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## Enhancing Oral Fluency as a Linguodidactic Issue

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### Abstract

The research reviews the problem of enhancing oral fluency during a course of General English for technical learners. The range of issues discussed includes the concept of fluency, criteria for its assessment, and the factors hindering it. The methodology suggested is designed in the framework of the cognitive-communicative approach and incorporates regular free-talking sessions, talks focused on language problems and discussions centered on pop-music. The methodology stimulates the learners' motivation for developing prosodic and grammatical skills, contributes to the growth of pragmatic competence and linguistic competence, which are indispensable conditions of oral fluency as a characteristic feature of L2 proficiency.

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### 1. Introduction

According to the competence approach, the ability of interacting verbally is regarded as a natural outcome of language teaching and learning. One of the major characteristics of communicative competence is fluency. Oral fluency is a specific feature characterizing the level of speaking skills which manifests itself in the learner's ability to speak freely, without unnecessary pausing and with the prosody of speech, syntax and vocabulary range comparable with those characteristic of the speech of a native speaker (Polyakov & Tormyshova, 2014, p. 168). It requires a

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considerably high level of achievement. Therefore, fluency is regarded "a performance descriptor for oral assessment of foreign language learners and as an indicator of progress in language learning" (Chambers, 1997, p. 535). It makes speech comprehensible, becoming one of the conditions which ensure successful communication.

However, the educators in Russia working in the field of language teaching have been still striving to combat the legacy left by the times of "the iron curtain" when foreign languages, though being a compulsory subject at schools and universities, were never actually taught for the sake of verbal discourse. In spite of the fact that for the last 30 years some Russian citizens have been traveling around the world more and developing international contacts in business and education, for the majority of the population in this country learning English has not yet become an essential need. Consequently, most schoolchildren study English just because it is required by the curriculum, but not because they are aware of the practical purpose of language learning. It accounts for the fact that a large number of university undergraduates (as former schoolchildren), display a low level of language proficiency and are not motivated for language study, at least at the beginning of the language course at universities. Learning English is viewed by undergraduates as a hypothetically useful option for prospective employment rather than a driving need of the present day.

We can raise the question of why this attitude to learning L2, idiomatically saying "for a rainy day", should be viewed as a problem. The answer implies at least two basic reasons. The first reason is that undergraduates prefer to meet bear minimum requirements and are not enthusiastic to grasp as much knowledge, acquire and develop as many skills as they would if they were learning L2 with the full awareness of its practical value. Keeping in mind that language study needs regular and intense practice to make developing communicative skills achievable, unenthusiastic studying brings unsatisfying results. The second reason, which in a certain way, results from the formalistic approach to studying and the lack of the awareness of the practical purpose of language study, is that undergraduates display low motivation for verbal discourse in L2. Here are the conditions in which the challenging task of developing learners' oral fluency has to be addressed.

The goal of this research is to review the range of issues related to oral fluency as a linguodidactic problem, which includes the concept of fluency, criteria for its assessment, the factors hindering it and identifying the approach to develop it when teaching technical learners. The research was conducted at the Institute of Power Engineering at Tomsk Polytechnic University.

## **2. Background**

It has to be noted that fluency was primarily viewed as a psychological problem. In cognitive psychology it is understood as the ease of processing information by the brain as a result of recognizing familiar stimuli, to which both objects and experiences refer (Jacoby & Dallas, 1981; Berlyne, 1971; Reber, et al., 2004). Perceptual fluency reveals the level of the performance of mental functions such as thinking, perception, memory, attention and a few others. Further on, perceptual fluency began to be regarded in relevance to the process of learning - a much broader process, having perception of information in its root and then followed by a number of mental operations for the purpose of digesting and assimilating perceived facts and, when necessary, producing new knowledge.

Consequently, fluency has become a pedagogical problem, and later on developed into an issue for linguodidactics. The goal of enhancing fluency is relevant to the range of language skills including speaking, reading, listening, both in the native and foreign languages. In this paper focused on oral fluency we naturally deal with speaking, and narrow the research to speaking L2. Oral fluency continues to draw the attention of the researchers (Segalowitz, 2010; Shakhtakhtinskaya, 2008; Thornbury, 2008, p. 1-11; De Jong & Perfetti, 2004; Pinget, et al., 2014; Polyakov & Tormyshova, 2014; Mirdamadi & De Jong, 2015). In linguodidactics fluency is viewed as a result of developed skills (Chambers, 1997). Language proficiency as a result of skill-learning implies the integration of a cognitive and a behavioral aspect in language learning. The cognitive aspect refers to the language system, which are defined as "plans" and the behavioral aspect is associated with converting language knowledge into fluent performance (Littlewood, 1984, p. 74) in definite situations. The consideration of the cognitive aspect in language teaching process means that attention is paid to how data is sorted and organized in the learners' minds to ensure the efficient application of knowledge and skills in the present or future.

Since the notion of fluency is applied in the reference to evaluating performance, quantitative and qualitative criteria have been isolated to measure oral fluency (Kawauchi, 1997; Bosker, et al., 2013; Raddaoui, 1997, p. 13-19;

Thornbury, 2008, p. 7-8; Polyakov & Tormyshova, 2014, p. 168-169). The quantitative criteria include pause rate and position, speech rate (or word density), the skill of dividing speech into sense-groups, the skills of shortening and filling in pauses. To these criteria we would like to suggest adding the duration of a fluent conversation on a given occasion. The qualitative criteria refer to the characteristics of the language means, such as correctness of pronunciation and grammar, vocabulary richness, diversity and complexity, precision in the choice of vocabulary, complexity of syntax, coherence, idiomaticity, and the absence of unnecessary repetitions. There is a clear tendency in teaching methodology to review the qualitative criteria of evaluating fluency as more significant than the quantitative ones (Polyakov & Tormyshova, 2014, p. 169), due to the fact that the former are relevant to communicative competence as the ability to receive and transmit information.

The challenge of enhancing oral fluency has to be addressed through building a close connection between theory and practice. In this respect we should keep in mind the three theories of language learning applicable to teaching speaking, to which behaviorist, cognitivist and sociocultural theory are referred (Thornbury, 2008, p. 37-39). It means that meeting all the teaching tasks connected with developing speaking skills, including the goal of enhancing oral fluency, can be resolved the approaches fitting into these theories.

### **3. Research Objectives and Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research Objectives*

It was hypothesized the problem of enhancing fluency is successfully addressed by the cognitive-communicative approach. Based on the immediate connection between cognition and communication, blended with the research on activity and critical thinking as dominant driving forces in learning promoted by Vygotsky (1934), Leont'ev (1983), Solso (2006), Piaget (1951), Maslow (1970), Vygotsky (1934) and the humanistic ideas of Gattegno (1972), the cognitive-communicative approach represents the accumulation of the most significant features of the activity-based, communicative, cognitive and personality-oriented approaches with a focus on extracting, obtaining, processing and organizing knowledge and generating new knowledge. This approach does not only holds the benefit of the cognitive approach, which helps the learner to create "... a system which remains open to noticing and to change" (Skehan, 2008: 91), but also provides multiple opportunities for interaction combined with awareness-raising.

There have been two stages in the research. The preliminary stage was aimed at identifying and analyzing the major factors hindering the development of learners' oral fluency. The major stage of the research was aimed at developing and testing the methodology for enhancing learners' oral fluency. The research involved two groups of sophomores with the total number of 24 learners who were taking their General English language course.

#### *3.2. The preliminary stage of the research*

At the preliminary stage the following activities were performed:

- the assessment of the level of learners' fluency
- the analysis of the major factors hindering the development of fluent speaking skills

The degree of fluency was estimated using such a communicative activity as 'free-talking'. The activity implies free verbal interaction in a group of two or three students, which was unrestricted by a single topic or situation. It was found out that at the beginning of the year only 29.19% of learners in the tested groups (titled in the research as "Relatively fluent speakers") were willing to participate immediately in the free-talking activities. In terms of quantitative criteria of fluency, the speech of those learners was characterized by proper pausing and a good rate; however, displayed a number of deficiencies (Table 1). The average time of a fluent verbal exchange during a free-talking session was 2.5 minutes. 50% of the learners (the group titled as "Non-fluent speakers") started the free-talking sessions with much reluctance and lack of confidence, constantly asking the teacher for help about grammar and vocabulary, or simply switching to the native language. The problems experienced by the learners testified to the low level of prosodic and grammar skills, as well as limited vocabulary richness. The average time of a conversation was 40 seconds, but it was not fluent in the genuine meaning of the word, since the learners would interrupt talking,

switch to the native language and made a lot of unnecessary pausing when formulating their ideas. 21% of the learners (titled as "Ineffective speakers") just started the free-talking sessions, but failed carry on, either not finding topics for discussion, or lacking the knowledge and skills to develop them. The average time of a fluent conversation was 20 seconds, and it was limited to a formal exchange of greeting phrases, often pronounced with negligence to the typical intonation patterns in English.

Table 1. Learners' grouping according to degree of fluency at the start of the research.

Grouping of learners graded by fluency	Number of learners	Deficiencies identified (listed by the degree of importance)	Average time of a free-talking session	Number of topics discussed during a free-talking session
Relatively fluent speakers	7 (29.16%)	Prosodic skills (in emphatic speech) Vocabulary richness & complexity Idiomatycity	2.5 min.	1-2
Non-fluent speakers	12 49.99%	Grammar skills Repair skills Coherence Prosodic skills (in regular and emphatic speech) Vocabulary richness & complexity Idiomatycity	40 sec.	1
Ineffective speakers	5 20.83%	Grammar skills Repair skills Coherence Vocabulary richness & complexity Prosodic skills (in regular and emphatic speech)	20 sec.	1

In the course of the analysis of the learners' conversations during the free-talking sessions, it was found out that nearly all the learners needed improvement on the skills important for developing fluency: 20 out of 24 students required the development of prosodic skills (pronunciation, stress and intonation), 18 students had unsatisfactory repair skills, 17 students had serious problems with coherence, and all the students needed improvement in vocabulary and idiomatycity.

The research highlighted that oral fluency was severely hindered the learners' low motivation for verbal interaction, which resulted from the two major factors: learners' lack of pragmatic competence and lack of linguistic competence. Among the definitions of pragmatic competence, we tend to side with the one that views it in terms of the knowledge and skills of building utterances conveying various communicative functions (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2003, p. 122), and agree with Bachman (2008) that it is a complex phenomenon which includes illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence (Bachman, 2008, p. 87). The deficiencies in pragmatic competence were also manifested in the poor skills of carrying on coherent conversations compiled of logically-dependent utterances with regard to the topic, the cause-effect relationship and discursive integrity. In the course of such chaotic and illogical conversations the learners were able to share too little information, which degraded their motivation for talking.

The overall analysis of the most common deficiencies in terms of linguistic competence, as they were seen by the learners, is presented in Table 2. It was peculiar that none of the students mentioned the prosody of speech as a problem area, which testifies to the fact that phonology had been totally neglected by the technical learners.

Table 2. Learners' view on their deficiencies in linguistic competence.

Word order	Use of tenses	Use of prepositions	Use of articles	Use of the gerund	Limited vocabulary
45.76% (11 st.)	95.83% (23 st.)	62.55% (15 st.)	58.24% (14 st.)	21% (5 st.)	91.22% (22 st.)

### 3.3. The major stage of the research

The major stage of the research included:

- developing the methodology for eliminating the negative factors hindering learners' oral fluency
- designing and implementing the methodology for enhancing fluency
- assessment of the results

The methodology for enhancing oral fluency of technical learners, developed in the framework of the cognitive-communicative approach, among other communicative language teaching activities (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, p. 107-108; Thornbury, 2008, p. 96-109), involved three basis elements: 1) regular free-talking sessions, 2) talks focused on language problems, 3) discussions centered around pop-music.

Regular free-talking sessions were conducted in most of the classes during the study year. At the beginning of a class, after greeting the group and announcing the plan for the lesson, the instructor gave the students time to chat with each other in English about whatever they were finding interesting. The students usually discussed such topics as the events of the previous day, their homework in other subjects, weekend activities, the films they had recently seen, sports events they had taken part in or watched on TV. One of the greatest values of free discussions is that they "...allow opportunity to practice strategies required in interpersonal communication" (Hedge, 2000, p. 277). It was due to this value that the learners started to care for stress and intonation, since in real-time situations the necessity of using emphatic intonation patterns came very natural, and the learners got the motivation to strengthen their prosodic skills through a range of other activities.

As for the instructor's role during this free-talking activity, it was to assist the learners to reduce the deficiencies in pragmatic competence by helping them arranging the words in sentences, developing repair strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication, showing the ways for extending their conversations and resolving any language problems so that the learners could express themselves in L2. In addition, the instructor had to listen very carefully to what the learners were saying, and if what they uttered resulted in dubious or ridiculous meanings, comment on it. During the free-talking sessions the students were allowed to ask any L2-related questions, either in foreign or native language. The teacher corrected mistakes if they were of a repetitive character, as methodologists side against correcting every error (Lewis & Hill, 1985, p. 36; Thornbury, 2008, p. 116). The instructor frequently regrouped the students to make sure that they were gaining experience of talking with different partners. Finally, the instructor's responsibility was to give students another assignment as soon as they ran out of the topics for discussion, so that free-talking would not get tiring.

The second type of activity practiced for eliminating the factors hindering fluency was talks focused on language problems (or language-focused talks). They were centered on problematic language issues and conducted according to the model of spontaneous communication. The students expressed their need to learn more about the word order, the use of tenses, the articles, the gerund and other grammar. Learning grammar was approached from the practical point of view, with regard to the knowledge and skills the learners had acquired or lacked. The language-focused talks were followed by drilling exercises and communicative activities to practice the discussed grammar problems.

The third element of the methodology for developing oral fluency was pop-music-related discussions in the classroom. As an important part of young people's lives, pop-music in English was applied as a stimulus for discussions from stylistic, historical and communicative perspectives. The discussions involving pop-music were also carried out in the form of the genuinely-communicative exercise: the learners shared information with the whole group about what they knew about the styles of pop-music, the performers they found prominent. Pieces of pop-music of different genres were presented, both the learners and the teacher exchanged their opinions about the melodies, performers' vocal features, the effects and the associations created by them. Pop-music was discussed in the temporal perspective. A specifically-designed set of communicative activities enabled the learners to view and dwell on the development of pop-music in the course of time. Some of the pieces of pop-music were applied for teaching specific aspects of the language (phonology, grammar, vocabulary).

#### 4. Results

The implementation of the developed methodology produced satisfying results in terms of eliminating the negative factors hindering the development of oral fluency. As a result of reducing the hindering factors specified above, the methodology contributed to the increase in learners' oral fluency: 24 students (100%) were able to communicate during the free-talking sessions; 19 of them (79.15%) were willing to participate in a free-talking session immediately, and 5 students (20.83%) got involved in the talks after some pausing.

Table 3. Learners' grouping according to degree of fluency at the start of the research.

Grouping of learners graded by fluency	Number of learners	Average time of a free-talking session	Number of topics discussed during a free-talking session
Fluent speakers	11 45.82%	7 min.	2-4
Relatively fluent speakers	8 33.33%	4 min.	1-2
Insufficiently fluent speakers	5 20.83%	2.5 min.	1

At the final stage of the research three groups of learners were identified, depending on the degree of their oral fluency.

As it becomes evident as a result of comparison of Table 1 and Table 3, all the learners have shown a considerable progress in enhancing oral fluency. The learners improved on the average time of a fluent talk, and most learners succeeded in extending the range of topics discussed. 19 out of 24 learners (79.15%) have been found to be fluent and relatively fluent speakers. The group of "Ineffective speakers" changed the status into "Insufficiently fluent speakers", which meant that the learners belonging of the group were able to express themselves during the free-talking sessions, although not fluently enough, compared to the learners of the other two groups. Learners' repair and prosodic skills have developed, however, the levels of the skill development ranged from satisfactory to excellent, depending on the group.

It has also been validated that using pop-music in the classroom can be an effective tool for enhancing oral fluency. Pop-music evoked considerable interest and was proved to be a good communicative stimulus during the discussions in the classroom targeted at the improvement of speaking skills. In addition, after the classroom discussions about pop-music, a few learners were inspired to speak extensively about their music preferences: 4 students (16.66%) created and delivered oral presentations about the styles and performers they appreciated; after the presentations they were able to answer the listeners' questions.

## 5. Conclusion

Oral fluency as a specific feature of verbal communication can be successfully developed by the cognitive-communicative approach, which provides multiple opportunities for real-life interaction. Creating situations for regular real-life communication is especially important for technical learners, who tend to appreciate practical activities. The methodology suggested in the research, consisting of free-talking sessions, talks focused on language problems and discussions centered on pop-music, has been effective when addressing the challenge of enhancing oral fluency, as the activities stimulate the learners' motivation for developing prosodic and grammatical skills, as well as improving vocabulary richness and complexity. The techniques contribute to the growth of pragmatic competence and linguistic competence, which are indispensable conditions of oral fluency as a characteristic feature of L2 proficiency.

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