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Fluency: an aim in teaching and a criterion in assessment

Abstract

This article investigates the concept 'fluency' from different perspectives. When fluency is an aim in teaching, a thorough comprehension of the concept among teachers is a prerequisite for appropriate planning of instruction, including the choice of appropriate classroom activities. When fluency is an assessment criterion, it is even more important that examiners have a shared perception of the concept. The present article starts by presenting common perceptions of the concept and goes on to explore some of the current research. Next, it provides a historical overview of the place of fluency in teaching theory and explains some of the preconditions for the inclusion of this concept among teaching objectives and assessment criteria. It will also, as an illustration, give an outline of the position of the concept over time in the Norwegian school system on the basis of an analysis of the relevant syllabuses. Finally, the article explicates the notion of language use as a complex cognitive skill and explores current methodological ideas about teaching towards fluency.

Introduction¹

The concept 'fluency', including the variant 'fluent', is often being used to characterize high language proficiency. It is most often used about skills in a foreign or second language, not in a mother tongue. Although the discussion in the present article is relevant for the teaching of most foreign languages, I will focus on English.²

Several perceptions of the concept 'fluency' exist. Two major types will be focused on here. The first is restricted to pointing out a number of typical and in general positive features in fluent language performance, such as "*smooth, rapid, effortless use of language*" (Crystal 1987, p. 421), "*Fluency, then, is to be regarded as natural language use*" (Brumfit 1984, p. 56), and finally language as "*spoken easily and without many pauses*" (Cambridge International Dictionary of English 1995). Naturally, these are features, which also are represented in studies of the concept over the last decades, to be returned to below.

The second major type identifies a number of other features. It recognizes, for example, that 'grammatical correctness' is not necessarily a feature of fluent

language use, as exemplified in the following quote: *"Fluency refers to the ability to produce rapid, flowing, natural speech, but not necessarily grammatically correct speech. This is often contrasted with accuracy"* (ESL Glossary). With learners in mind, Brumfit has in addition given the following definition of fluency as *"The maximally effective operation of the language system so far acquired by the students"* (Brumfit 1984, p. 57). According to Chambers, in studies of fluency an obvious first step is to differentiate fluency from overall language proficiency (Chambers 1997, p. 536; see also below).

The present article will focus on fluency in speaking. However, today the concept is also being used about other major skills, such as 'reading fluency' and 'fluency in writing'.

In sum, we may say that there are several perceptions of the concept 'fluency'. One type includes features such as speed and effortless, smooth and native-like use of language and a language spoken without many pauses. In addition, there is an understanding of fluency which also gives credit to the use of inaccurate language as well as one that does not represent comprehensive language proficiency.

Research on fluency

Several studies of fluency have attempted to further specify features of fluent oral use of language, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research procedure has normally been to classify informants into groups, for example one group of fluent mother tongue speakers of a language, one group of speakers with a declared high degree of fluency in the language in question, either as a foreign or second language, and one group of speakers with a low degree of fluency in the same foreign or second language. Usually, the classification into groups has been done by skilled evaluators, such as language teachers with long experience in the field. The next step has been to analyze and compare the linguistic performance of the groups in order to come up with measures of fluency.

One type of quantitative studies has investigated speech rate, in general understood as amount of speech produced over a period of time, such as the number of syllables emitted per second. This led to a suggested norm of six syllables (plus or minus one) per second (cf. Hieke 1985). Of course, this is dependent on type of speech, where a basic distinction may be made between prepared and impromptu speech. An example of the former may, for example, be lecturing, while retelling a story conveyed by a picture sequence produced speech of the impromptu type in one investigation (Lennon 1990).

Other aspects of speech, such as frequency and types of pauses and hesitations, have also been studied. Certain types of pauses are common and accepted in the speech of native speakers as well as in the speech of speakers of

a foreign or second language. In the words of an author of several studies: “Indeed, pause is itself a necessary ingredient in fluent speech” (Lennon 1990, p. 408). Obviously, this applies first and foremost to pauses in order to breathe, generally referred to as ‘natural pauses’. Next, it applies to pauses to reflect on and organize new ideas before articulating them. Furthermore, it applies to pauses to search for the best or most precise word or expression required to convey a speaker’s ideas. The frequency of pauses related to choice of linguistic form is normally higher among users of a foreign or second language than among native speakers (cf. the survey in Wood 2001).

With regard to qualitative differences in studies comparing native speakers and speakers of a foreign or second language, a crucial point has been the location of pauses in spoken language. Native speakers usually locate pauses between sentences and clauses or after groups of words that constitute semantic units. These are also often referred to as ‘natural pauses’. This applies to speakers of a foreign or second language as well, but this group may resort to additional pauses. One study found significant differences in pause distribution between mother tongue and second language speakers in narration. A conclusion was that second language speakers are “planning within clauses as well as in supra-clausal units” (Lennon 1984, p. 61, quoted in Wood 2001, p. 576).

Another significant qualitative difference between these two types of speakers is the extent to which the pauses are mute or filled with language elements of various kinds. In general, mute pauses have been regarded as evidence of non-fluency. Indeed, one hypothesis about native speakers’ fluency is that they are in charge of a rich arsenal of fillers, so-called ‘small words’, which they may insert in pauses to get time to think, organize new ideas etc., and in this manner send signals to keep talk flowing (see Hasselgreen 2004, further discussed below). In English this applies to non-lexical items such as ‘uh’, ‘um’ and ‘ah’ and lexical items which do not carry conventional meaning, such as ‘you know’, ‘right’, ‘I see’, ‘I mean’, ‘well’ and ‘sort of’. Pauses may also be filled by longer set phrases/formulaic expressions of various kinds, such as ‘what I mean is’, ‘what I’m trying to say’, ‘nice talking to you’ and ‘you’re kidding’. A strong claim about the function of such language elements dates from 1993: “Most contemporary linguists agree that the basis of native speaker fluency is control of a vast repertoire of formulaic phrases of this kind...” (Lewis 1993, p. 128). A study of university students in a full-time intermediate level course of English as a second language came up with the following main conclusion: “The use of formulaic sequences played a clear role in facilitating the development of speech fluency over time in this study” (Wood 2006, p. 29). Studies in the 1990s had also established a link between fluency and automatically retrieved ‘chunks’ of language (Hasselgreen 2004).

The hypothesis referred to above has been confirmed in a number of studies. For our purpose the most interesting is the Ph.D. study by Angela Hasselgreen (Hasselgreen 2004). This is a comprehensive analysis of the speech of three

groups of informants: native speakers of English, Norwegians pupils with an approved high level of oral proficiency in English, and Norwegian pupils estimated to a lower level of oral proficiency in English. One of the many findings of this study was that performance assessed as more fluent contained more ‘small words’, and that Norwegian pupils with an approved high level of oral proficiency in English used ‘small words’ in a way which resembled that of native speakers (cf. also Towell et al. 1996).

How native speakers acquire this aspect of oral proficiency is normally explained by a long period of acquisition and thus most likely of continual repetitions of ‘small words’ and similar types of language items (cf. Lewis 1993, 1997). This accords with the theory of automatic processing, which I will return to in further detail below. It is argued that “[F]luency research over many years has determined that automatic and controlled processing are a vital part of an explanation of how fluent speech occurs” (Wood 2001, p. 579).

Towards fluency in teaching theory

The second major type of perceptions of the concept ‘fluency’, mentioned above, points towards a gradual development over time away from ‘linguistic and grammatical correctness’ as the dominant aim in teaching right up to the end of the 1960s. An example of emphasis on linguistic accuracy in both pronunciation and grammar was apparent in the predecessor to the audiolingual teaching theory of the 1950s and 1960s, the oral theory. In the audiolingual theory, however, there was also room for fluency, even though it should not take place at the cost of linguistic accuracy (cf. Simensen 2007, p. 37 and p. 53). This is pointed out by Wilga Rivers, probably the most central and prolific representative of the audiolingual theory (cf. for example Rivers 1964). Rivers relates the concept ‘fluency’ to a spontaneous use of language. In this perspective language practice became the key element in teaching. And, as is familiar to many readers, in this particular paradigm of learning, practice in the classroom was to try to prohibit situations where the pupils would produce linguistically erroneous language. Instead, situations were to be designed so that learners should produce a lot of linguistically correct responses that could be positively reinforced, and thus transformed into good language habits.

However, as is generally known among practicing language teachers today, later development has been towards a ‘communicative’ aim where the basic and most elementary aspiration of a foreign or second language user has been understood as being able to communicate and understand an intended message, independent of the accepted norm. A comprehensive definition of communicative ability was in the 1960s given the label ‘communicative competence’. The origin of the concept goes back to the influential writings of the well-known American

sociolinguist Dell Hymes (for example Hymes 1972). As many involved in the foreign language teaching business are familiar with, this new notion of proficiency has progressed through several developmental stages on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (cf. Simensen 2007, pp. 104-110).

The following section is an outline of the essential stages on the European side. Starting in the 1970s, an outcome of the first stage of a Council of Europe-project was a description of the language needs of the pupils in terms of what they need 'to do' with the language, such as having to ask for help, to invite somebody, to express agreement/disagreement etc. Answers to questions of this kind were given in terms of a number of 'language functions' that the pupils should be able to handle at a threshold level. These inventories of 'language functions' were published in the influential document *The Threshold Level in a European Unit/Credit System for Modern Language Learning by Adults* (van Ek 1975). In this document language functions were described in terms of six categories, which were further divided into subcategories and supplemented by appropriate language exponents. The 'language function' to express agreement/-disagreement had, for example, such exponents as 'I agree', 'That's right', 'I don't agree', 'I don't think so' etc. This reflects a functional approach to defining aims in foreign language teaching (for details, see Simensen 2007, pp. 107-108).

In the second stage of the Council's work, Hymes' 'communicative competence'-concept was further developed with regard to teaching. In the 1980s this resulted in a series of documents pointing towards a new Threshold level-description, *Threshold Level 1990* (van Ek & Trim 1991). In one of these, *Objectives for foreign language learning. Volume I: Scope*, from 1986, the sociocultural aspects of language use were among the six categories included (van Ek 1986). Inter alia, the researchers involved looked for answers to questions like: What is appropriate for a language user to say to whom, when, where and in what manner? (cf. Hymes 1972). Knowledge about this was considered an important part of language proficiency. Another category among the six, 'strategic competence', was to, among other things, cater for the needs among learners for approaches to compensate for inadequate language knowledge and skills (see also below).

The developments presented briefly above laid the foundation for a gradually strengthened standing of fluency as an aim in teaching. While the linguistic concept of proficiency and the corresponding requirement of linguistic accuracy in the pupils' language dominated as an important aim in teaching right up to the 1960s, the gradual weakening of this concept thereafter paved the way for other aims, such as fluency. However, it was not until the second half of the 1970s that a communicative concept of proficiency gradually replaced the more restricted linguistic concept. This opened for fluency as a self-contained part of the aims in foreign language teaching theory.

An early and very influential debate about the conflict between the concepts ‘accuracy’ and ‘fluency’ as aims in teaching was started by Christopher Brumfit in 1984 (Brumfit 1984). The model presented below, from the same year, places the concept ‘fluency’ in a separate box, thus giving it an exceptional prominence. The idea is that components of knowledge of various kinds have to go through the box ‘fluency’ to become performance or language in use (Færch, Haastrup and Phillipson 1984, p. 69).

Fig. 13: Components of communicative competence

By introducing a strategic competence component this model, together with similar models of communicative competence, take into account factors beyond linguistic knowledge that are necessary for language proficiency (see the discussion in Chambers 1997). Furthermore, that only a minority of the users of English today are native speakers and the fact that new varieties of English (‘Englishes’) are currently being recognized, will undoubtedly at some point challenge the current notion of ‘language proficiency’. Research is therefore needed, among other things, with regard to how school authorities and practicing teachers within an educational system in the future should settle on aims in teaching and criteria for assessment.

Fluency in syllabuses: Norway as a case

The concept ‘fluency’ was for a long time left out of the syllabuses in the Norwegian school system (for English in Norway, see Gundem 1989 and Simensen 2007, 2010). In fact, this also applies to the period in which the breakdown of the traditional, linguistic notion of accuracy as the leading aim in teaching speech opened up for aims like fluency, as noted above. Even in the 1970s, in the most audiolingually-oriented syllabus in the Norwegian school system, *Mønsterplan for grunnskolen* [Curriculum Guidelines for Compulsory Education] from 1974, fluency is not mentioned at all. It is stated, however, that the purpose of the oral exercises is to practice the pupils’ ability to

“*spontaneously express thoughts and ideas in English*” (p. 149, translated here; cf. Wilga Rivers above).

A most interesting point with regard to the question of linguistic accuracy in the period around 1970, is that we can observe a weakening of the dominant linguistic concept of proficiency in some of the written assessment criteria for English in the 9-year school system (for the disregard of assessment in oral skills, see Evensen 1986 and Simensen 1983, 1988). In 1967, for example, we find an explicit recommendation to credit learners’ language even though it may not be grammatically correct, as long as it is only a question of “[*formal*] faults which do not distort the meaning” (Norsk skole 1967, p. 277, translated here). This recommendation was not in accordance with the syllabus in force in 1967, *Læreplan for forsøk med 9-årig skole* from 1960. This was based on the oral theory of teaching and thus had a clear focus on linguistic accuracy, as noted above. In fact, discrepancies between syllabuses in force and corresponding assessment instruments and criteria were fairly common at the time.

In the 1970s, the message above about assessment was made more explicit by way of examples given of erroneous learners’ language that should be credited by assessors. One example is from 1977: “Went Stephen pony-riding?” This year the assessment guide recommends crediting learner language of this kind with a reduced number of points compared to those given for grammatically fully correct learner language (*Evaluering i grunnskolen. Avgangsprøva 1977*, p. 29; discussed in Simensen 1988). Assessment criteria were therefore among the first indicators that a new conception of language proficiency was entering the scene, a conception that has been present ever since.

In the syllabus for upper secondary school from 1976, *Læreplan for den videregående skole (L76)*, fluency is mentioned in connection with methods of work, but not as an aim in teaching. And it is related to the concept ‘accuracy’ in the following way: “*The purpose of oral practice is to develop the pupils’ ability to use the language in meaningful contexts with the highest possible degree of fluency and accuracy*” (L76, p. 136, translated here). This is repeated in the revised versions of L76, appearing in the first half of the 1990s.

In spite of this new signal, fluency got no mention in the new syllabuses which followed in the 1990s, neither in the 1994 syllabus for the upper secondary school, *Reform 94* nor in the syllabus of 1997 for the compulsory school system, *Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen (L97)* [The Curriculum for the 10-year Compulsory School in Norway]. However, in the 2006 English syllabus, *Knowledge Promotion or Kunnskapsløftet (K06)*, the concept appears as a proficiency aim in the subject area ‘Communication’, at upper levels, for both speaking and writing. This was phrased in the following way after completion of 10th grade: “*The aims are that the pupil shall be able to ... express himself /herself in writing and orally with some precision, fluency*

and coherence” followed by a slightly higher proficiency aim at the next level, i.e. after the completion of the first year(s) in the Programmes for General Studies in upper secondary: “*The pupil should be able to ... express himself/herself in writing and orally with subtleness, proper register, fluency, precision and coherence*” English subject curriculum (p. 6 and p. 8).

The levels of specification and the place of the concept ‘fluency’ among the aims in *K06* is undoubtedly due to the influence from the 2001 Council of Europe-document *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (Framework)*. This document presents a comprehensive conception of language proficiency, with proficiency aims that are functionally oriented and phrased in terms of what the pupils should learn *to do* by means of the language, i.e. in terms of ‘can do -statements’ or ‘descriptors’, within a number of major skills, sub-skills and subject areas, and normally at 6 levels of proficiency. A descriptor may, for example, be phrased as ‘can argue a formal position convincingly’ or as ‘can produce brief everyday statements in order to satisfy simple needs...’, a wording comparable to an ability to ‘express agreement/disagreement’ etc., as discussed above. In *Framework* the concept ‘fluency’ is used amply as a qualitative characterization of oral proficiency. One specific scale, ‘Spoken fluency’, is actually exclusively devoted to the concept in speaking. It has six levels and includes detailed characterizations of language typical for each level. As may be noticed in the scale, quoted below, characterizations such as ‘unhesitating flow’, ‘spontaneity’ and ‘few noticeably long pauses’ are used as positive features of language at upper proficiency levels (C2, C1 and B2), while the opposite, including ‘noticeable hesitation’, ‘false starts’ and ‘much pausing’, are used about language at lower proficiency levels (B1, A2 and A1).

Spoken fluency

C2

Can express him/herself at length with a natural, effortless, unhesitating flow. Pauses only to reflect on precisely the right words to express his/her thoughts or to find an appropriate example or explanation.

C1

Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.

Can communicate spontaneously, often showing remarkable fluency and ease of expression in even longer complex stretches of speech.

B2

Can produce stretches of language with a fairly even tempo; although he/she can be hesitant as he/she searches for patterns and expressions, there are few noticeably long pauses. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without imposing strain on either party. Can express him/herself with relative ease. Despite some problems with formulation resulting in pauses and ‘cul-de-sacs’, he/she is able to keep going effectively without help.

B1

Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production. Can make him/herself understood in short contributions, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.

A2

Can construct phrases on familiar topics with sufficient ease to handle short exchanges, despite very noticeable hesitation and false starts.

A1

Can manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communication.

(Framework, p.129)

This scale has already had considerable influence on assessment of oral proficiency in English in the Norwegian school system. Since oral exams are a local responsibility, there are no centrally produced assessment criteria available. However, scales have been constructed for the purpose of in-service training of teachers. These are accessible as ‘*Vurderingskriterier*’ or ‘*Muntlig eksamen*’ on the Internet. They illustrate that fluency is among the criteria suggested for an assessment of high and fairly high levels of spoken language proficiency in English, more or less as proposed in the scale above.

Contemporary conceptions of teaching and learning

With regard to developing fluency and spontaneity in foreign language teaching, two arguments are central in the literature about approaches to teaching. The first relates to classroom practice and recommends teaching pupils to use ‘small-words’, set phrases and longer segments of language of the types described above, in the same way that mother tongue users do. One suggestion is even to include this type of language in lexical drill exercises (cf. Lewis 1993, 1997). The justification is obvious: to develop in a user of a foreign or a second language a proficiency which allows her/him a way to gain time to organize her/his thoughts, find appropriate linguistic expressions etc., without interrupting the flow of language, as discussed above. It may also be a question of being able to keep the floor in spite of many speakers eagerly waiting to have a say (discussed as a use of ‘conversational gambits’ in Simensen 2007, pp. 64-65).

The second argument relates to a conception of learning and links fluency to an automatization of language use, as illustrated in the following quotes: “Fluency serves as an index of automaticity of processing” (de Bot 1996, p. 552) and “...we will consider (L2) fluency to be an automatic procedural skill ... on the part of the speaker...” (Derwing et al. 2004, p. 656). Teaching theories related to this conception of learning, including the idea of teaching ‘language

habits', have existed since the audiolingual theory was the leading model in teaching. The fundamental belief is that in speaking it is much quicker to retrieve automatized words and sequences of language from long-term memory than it is to produce it through the application of rules of grammar etc. Many readers are familiar with this idea.

However, what readers may be less familiar with is probably that research over the last two-three decades in disciplines such as 'cognitive psychology/psycholinguistics' have contributed to a better understanding of automatization as a basic condition for fluency and spontaneous speech (cf. de Bot 1996). The theory of language use as a complex cognitive skill is fundamental in this way of thinking. By 'complex' is meant, among other things, that the act of speaking proceeds through several phases (a hierarchy of goals) from the goal of expressing a particular intention in speaking to the goal of choosing linguistic form (cf. Levelt 1989 and McLaughlin 1990). The crucial key word both for 'old' and new theories is automatization (cf. Towell et al 1996 and Levelt 1989; both works thoroughly explained in Hasselgreen 2004). It is considered especially critical that the last phase, the choice of linguistic form, is automatized (discussed in Simensen 2007, pp. 84-85). In other words, like in many other complex cognitive skills, an automatization of sub-skills is needed to allow the language user to be able to do "more than one thing at the same time" (Johnson 1996, p. 44). Examples from various sports are, in fact, sometimes given to exemplify this in the literature. And as to fluency, it develops as more sub-skills become automatic (Chambers 1997). Phrased in a different way, fluency may be regarded as a parameter of how well various language competences and skills can be mobilized.

In the discipline 'cognitive psychology', the limited capacity of short-term memory is emphasized and repeatedly dealt with. Basically, the limitation of the short-term memory means that for a speaker there is quite simply very restricted capacity for reflecting on the purpose and the meaning of an utterance *at the same time as* he/she is retrieving appropriate words and expressions to convey it. However, a speaker who can retrieve linguistic forms from a substantial store of automatized language in long-term memory releases mental capacity, which he/she can use for the meaningful aspects of speaking.

The implications for teaching seem clear. The crucial argument is that time- and capacity-consuming controlled processing is inevitable when the store in long-term memory is non-existent or inadequate. Thus, systematic training in language forms, from 'small words' to longer sequences, should be regarded as the key factor in an upgrading of capability from controlled to automatic processing. Top priority must, for example, be given to automatic processing and fluency in the teaching of pupils and students who will have to cope professionally in English on the international arena. Research on the specific needs of pupils and students on this point and on the most efficient methods of teaching will have to be undertaken in the years to come, including taking the

age of the learners into consideration. This is often expressed as ‘the critical period hypothesis’ (for an explanation, see Simensen 2007, pp. 48-49).

Conclusion

The purpose of the present article has been to study the concept ‘fluency’ from a variety of perspectives. An important point has been to discuss some of the most central studies over the last two-three decades that deal with this concept. Not only speech rate but also frequency and types of pauses and hesitations have been studied, and differences on these points in the speech of mother tongue and foreign or second language speakers have been distinguished. Among the findings is the greater share of filled pauses in mother tongue speech and in the speech of foreign or second language speakers assessed as more fluent. In this connection, the teaching of set phrases/formulaic expressions to improve fluency has been considered.

The place of fluency in the development of teaching theory has furthermore been studied in the article, and the gradual inclusion of the concept in approaches to teaching has been explicated as a result of a more comprehensive and communicative conception of language proficiency being accepted as an important aim in teaching. Next, the analysis of syllabus documents in a school system well known to the author, the Norwegian, has revealed that fluency finally appeared as an aim in teaching in the syllabus of 2006. The influence of the Council of Europe-document *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment* was obvious.

On the basis of crucial contemporary conceptions about teaching and learning, the final section of the article has outlined two key implications for the teaching of fluency. The first is that pupils and students should be taught to use ‘small-words’, set phrases etc. The second is that teaching should ensure an automatization of sub-skills in the sense that pupils and students in this way will accumulate a substantial store of words and sequences of language in long-term memory. Central fields of future research have been suggested, among other things, how an educational system should meet the challenge of the new varieties of English appearing.

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² The terms 'foreign' or 'second language' will be used when appropriate. I will use the phrases 'foreign languages' and 'foreign language teaching/learning' to include English, although, for example, the current discourse of the Norwegian educational authorities does not include English among the foreign language school subjects (cf. *Kunnskapsløftet* 2006).