ideas with his own words he will become aware which parts of his language knowledge are drawn from his implicit competence (flowing L2-like from his mouth), which parts are metalinguistic (requiring effort to piece together from what he 'knows about' how to use L2) (Paradis, 2009), and which parts reflect some other implicit competence (this might be influence from L1, interlanguage, or another source: it all sounds different from how a NS would speak) (Byrnes, 1984). The learner's growing awareness of his gaps will alert him to tune in to certain aspects of L2 he encounters later (Gass & Mackey, 2002; Shehedah, 2001; Swain, 1985). In this way speaking (and hearing himself speak) facilitates the learner's development. The optimal context for the learner to search for gaps in his ability will be among NSs who give him the permission to join in their social groups (Norton, 2001).

*Relational Context.* As the learner joins in activities that allow for recurring conversations with NSs, according to the Language Socialization view of SLA, he will acquire cultural and pragmatic knowledge: learning how and when particular language is used (Kasper, 2001). The developing network of NSs who invite him to join more fully in the L2 community will facilitate language growth, as they patiently maintain interest while he struggles to communicate (Boxer & Cohen, 2004; Flege & Liu, 2001). However, spontaneous conversations, as valuable as they are, are not optimal for acquiring some elusive linguistic features (Lightbown, 2008; Wong, 2004). The learner needs some NSs with a higher commitment to join him for more systematic language sessions, during which focus on language learning tasks can strengthen connections between form and meaning (Williams, 2000). The learner will be motivated by these relationships to negotiate and communicate beyond what he could do on his own, which will prompt development of his linguistic systems (Littlewood, 1992; Tarone, 2002) as well as shape his choices as he uses language to identify with parts of the L2 community (Ortega, 2014). The learner's motivation will crucially determine the direction of his language development, as well as how long he perseveres in SLA.

*Learner-driven.* Many studies which describe what actually takes place during language learning in classes reveal that learning is learner-driven, whether or not the teacher (or curriculum designer) recognises it. When there is competition in the learner's mind between a teacher's lesson focus and his internal drive to understand a particular feature, the internal drive will win. What the learner perceives as salient or worth noticing, will be noticed spontaneously and impact his linguistic development (Han, 2008; Truscott & Sharwood-Smith, 2011; VanPatten, 2009). Researchers, hoping to define saliency to assist in pedagogical design, gather features that learners most often notice, including meaning-bearing words, non-redundant elements, frequently-heard words, novel sounds and words that avert communication failure (Broselow, 2009; Ellis & Collins, 2009; Sagarra, 2008). However, saliency is

difficult to predict outside of the learner's mind (Carroll, 1999; Ellis & Wulff, 2015). It is a quality defined by the shape of his interlanguage (Gass & Mackey, 2002; Leow, 2000; Lightbown, 2000; Philp, 2003; Sharwood-Smith, 1986) combined with situational and affective factors, such as his sense of need (Bargh, 1982). When the learner recognises intuitively that certain L2 features clarify new levels of meaning (things he has not previously grasped and now needs for some reason), his cognitive detection systems become alert for cues that relate to this meaning (Carroll, 1999). Thus an efficient 'teaching technique' would allow the learner to shape much of the learning experience by pacing learning activities according to aspects of language he himself is noticing. One example of how this learner-directed pacing happens outside of the classroom is when the learner engages in community activities (such as sports), gaining language as he joins in. This dynamic has been brought into class settings by replicating the need for language in the midst of accomplishing goals or carrying out tasks.

*Task-centered.* Tasks, in language learning, have been defined as sets of sequenced, problem-posing activities involving learners and NSs (Candlin, 2013), and have been shown to aid speech acquisition for many reasons (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Task-work provides a context for collaborative learning (principle 2D), during which the learner benefits from interaction (Gibbons, 2009; Holton & Clarke, 2006) and scaffolding (the use of themes or props to provide meaningful contextual cues). Cooperative tasks give the learner a context and a reason to keep trying to speak in socially appropriate ways (Bardovi-Harlig, 2014) (principle 2C) as well as motivation to expand his comprehension (principle 2A). During task-work with NSs the learner's attention will be drawn repeatedly to differences between L2 and L1 ways of doing things and talking about them (principle 2B). This will confirm linguistic patterns with concrete evidence, as well as pressure him to use his language resources to resolve ever-changing communication challenges (principle 2E) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Robinson, 2011). Because of these attractive aspects, tasks have been valued as units on which to base learning design, measurement, and needs assessment (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Meta-analyses of studies which seek correlations between learning tasks and changes in linguistic behaviour, so as to rate task complexity and usefulness at particular stages of proficiency (Candlin, 2013), reveal conflicting conclusions (Jackson & Suethanapornkul, 2013; Li, 2010; Robinson, 2011) due to the consistent confounding factors of learners, teachers, and learning environments. Despite the designers' intentions, different learners will use language very differently to carry out a given task, due to personal factors (Slimani-Rolls, 2005), interpersonal dynamics with the teacher or other learners (Breen, 1985), or unpredictable contextual factors (Littlewood, 1992). These aspects combine to make predictions of task design impact difficult (Block, 2004; Ellis, 2003). Thus it is wise to shape the learning environment to maximize potentially productive features of tasks as defined earlier: sequential sets, problem-posing activities, and cumulative sets.

*Sequential sets:* Tasks can be appropriately sequenced to aid language development, according to the Cognition Hypothesis, increasing in aspects of complexity to equip the learner to develop skills for interaction in other settings (Robinson, 2011; Robinson & Gilabert, 2007). For example, pictures, real objects, or schematic ideas (such as role-plays) within tasks can be adjusted to reduce or increase the range and complexity of language in use during the activity (Tabak, 2013). A natural developmental sequence occurs when a task poses a problem or challenge to the participants.

*Problem-Posing activities:* When tasks involve discovery (as in solving a problem), the learner

processes new concepts deeply and thus becomes more familiar with previously unknown items than if he was exposed to the concepts in a less engaged manner (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Watkins & Peynircioglu, 1990). Associative Theory suggests that when concepts are analysed or compared, this leads to more and stronger mental associations between all the ideas activated during the process (Bradley & Glenberg, 1983) and more accurate definition of boundaries for L2 categories (Boroditsky, 2007). Psychological research confirms what language learners experience: multiple links between linguistic items in memory stores allow a learner to find multiple ways to access the concepts later (Nairne, 2010; Nairne, Pandeirada & Thompson, 2008), and a learner can more readily access needed language if he has learned the language in a similar setting (Lightbown, 2008). The task design can allow the learner to develop this range of access options in an incremental, cumulative way (Bygate, 1999).

*Cumulative Sets:* Tasks are more productive if they are ongoing, inherently repetitive, and build one skill on another, linking in a cumulative set rather than changing from lesson to lesson (Bygate, 1999). Narratives are one task type which is naturally cumulative, plus they allow the learner to learn L2 ways of expressing cohesion between events, actors, and levels of action in a story (Pavlenko, 2006). Good learning activities provide contexts in which the learner needs the repetition in order to achieve his communicative goal (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). Remaining for several lessons focused on a certain domain of language as part of the narrative task will allow the learner to gain much experience in that domain, leading to more strength in the associations between components (Bargh, 1982). Plus, repeatedly encountering the concepts will encourage the learner to mentally coordinate, integrate, and reorganise his ideas, thus allowing more cognitive restructuring as cumbersome communication becomes more efficient with practice (Ellis, 2005).

Another benefit of a set of cumulative lessons is that the Tutor will most likely see the learner repeatedly challenged in one area. To support ongoing conceptual restructuring, it is important for a gap to keep being evident, so recasts or corrections can address that feature repeatedly (Han, 2008). Despite, as well as because of, explicit efforts to improve language skills, most language learning is gained incrementally as well as implicitly--change happens in one aspect while the learner and Tutor are focused on something else (Ellis & Collins, 2009; Ellis & Wulff, 2015). Throughout patient, generous interaction in comprehensible contexts, the learner's confidence and enjoyment in speaking should increase, sustaining his motivation to interact within the L2 community (MacIntyre, 2007).

### **Achieving L2 Speaking Competence: A Study Plan**

In this paper, the learner is an adult (male or female, but referred to with generic 'he') employed in a community in which his L1 is not the local language. To succeed in his job he needs to live among and interact well with the community, thus he is motivated for many reasons to become proficient in L2. He has prepared to follow a semi-structured language-learning approach involving a network of local friends (NSs) who will learn to support his language development through focused interaction. The program is learner-led: the learner will gather needed resources, arrange the setting, and contract with a NS to be his Tutor for a certain number of sessions.

The commentary in this section will refer to the points which contain the program outline (Thomson & Thomson, 2004). We begin with the program goal and rules, then walk through the session with the

Tutor and learner. The goal of this set of sessions is for the learner to talk as much as possible, putting his own ideas into his own words, with the Tutor's help. The sessions, using only L2, are broken segments from five to fifteen minutes in length. Only the Tutor will write during the sessions. The learner will acquire language he needs through interaction and the topical context created by the pictures. Then, to allow each session to build on previous ones, a brief time is given to re-use some previously encountered language items. Notes in the Word Log remind the Tutor of recently added words and phrases. This will lead to the heart of the session in Step 3. The picture book will be novel to both learner and Tutor, leading to interaction, discovery and negotiation. The Tutor will take time to note down words / phrases new to the learner, to record later. Then the Tutor will make an audio recording, re-telling the picture description in a natural way, including all the details the learner wanted to talk about. He needs to be careful to tell it as in "here-and-now" language, not switching to a storytelling mode. Listening to the recording together enables the learner to pause the speech stream to have a meaningful re-encounter with some recently heard concepts and clarify new ones that may have been introduced by the Tutor in the recording. The Tutor catches any newer words/phrases in the Word Log to use later. They continue through the whole recording in this way. Then the Tutor creates an audio recording mentioning each word/phrase in a way that will remind the learner of how he heard it during the Session. They then take a brief break to allow time to relax and talk (simply and casually) about other things. If necessary, this would be a time to adjust how the session is to continue. Then the same routine is used again, beginning with review of just-learned concepts.

As the Tutor becomes familiar with the task, he will tune into the learner's proficiency level and see the value of this repeated encounter to refresh the newer words. With some concepts now familiar, the learner may feel better able to explore more widely in his description time. There is no need to stick to a set story that the book was created to tell. The Tutor, as before, will record a description of the picture, including all of the learner's details. They will listen to this recording together, with the learner pausing to clarify parts that are hard for him to understand. The Tutor, having noted down new words/phrases, makes a final Word Log recording, putting each word in a meaningful sentence. Then the session closes with appropriate personal interaction and planning for the next meeting time. Between sessions, the learner will listen to the recordings made by the Tutor, to refresh his memories. This is not a matter of memorising the picture description, but of being able to respond with understanding to what he hears (by pointing at what is being mentioned in the picture). As the sessions progress and the speaking becomes easier, he can also try showing the pictures to friends and describing parts to them.

At the start of future session, the learner should follow the short review time with an attempt at re-describing all the pictures that have come before. In the process he will become more familiar with a variety of ways to express his thoughts. When the picture book is finished, the Tutor should make an audio recording describing it page by page. One version should be a "here-and-now" description, and a second version should be in a normal story-telling mode. Version 1 should be paused and discussed as the picture recordings were. Version 2 is just for the learner to listen to in order to hear the now familiar concepts set in a different time frame. This task will be used for 70 hours of sessions with Tutors, involving several wordless picture books. Other activities with a similar range of language functions can be used if the learner and Tutor so desire (there is not room in this paper to describe those). This phase will lead naturally to the next, during which changes are made to the tasks to increase complexity. This

discussion will now evaluate how well the program design addresses the theoretical principles introduced earlier.

### **Program Design: A Step by Step Measurement**

Here we measure the program, step by step, using the principled framework presented in the opening section to this paper. The learner's listening comprehension will be increasing by seven to ten words/phrases per hour, as noted in the Word Log. This is the rate typical of program users (Thomson, 2013). Mental restructuring of linguistic categories should be happening, since at this stage many L2 conceptual and syntactic structures will be new. By focusing on one domain of life (through the constraint of the pictures) the learner can be exposed to many words commonly used within that domain, which will very likely differ from a similar domain in L1. If the Tutor and learner are able to agree on the session goal of the learner being encouraged to speak as much as possible, then the learner will be speaking as much as he is able. This could, however, be a weak point in the plan: if the Tutor perceives the learner as hesitant and wants to avoid embarrassing him, or if the Tutor feels obligated to describe the picture 'properly', this might hinder the learner from speaking freely. Ideally the relationship will be growing through this activity, both on a friendship level, and on the level of the Tutor sensing how to be supportive in the role of language coach.

The learner-driven dynamic itself might, however, be problematic. The learner needs to sensitively direct the lessons while communicating respect for the Tutor as the L2 Expert, the one with insight into the L2 world. The learner has to be careful not to press for explanations in L1 or to satisfy his curiosity about "why" language is used certain ways. Not all NSs will have these types of answers, and would be an inefficient use of the time reserved for L2 interaction. The Tutor has to be careful not to give long explanations of grammar, or to correct every error the learner utters. In addition, if the lessons take place at the learner's home, care must be taken to remain conscious of the L2 world as the 'setting'. This picture-description/story-building task is cumulative, involving discovery and building lesson upon lesson. Also, it can be easily adjusted to fit many proficiency levels and explore many domains of the L2 world, as pictures can be created to meet the interests of both the learner and Tutor.

One weakness with the task is that either participant may misunderstand the point of using pictures and picture-books. If either person is unaccustomed to being creative with a picture, they might simply try to describe what is 'true' about the picture, or tell the story 'properly'. The task might also prove problematic if the picture content is inappropriate, offensive, too childish, too strange of a setting for either participant, or if the learner has a pressing language-learning need which differs from the picture topic. These issues would need to be resolved on an as needed or case by case basis. Overall, the task seems suited for the purpose except for the question of transfer-appropriate-processing (Lightbown, 2008). Does the picture-description / story-building process transfer to interactions the learner will have in the community? The learning sessions are serving the purpose of nurturing *beginning* language skills, through giving opportunity to link ideas together and explore domains of life. Although these particular stories may not be relevant for ordinary conversations, the growth in comprehension and linking skills will contribute to the learner's ability to understand what other people are discussing in the community, and will eventually lead to conversational competence. Meanwhile, other activities such as role-plays and

re-telling of shared experiences in community can allow the learner to gain speaking competence directly relevant to social situations he faces.

### Conclusion

Six principles have been presented which provide a framework explaining how speaking fluency develops. These have been applied to evaluate a program designed to facilitate a self-directed learner, at a beginner level, in developing the ability to link ideas through interaction with NS conversational partners. The series of lessons seem to match the six principles in that they facilitate broadening listening comprehension and conceptual restructuring. The lessons encourage the learner to take risks to express thoughts, and foster the growth of his friendship with his Tutor. They are task-based and learner-driven. The evaluation reveals that some possible weaknesses can be addressed as they arise. The major weakness of the program warranting careful investigation is how readily skills developed during this task can be transferred to community interactions.

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