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Developing Fluency in Language Use

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Although fluency activities are aimed at the development of skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, they inevitably affect knowledge of the language. The way that these activities affect this knowledge in turn relates to the development of fluency. Fluency can be defined as making the most effective use of what skills are already known and is usually measured in terms of rate (words per minute) and lack of hesitation. We can distinguish three approaches which can all be usefully part of a language course.

The first approach relies primarily on repetition and could be called "the well-beaten-path approach" to fluency. This involves repeated practice on the same material until fluency is attained. The second approach to fluency relies on making many connections and associations with a known item such as a word or grammatical feature. Rather than following one well-beaten-path, the learner can choose from many paths. This could be called "the richness approach" to fluency. This involves using the known item in a wide variety of contexts and situations. The third approach to fluency is the aim and result of the previous two approaches. This could be called

"the well-ordered approach." Fluency occurs because the learner is in control of the lexical and grammatical system of the language and can use a variety of efficient, well-connected, and well-practiced paths to the wanted item. This is one of the major goals of language learning and is not easily achieved.

Conditions for Developing Fluency

The approaches described above set up the following conditions that are necessary for the development of fluency.

1. They place very limited demands on the learners in that they rely heavily on language items, topics, and experiences that the learners are already familiar with. This familiarity may come from the learners having met or produced the material themselves in a different medium, or through drawing on knowledge gained through the first language. The demands of the task may also be limited through the use of controlled input and through the use of supporting material such as pictures and written texts to support the input.
2. They comprise meaning-focused activity. This involves listening to interesting stories, puzzle and quiz activities, and activities with clear communication outcomes.
3. They encourage learners to reach a high level of performance through the use of meaning-focused repetition, increasing speed of input, and the opportunity

for prediction and the use of previous background knowledge.

Fluency Techniques

Here are four activities for developing fluency for each of the four skills.

Listening to stories is particularly suitable for learners who read well but whose listening skills are poor. The teacher chooses an interesting story, possibly a graded reader, and reads aloud a chapter each day to the learners. The learners just listen to the story and enjoy it. While reading the story the teacher sits next to the blackboard and writes any words that the learners might not recognize in their spoken form. Any words the learners have not met before may also be written, but the story should be chosen so that there are very few of these. During the reading of the first chapters the teacher may go fairly slowly and repeat some sentences. As the learners become more familiar with the story, the speed is increased and the repetitions decreased. Learner interest in this activity is very high and the daily story is usually looked forward to with the same anticipation people show towards television serials. If the pauses are a little bit longer than usual in telling the story, this allows learners to consider what has just been heard and to anticipate what may come next. It allows learners to listen to language at normal speed without becoming lost. The graded

readers *In the beginning* (Longman Structural Readers, Stage 2), *Of mice and men* (Heinemann Guided Readers, Upper level), and *Animal farm* (Longman Bridge Series) are particularly good.

The 4/3/2 speaking technique was devised by Maurice (1983). In this technique, learners work in pairs with one acting as the speaker and the other as listener. The speaker talks for four minutes on a topic while his or her partner listens. Then the pairs change with each speaker giving the same information to a new partner in three minutes, followed by a further change and a two minute talk. From the point of view of fluency, this activity has three important features. First, the user is encouraged to process a large quantity of language. In the 4/3/2 method this is done by allowing the speaker to perform without interruption and by having the speaker make three deliveries of the talk. Second, the demands of the activity are limited to a much smaller set than would be the case in uncontrolled learning activities. This can be done by control by the teacher as is the case in most receptive fluency activities such as reading graded readers or listening to stories, or can be done by choice, planning, or repetition by the learner. In the 4/3/2 activity the speaker chooses the ideas and language items, and plans the organization of the presentation. The 4- and 3- minute deliveries allow the speaker to bring these aspects well under control, so that fluency can become the learning goal of the

activity. Note that the repetition of the presentation and the changing audience keep the learner's attention focused on the message. Third, the learner is helped to reach higher levels of performance by having the opportunity to repeat and by the challenge of decreasing time needed to convey the same message (Nation, 1989).

Speed reading and extensive reading of graded readers result in an improvement of fluency due to limited demands, specifically language control and the quantity of processing. To be effective, speed reading courses need to be written with a limited vocabulary so that learners can focus on the reading skill without having to tackle other language difficulties. Speed reading courses also have the added benefit of involving the learners in keeping a running record of their speed and comprehension scores. Research on graded readers (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988) shows that reading only a few books at one level would provide the learners with contact with almost all the words at that level. This shows that graded reading can provide a reliable basis for systematic coverage of vocabulary for fluency development.

Continuous writing is an activity where learners are given a set time (usually five to ten minutes) to write with the aim of producing a large quantity of writing within the time. The learners can record the number of words they have written on a graph. The teacher responds to the writing not by correcting errors but by finding a positive aspect in the

content of the writing to briefly comment on.

Fluency Activities in a Course

About one quarter of class time should be given to fluency activities so that learners can make the best use of the language they already know. Without these kinds of activities or substantial opportunity outside the classroom for learners to use what they know, language knowledge will not be readily available for use.

References

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