Fluency and Accuracy in Communication

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Abstract

English is an international language and people from all over the world learn it in order to communicate with each other. Communication skills are very important for overall success in life. Proficiency in each of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing is necessary to become a well-rounded communicator. The ability to speak skillfully provides the speaker with several distinct advantages.

Undoubtedly, accuracy and fluency in communication are two factors which can determine the success of English language students in the future. Essentially, accuracy is the ability to produce correct sentences using correct grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, fluency is the ability to produce language easily and smoothly. A speaker who has mastered accuracy and fluency in communication has these added advantages - the ability to inform, persuade and direct, the ability to stand out from the rest, the ability to benefit derivatively and career enhancement.

One important point to bear in mind, however, is that too much bias one way or another is not good. Accuracy without fluency is not useful in the same way fluency without accuracy is also not useful. A good mixture - biased towards the needs of the student- is the ideal way to go.

Keywords: communication skills, fluency in communication, accuracy and fluency, oral fluency, effective communication, second language acquisition, vocabulary strategies

Communication

Communication (from Latin 'communicare', meaning "to share") is the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules. The main steps inherent to all communication are motivation or reason, message composition, message encoding, transmission, reception, decoding and interpretation. Lack of fluency and accuracy in any one or more of the steps mentioned above steps will be a barrier to effective communication.

Accuracy and fluency are two key components of second language acquisition. In the current world scenario, learning the usage of grammar and focusing on accuracy are emphasized by many language students over fluency. Accuracy in communication is associated with these ideas: clear and articulate speaking or writing, language free from grammar mistakes, words spelled and/or pronounced correctly and language appropriate to the situation and/or context. On the other hand, fluency in communication is associated with: the ability to produce written and/or spoken language with ease, speaking with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary and grammar, communicating ideas effectively and producing continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown in communication.

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Varying definitions of fluency characterize it by the language user's automaticity in their speed and coherency of language use, or the length and rate of their speech output. Theories of automaticity postulate that more fluent language users can manage all the components of language use without paying attention to each individual component of the act. In other words, fluency is achieved when one can access language knowledge and produce language unconsciously, or automatically. Theories that focus on speed or length and rate of speech typically expect fluent language users to produce language in real time without unusual pauses, false starts, or repetitions. Fluency is sometimes considered to be a measure of performance, rather than an indicator of more concrete language knowledge, and thus perception and understandability are often key ways that fluency is understood. Language fluency is sometimes contrasted with accuracy (or correctness of language use, especially grammatical correctness) and complexity (or a more encompassing knowledge of vocabulary and discourse strategies). Fluency, accuracy, and complexity are distinct but interrelated components of language acquisition and proficiency.

Types of Fluency

Fluency can be categorized into four types. These types of fluency as mentioned hereafter are interrelated, but do not necessarily develop in tandem or linearly. **Reading fluency** refers to the link between the recognition of words while reading and which manifests itself in the speed and accuracy with which one is able to read a text. To achieve reading fluency, readers must have knowledge of the content of the language as well as the vocabulary being used. **Oral fluency** or **speaking fluency** is a measurement both of production and reception of speech, as a fluent speaker must be able to understand and respond to others in conversation. Spoken language is typically characterized by non-fluent qualities (fragmentation, pauses, false starts, hesitation, repetition) because of 'task stress'. How orally fluent one is can therefore be understood in terms of perception, and whether these qualities of speech can be perceived as expected and natural (fluent) or unusual and problematic (non-fluent). **Oral reading fluency** refers to the ability to read words accurately and quickly while using good vocal expression and phrasing. Oral reading fluency is often linked to Schreiber's Theory of Prosody, which places importance on the tone, rhythm, and expressiveness of speech. According to many researchers, **written or compositional fluency** can be measured by length of the composition, words produced per minute, sentence length, or words per clause. Ratio measures (words per clause, words per sentence, and words per error-free sentence) have been most valid and reliable.

Language as the chief means of communication is not spoken in a vacuum. Knowing a language is not merely knowing the grammatical rules but also knowing when to say what and to whom, that is knowledge of how the system is put to use in the performance of social actions of different kinds. A general problem faced by language teachers today, is whether to focus on accuracy or fluency. Generally, language teachers have had to deal with heterogeneous students having different language backgrounds and language skills, different world views, age levels, experiences and point of view. Some students are accurate in speaking and writing but hesitate to speak in public. On the other hand, few students are fluent but not accurate. Every student wants to be accurate as well as fluent in speaking and writing. But there are many variables and kinds of learners and differences in classroom that makes teaching sometimes very challenging and interesting. In our language classes we go through many activities to develop accuracy and fluency in reading, writing, listening and speaking. Brumfit distinguishes between these two activities, "extensive reading is aimed at fluency, but much intensive reading work is aimed at accuracy; free and situational writing exercises are aimed at fluency, but all controlled and much guided writing is aimed at accuracy; listening exercises are aimed at accuracy but casual listening in the classroom has a major role as a fluency activity". (Brumfit, 1984)

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The learner is the most important person in the classroom. The learner centered class treats students as a "tabula rasa" or a clear slate to be worked over and changed by new knowledge. Communication in natural and meaningful atmosphere, integration of skills, real life (authentic) material, learning by doing, class organization- individual, pair/ group/ whole, focus on meaning, learner involvement, teacher as felicitator, extending language use beyond the class, focus on using the language and focus on the process as opposed to product are some of the methods that can enable a learner-centered teacher to facilitate the process of acquiring accuracy and fluency among learners.

It is important to first analyze the differences in various aspects concerned with the activities for improving accuracy and fluency in communication. This analysis will enable the teacher to accordingly manipulate the activities for improving and fostering fluency and accuracy among the learners. As far as activities associated with accuracy are concerned, the students' attention is focused on a particular target. The output obtained through accuracy-based activities is usually predictable. The learners' performance in accuracy-oriented activities is assessed on how some language errors are made. The errors made by the learners are usually corrected. Accuracy-oriented tasks do not usually simulate real-life situations. On the other hand, the learners' attention in fluency-based activities is focused on communicating information and expressing ideas. The learners' output here may not always be predictable. The performance of the learners in fluency-based activities is assessed on how well ideas are expressed or understood. The errors made by the learners are not corrected unless it interferes with communication. Fluency-oriented tasks often simulate real-life situations.

Approaches for Fostering Accuracy and Fluency

The approach for fostering accuracy and fluency is a matter to be taken seriously. Fluency-based activities need to be introduced in the language classes and learners' involvement should be increased. The teacher should motivate and create tasks for the language skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking and let them free to express themselves in natural classroom situations. In the second language classroom, students should be free to choose what they say within "real time". The concept of selection or the freedom of expression is the basis to the process of fluent communication. Outside the classroom the students constantly and spontaneously interact. Errors can be made by the learners due to many reasons, but errors should be taken as significant evidence of development and learning. Teachers should not over-emphasize on accuracy and fluency because it can make the learners lose their confidence. In the case of second language there should be a gradual shift from fluency-based activities to accuracy-based activities. Motivation is an important factor in oral communication and helps a great deal in achieving the desired result. To sum up, it is most important to give the learner as much exposure as possible to practice the language.

Conclusion

It is possible to foster accuracy and fluency in communicative language teaching and many of us would agree that accuracy is indispensable to improving fluency. In fact, both are mutually influential. Accuracy brings fluency and fluency brings further accuracy. Accuracy and fluency are not contradictory, but rather like two pillars that support the spiral stairs towards communicative competence.

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