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Focusing on Fluency: Boosting Speaking Skills in Foreign Language Acquisition

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Abstract :

The acquisition of a foreign language opens up a myriad of opportunities and experiences, ranging from enhanced career prospects to deeper cultural understanding. Among the four primary language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—speaking fluently is often considered the most challenging to master. This paper addresses the significance of focusing on fluency in speaking skills within the context of foreign language acquisition. It examines strategies and methodologies that can aid learners in overcoming barriers to fluency, thereby enhancing their overall language learning experience. Ultimately, the journey to fluency is a rewarding experience that opens doors to a world of opportunities.

Keywords: *speaking, skills, fluency, foreign language, learning/teaching.*

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Introduction

Fluency in speaking is often considered the ultimate goal in foreign language acquisition. Language learners frequently aspire to speak effortlessly, without hesitation, and with the ability to navigate complex social and professional interactions in the target language. While reading, writing, and listening comprehension are important components of language proficiency, speaking fluently is the skill that allows learners to actively engage with others and participate meaningfully in communicative exchanges. Achieving speaking fluency, however, is not a simple matter of acquiring vocabulary or memorizing grammatical structures. It involves the ability to use language spontaneously, manage conversational flow, and overcome communication challenges in real time. As such, it requires not just knowledge of the language, but also the development of cognitive and psychological strategies to facilitate smooth communication.

Nation and Newton (2009) emphasize that "fluency is often regarded as a key indicator of language proficiency, representing the speaker's ability to produce language spontaneously, quickly, and without significant hesitation" (p. 152), which shows why speaking fluently is a primary goal for many language learners, especially since it allows them to participate meaningfully in communicative exchanges. Furthermore, "the entire concept of synchronicity, the ability to connect to a contemporary platform of teaching, has fostered significant necessities for adaptation" (Lăpădat, 2020:139), which pinpoints the need for educators to balance traditional methods with modern, adaptable teaching techniques to meet the demands of fluency in today's communicative contexts.

In this paper, we will explore the key factors that contribute to speaking fluency in foreign language acquisition. Specifically, we will look at the relationship between fluency and accuracy, the role of interaction in language learning, the importance of input, and the psychological factors, such as anxiety, that can influence speaking ability. Finally, we will discuss effective strategies for enhancing speaking fluency and offer practical recommendations for learners and educators alike.

Defining Fluency in Language Acquisition

Fluency in language learning is often understood as the ability to produce spoken language smoothly and effortlessly, with minimal hesitation. Fluency is not synonymous with grammatical accuracy or the correct use of syntax; rather, it refers to the ability to communicate ideas clearly and fluidly, even if minor mistakes occur along the way. In this sense, Skehan (1996) describes fluency as the "ability to communicate ideas in an uninterrupted, smooth, and efficient manner, without the cognitive load of focusing on form" (p. 46). This definition highlights that, unlike accuracy, fluency involves a speaker's capacity to articulate thoughts seamlessly and adaptively, fostering meaningful conversation and interaction.

Developing fluency also requires an awareness of the structural differences between native and target languages. One needs to recognise the differences between native and target languages in order to enhance fluency: "learning a foreign language can be challenging due to the fact that in the first stage, the learner will automatically try to connect the syntax of the new language to the set of grammar rules that exist in his mother-tongue" (Stoian, 2021:149). This observation turns the attention to the necessity for learners to identify and adapt to these structural differences to achieve greater speaking fluency.

Additionally, fluency involves speaking with natural rhythm and pace, without overly pausing to search for words or grammar rules. For learners, the primary challenge in developing fluency is overcoming the initial hesitation and anxiety that comes with speaking a foreign language. Fluency allows for quicker processing and quicker production of language, facilitating the natural exchange of ideas and fostering deeper, more meaningful conversations.

Fluency is often considered the ultimate measure of success in second language acquisition (SLA). In communicative contexts, the ability to express oneself with ease, adapt to new situations, and maintain conversations in real-time is a valuable skill. It is important to recognize, however, that fluency is not a static state. It is a developmental process that occurs over time and depends on a variety of factors including practice, exposure, and psychological readiness. Fluency is shaped by both external factors such as the availability of language input and interaction opportunities, as well as internal factors like the learner's cognitive strategies and emotional disposition.

Fluency vs. Accuracy: Finding a Balance

One of the most significant challenges in language acquisition is balancing fluency with accuracy. While fluency emphasizes the natural and fluid use of language, accuracy involves the correct application of grammatical rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Early language learning models emphasized the importance of accuracy, with teachers focusing on correcting mistakes and providing explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary. Ellis (2005) notes that "while fluency and accuracy are often seen as competing aspects of language performance, a balanced approach can foster a more complete language competence, allowing learners to communicate both effectively and accurately" (p. 159), suggesting a balanced approach in which learners benefit most when fluency practice is paired with corrective feedback, allowing them to speak freely while refining their accuracy over time. However, this focus on accuracy alone can inadvertently lead to slower speech, as learners may become overly cautious and hesitant when speaking.

In contrast, an overemphasis on fluency—encouraging students to speak freely without concern for mistakes—can lead to the development of fossilized errors. Fossilization occurs when errors become ingrained and difficult to correct over time. The challenge, therefore, is to strike a balance between fluency and accuracy. Language learners should be encouraged to speak freely and express their thoughts without fear of making mistakes, but they also need opportunities to refine their accuracy through feedback and correction. In this regard, we can say that developing fluency in a foreign language requires prioritizing effective communication over strict grammatical accuracy, viewing grammar as a step within the broader goal of achieving smooth, successful exchanges of ideas (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2020:146). This approach suggests that while grammar contributes to language learning, true fluency arises from the ability to communicate confidently in real-life situations.

Research has shown that learners who focus solely on accuracy tend to produce slower, more fragmented speech, as they are preoccupied with the mechanics of the language. This often results in a process of thinking in the native language, translating into the target language, and then trying to produce a perfect sentence. In contrast, learners who focus on fluency may initially make more errors, but their speech tends to be smoother, and they are more likely to communicate effectively overall.

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The ideal approach is to integrate both fluency and accuracy, recognizing that the two elements complement each other. Fluency practice, through conversation, storytelling, and other interactive tasks—helps learners develop confidence and automaticity in language production. At the same time, learners should receive corrective feedback on their errors, ensuring that they are aware of and can address mistakes when they occur. Over time, with repeated exposure to the target language and consistent practice, learners can improve both their fluency and accuracy, integrating these elements into their overall communicative competence.

The Role of Interaction in Developing Fluency

Interaction is essential in the development of speaking fluency. In the process of language acquisition, interaction provides learners with the opportunity to use language in authentic communicative situations, which is far more beneficial for fluency development than isolated drills or passive listening activities. Long (1983) underscores the value of interaction, arguing that it "provides learners with opportunities to use language in meaningful exchanges, thereby enhancing both their fluency and their confidence in using the target language" (p. 134). Through interactions, learners gain the chance to practice language in context, helping them to adjust their speech based on feedback and develop a more natural conversational flow. Therefore, speaking in real-time, with the need to respond quickly and appropriately to another person, provides the kind of dynamic environment where learners can practice and refine their language skills.

Language is learned most effectively through social interaction. Theories of second language acquisition, particularly the interaction hypothesis, argue that learners benefit from negotiating meaning during conversations, which enables them to adjust their language use based on feedback from their interlocutors. This negotiation of meaning—where learners clarify, rephrase, and ask for confirmation—provides crucial feedback that helps them adjust their language use and develop fluency. Furthermore, the pressure of real-world communication forces learners to become more adaptive and creative in their use of language, encouraging the development of both spoken fluency and pragmatic competence.

Interactive activities—such as role-plays, group discussions, and problem-solving tasks—can help learners practice real-life language use in a controlled, low-stakes setting. These activities allow learners to rehearse language that is relevant to their needs, whether it is ordering food at a restaurant, negotiating in a business meeting, or making small talk at a social gathering. Through repeated practice in these interactive contexts, learners become more confident in their ability to express themselves in the target language.

Moreover, peer interaction offers the added benefit of mutual support. Learners can help each other, offer feedback, and collaborate on solving communication problems. In a supportive group setting, learners feel more comfortable taking risks and experimenting with the language, which accelerates the development of fluency.

Input and Fluency Development

Input is another necessary component of developing speaking fluency. In the context of language learning, input refers to language that learners are exposed to through listening or reading. Comprehensible input—the type of language that is slightly above a learner's current level but still understandable—is critical for acquiring new

vocabulary and grammatical structures. When learners are exposed to rich, varied, and contextualized input, they are better able to internalize language patterns and incorporate them into their speaking repertoire. Krashen (1985) highlights that "comprehensible input is essential in language acquisition, as it provides learners with the language structures and vocabulary needed to facilitate spontaneous, fluent speech" (p. 62). When learners encounter rich and varied input, they internalize language patterns and structures that ultimately support fluent, unhesitating speech in real-world settings.

For speaking fluency, input helps learners develop automaticity, which refers to the ability to produce language without conscious thought. The more exposure learners have to authentic language, the more they internalize the structures, vocabulary, and speech patterns used by native speakers. For example, watching movies, listening to podcasts, or engaging with other forms of media in the target language provides learners with valuable input that they can use in conversations. This input helps learners familiarize themselves with common expressions, idioms, and conversational strategies, all of which contribute to fluency.

It is important to note that input should be both extensive and varied. Learners who are exposed to a wide range of linguistic contexts—such as different accents, registers, and topics—are better able to handle the diversity of language use they will encounter in real-world interactions. Regular and varied input provides learners with the tools they need to adapt to different communicative situations, whether they are engaging in formal discussions or casual, everyday conversations.

While input alone is not sufficient to develop speaking fluency, it provides the raw material that learners need to produce language spontaneously. Without sufficient exposure to language input, learners may struggle to produce accurate and fluent speech, as they simply do not have enough linguistic material to draw upon.

Psychological Factors: Anxiety and Confidence

One of the biggest obstacles to speaking fluently in a foreign language is anxiety. Many language learners experience significant anxiety when asked to speak in the target language, especially in a public or high-stakes setting. This anxiety can stem from fear of making mistakes, being judged by others, or feeling that one's language proficiency is inadequate. This fear can lead to avoidance behaviour, such as not participating in class discussions or refusing to engage in conversations with native speakers. Anxiety can also result in physical symptoms—such as a dry mouth or shaking hands—that further exacerbate the problem. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) observe that "anxiety can negatively impact language performance by creating a cognitive burden that hinders learners' ability to focus on language processing and fluent production" (p. 127). Overcoming this challenge requires supportive learning environments where mistakes are seen as part of the growth process, helping learners to build confidence and reduce anxiety over time.

Anxiety directly affects fluency because it increases hesitation and impairs cognitive processing. When learners are anxious, they are more likely to focus on their mistakes or fear of failure, rather than on the content of the conversation. This mental distraction interferes with the natural flow of speech and makes it more difficult for learners to speak confidently and fluidly.

To mitigate the effects of anxiety, learners should be encouraged to create a positive, supportive environment where mistakes are viewed as a natural and necessary part of the learning process. Teachers and peers can help alleviate anxiety by offering

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constructive feedback, focusing on the progress learners have made, and fostering a growth mindset. Encouraging risk-taking and celebrating mistakes as learning opportunities can help reduce anxiety and improve fluency over time.

Confidence also plays a central role in fluency development. Learners who believe in their ability to communicate in the target language are more likely to engage in speaking practice and seek out opportunities to interact. Building confidence can be achieved through consistent practice, positive reinforcement, and gradual exposure to more challenging language tasks. As learners gain experience and see improvements in their ability to communicate, their confidence grows, and they become more comfortable speaking fluently.

Recognizing individual learning styles is essential for understanding and supporting language acquisition, as they "are a valuable contribution to the psychoeducational diagnosis" (Scorțan, 2021:150), providing insights into each learner's cognitive preferences. Tailoring instructional methods to align with these preferences creates a more personalized approach that can alleviate anxiety and build confidence—two critical psychological factors in developing fluency. When learners feel understood and see their unique needs addressed, they are more likely to engage openly in speaking exercises, taking risks without fear of judgment (Lăpădat and Lăpădat, 2023). This personalized approach not only boosts motivation but also enhances speaking fluency, as learners develop the confidence to navigate real-life communication situations. Emphasizing learning styles as part of fluency-building acknowledges the psychological underpinnings of language acquisition, underscoring the need for adaptive teaching methods to create a supportive, anxiety-reducing environment.

Strategies for Enhancing Speaking Fluency

To develop speaking fluency in a foreign language, learners can adopt a range of effective strategies that target different aspects of spoken communication, including pronunciation, vocabulary, listening comprehension, and real-world interaction. These practices are designed not only to improve fluency but also to build confidence and adaptability in various communicative contexts.

Shadowing: Shadowing involves repeating what a native speaker says in real-time, often directly following along with audio recordings, podcasts, or videos. This technique helps learners refine their pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation by closely mimicking native speakers' speech patterns. By practicing the natural flow of spoken language, learners become more comfortable with the cadence and inflection used by native speakers, which enhances their ability to sound more authentic. Shadowing also promotes faster processing speeds and improves learners' ability to speak without lengthy pauses, both of which are crucial for fluency.

Role-playing and Simulations: Role-playing is a powerful tool for practicing specific speaking scenarios. Whether it is simulating a job interview, participating in a debate, or pretending to navigate a social situation, role-playing allows learners to practice speaking in a variety of contexts and use language that is relevant to their needs. Thornbury (2005) advocates for role-playing, noting that it "provides opportunities for learners to practice communicative tasks in a supportive environment, building confidence and fluency in speaking" (p. 97). By engaging in these simulated scenarios and repeated practice, learners become more comfortable with spontaneous speaking, which is key to enhancing their fluency and adaptability.

Extensive Listening and Speaking Practice: Engaging regularly with authentic materials, such as movies, TV shows, podcasts, and real conversations with native speakers, exposes learners to the language as it is naturally used. Listening to authentic content familiarizes learners with common phrases, idioms, and informal expressions, which are essential for fluid communication. Additionally, practicing conversation with native speakers enables learners to internalize language patterns, making it easier to respond naturally and quickly. This consistent exposure fosters automaticity—the ability to produce language without conscious thought—which is fundamental to speaking fluency.

Using Technology: Language exchange apps, online conversation platforms, and speech recognition software can provide learners with opportunities to practice speaking and receive immediate feedback. These technological tools make it easier to find conversation partners and practice speaking regularly, regardless of geographic location. As “the symbiosis between computer technology and education can no longer be denied or overlooked” (Bărbuceanu, 2022:241), e-learning has reshaped the educational landscape, making it easier for learners to access diverse conversation partners and practice speaking regularly, regardless of geographic location. By leveraging these digital resources, students can enhance their fluency through consistent practice and interaction, supported by the immediacy and accessibility that technology now offers.

Regular Conversation Practice: Frequent conversation with native speakers, language exchange partners, or fellow learners is one of the most effective ways to improve speaking fluency. Regular conversation practice reinforces vocabulary, grammatical structures, and cultural expressions learned through input while helping learners build confidence in their speaking abilities. Engaging in real conversations provides essential opportunities to navigate the unpredictability of spoken language, make on-the-spot adjustments, and respond appropriately in different contexts. As learners practice frequently, they become more comfortable speaking spontaneously and maintaining the natural flow of language, which are critical for achieving conversational fluency.

Conclusion

Fluency development should be viewed as an integrated process that requires consistent practice, varied input, and confidence-building strategies. Richards (2008) argues that “fluency development should be considered as a multi-faceted process, incorporating practice, exposure, and confidence-building in order to foster real-world communication competence” (p. 19). This holistic approach prepares language learners for meaningful communication across diverse cultural and professional contexts, highlighting the critical role fluency plays in effective interaction. Achieving speaking fluency requires a comprehensive approach that integrates interactive practice, exposure to authentic input, and the development of cognitive and emotional strategies to manage communication. By balancing fluency and accuracy, engaging in interactive learning environments, and embracing opportunities for real-world communication, learners can gradually build the confidence and competence necessary to speak fluently in their target language. As language learners continue to engage with the global community, the importance of fluency cannot be overstated, as it enables meaningful, effective communication across cultures and contexts.

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Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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