

Principles for developing oral fluency in the classroom

スピーキング力を発 達させる指導法

Keywords

oral fluency, fluency activities, motivation, time pressure, formulaic sequences

Oral fluency consists of temporal aspects of speech, including speech rate, pauses, and length of speech runs between pauses. Language that students know but cannot use fluently is an especially good target for fluency development. This paper presents seven principles to consider when designing and doing fluency-based classroom activities: incorporate repetition, increase speaking time, prepare for speaking, use familiar and motivating topics, ensure appropriate level, impose time limits, and teach formulaic sequences. Each of these principles is discussed along with illustrative sample classroom activities.

オーラルの流暢さは、スピーチの速度や間合い、間合いの間のスピーチの長さを含む時間的側面によって成り立つ。学生がわかってはいるが上手く話せない言葉は、流暢さを発達させるために特に適した対象となる。本論は、流暢さを発達させるためのアクティビティやそのデザインを考慮する際の7つの原則を提案する。繰返しを取り入れ、会話の時間を増やし、会話の準備をさせ、なじみがありやる気を起こさせるトピックを使用し、適切なレベルを保ちつつ、制限時間を課し、そして定型文を教える。これらの原則は例証となるクラスでのアクティビティを引き合いに出しながら論じられる。

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FLUENCY, often considered in opposition to accuracy (Brumfit, 1984) and complexity (Skehan, 1996), is best thought of as an integrated component of language. The term refers to an aspect of overall speaking ability. One way to define this term is by temporal aspects of speech: speech rate, pauses (including their location, length, and frequency), and length of speech runs between pauses (Lennon, 1990, Schmidt, 1992, Wood, 2001). There are various ways of building fluency. For example, certain experiences, such as study abroad, contribute to it (Wood, 2007). In addition, classroom activities promoting fluency have been suggested and explained (Gatbonton and Segalowitz, 1988, Maurice, 1983, Schneider, 1993). From this literature comes seven principles to consider when designing and doing fluency building activities:

1. Incorporate repetition
2. Increase speaking time
3. Prepare before speaking
4. Use familiar and motivating topics
5. Ensure appropriate level
6. Impose time limits
7. Teach formulaic sequences

Each of these principles will now be discussed, along with illustrative sample classroom activities.

1. Repeat, repeat, repeat

One of the best ways to increase fluency is to use the same language over and over. This does not mean simply repeating what the teacher says or doing substitution drills. It is important to change the audience or purpose when an activity is repeated. Repetition can be incorporated into many speaking activities. A common exercise is *Find Someone Who...*, where students must ask the same question to many students until someone answers affirmatively. Another technique often used is *Interview and Report*, where Student A interviews Student B and takes note of the answers. Student A is then required to report Student B's answers to Student C, who must take notes. *Class Photo* (Gatbonton and Segalowitz, 1988) is another effective activity that avoids the problem of mindless repetition. The teacher gives students the task of taking a group

photo. Students take turns managing this task, directing each other where to stand or how to line up for the picture. The language used (*X please go to the front, please stand next to X, sit in front of X*) is necessarily repeated many times. To increase focus on language use, speakers cannot use gestures, and the students must go where they are told. *Class Photo*, along with the other activities mentioned previously, are examples of activities with clear and meaningful outcomes, making them great candidates for encouraging fluency development.

2. Increase the amount of speaking time

When it comes to speaking, one challenge facing most Japanese learners is the limited amount of time they spend actually using English. At the university level, many speaking courses are limited to one 90 minute lesson per week, and little if any English is used outside of class. Here are a few ways of helping students converse as much as possible:

- Have students work in pairs or small groups
- Encourage 100% English free-conversation
- Promote English use outside of class

In large classes, a great way to increase talk time is to put students in pairs or small groups. There are innumerable ways to do this, such as interviews, information gaps, role plays, and group discussions.

Free conversation is an activity that encourages students to speak. More advanced students may simply need a prompt such as, "*So, how was your weekend?*" Low to intermediate students will benefit from more initial support. Below is a common conversation framework for providing such guidance:

Student A: (Question)

Student B: (Answer + extra information)

A: (Follow-up question)

B: (Answer + question)

A: (Answer + extra information)

Example:

Student A: What did you do last weekend?

Student B: I went to a movie on Saturday. I saw the new Batman movie.

A: Who did you go with?

B: I went with my girlfriend. What did you do last weekend?

A: I went shopping on Sunday. I bought new shoes.

Recording conversations is another technique that gives students more fluency practice. When done outside of class, overall time spent speaking, listening, and thinking in English increases. For

optimal results, care must be taken with assigning topics (Schneider, 1993), handling the logistics (Kluge and Taylor, 1999), and assessing the recordings (Ho, 2003). As students get used to recording their conversations, they gradually feel more relaxed, and the task becomes easier to complete. Another benefit of outside taping is that practice done at spaced intervals enhances language acquisition (Bahrick, 1979). Students get into this habit of using English more often for shorter stretches of time as opposed to only once per week in class.

3. Allow time to prepare before speaking

One factor that contributes to increased fluency and shorter pauses is adequate planning (Foster and Skehan, 1996). Low and intermediate level students especially need time to prepare what they are going to say. Written planning done in silence before a speaking activity helps maintain focus on the act of speaking and creating meaning with an interlocutor. Examples of planning include taking notes on a topic for homework, composing written answers to interview questions before discussing them, and writing potential questions other students might ask about a topic and the subsequent answers. A technique as simple as giving students a few minutes to silently read and think before engaging in conversation lightens the cognitive load and allows for improved attention to communication.

4. Use familiar and motivating topics

The more familiar and personally relevant a topic is, the easier it is to talk about. Asking students to discuss subjects far removed from their lives, about which they have little knowledge, is a sure way to decrease fluency. When focusing on fluency development in class, choose topics that are relevant and interesting to the learners, such as describing recent events and activities. A list of possible discussion topics (such as pets, hobbies and interests, friends, or family) can also be provided, from which students are free to choose.

5. Ensure appropriate language level

Fluency promotion activities should be at an appropriate level of difficulty in order to reduce the necessity of over-thinking while speaking. Activities that push students to use new and recently learned language have their place in the classroom, but are not optimal for enhancing fluency. Fluency is best developed when already known language is put to active use (Nation, 1995), something most efficiently done through discussion of relevant and familiar topics. The ideal level should be at or just below

the students' current level. Review activities are thus especially good for fluency building. Having students review at the beginning or end of class is a good way to have language repeated and reinforced.

6. Set time limits

While creating a comfortable speaking atmosphere is important, it may be helpful to introduce a bit of intensity by setting time limits on conversation activities. This forces students to speak faster and pause less. One simple technique is to set a timer and tell students to complete a task before the timer goes off. Similarly, the *4-3-2-Minute Speech* (Maurice, 1983), provides intermediate to advanced students an opportunity of giving the same speech three times in succession, thus combining the benefits of time pressure and repetition. Working in small groups, each student gives a four-minute speech. During this first attempt, attention is necessarily divided between language and content. After rotating groups, students repeat their same speech, this time in three minutes. Ideally overall fluency improves since the content and language have already been worked through once. After rotating groups again, students repeat their speeches a third time, condensing them into more confident and fluent two-minute versions. In addition, speeches can be recorded and compared to verify that fluency has indeed improved and that students are not simply saying less as time decreases.

7. Teach formulaic sequences

It is important for fluency building that learners are taught chunks, collocations, and formulaic sequences (Wood, 2007). Mastering communication strategies involves developing the ability to automatically plug set phrases into conversations at appropriate moments. One such strategy is making frequent use of classroom English phrases such as *Can you repeat that?* and *What does ~ mean?* Other examples are agreeing/disagreeing (*I agree because..., I see your point, but...*) or stating opinions (*In my opinion..., I think...*). Encouraging the use of these sorts of strategies will provide more opportunities for students to use already learned language, thus building fluency more efficiently.

Conclusion

When fluency is specifically targeted in pedagogic activities, it need not be at the expense of precision or intricacy. In the EFL context of Japan, it is common for university students to have a knowledge of English where their reading and grammar skills far outweigh those for speaking and listening. It is in these cases

that students can especially benefit from explicit fluency work. The seven principles presented in this paper offer a set of guidelines for preparing effective classroom activities and encouraging students to efficiently focus on their fluency development.

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