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FLUENCY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES FOR THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a workshop conducted at the 8th CamTESOL Conference on English language teaching on February 25, 2012 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The format of the workshop was as follows: a discussion of the meaning of fluency in the context of EFL; suggested criteria for selecting fluency activities; an explanation of several sample activities and a concluding discussion. This paper adheres to that format.

1. INTRODUCTION

The workshop described in this paper evolved from a workshop developed for Japanese junior high school and high school teachers of English as part of a seminar on the theme of developing students' communication skills (Patterson, 2011). Critics of Japan's education system claim that Japanese grade-school students lack communicative ability in English due to the system's strong focus on the grammar translation method (Aspinall, 2003, p.106). The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has taken steps to make students' learning more communicative (Groom and Littlemore, 2011, p.36), such as implementing the placement of native English-speaking Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in the classroom by means of the JET Programme. However, these measures continue to be counteracted by the over-riding academic importance of the high school entrance examinations, which are mark sheet tests not requiring communicative ability (Reischauer, 2005, p.393).

The goals of the workshop for Japanese teachers of English were to encourage discussion of what teachers could do to promote fluency in their classrooms and to introduce several fluency-building activities to the Japanese teachers that could be used in their classrooms with little need for preparation. Despite significant differences between the Japanese and Cambodian educational contexts, particularly in terms of resources, few adaptations had to be made to the workshop for the CamTESOL conference and its theme of “language and development.” Indeed, the focus on activities not dependent upon resources or technology made the workshop highly applicable to the Cambodian context.

Furthermore, a small study by Igawa (2008, p.362) suggests that there is a strong interest among Cambodian teachers of English to improve their teaching skills. Igawa surveyed 36 Cambodian instructors at the 2008 CamTESOL conference regarding their views towards their professional development needs; the most commonly chosen area was “teaching skills and methods” with 50% of respondents expressing an interest in this category. Accordingly, the workshop aimed to provide both an opportunity to discuss methods and a platform to present as many practical classroom activities as possible to assist in this professional development.

2. DISCUSSION

Defining Fluency

Most educators would likely agree that achieving a degree of fluency is an important goal for language learners. However, as the concept of fluency may be interpreted differently by different educators, an examination of its meaning may be beneficial prior to the discussion of what constitutes a good fluency-building activity.

The word fluency has its origins in the Latin *fluere* meaning to flow. The adjective form, fluent, is defined by the *Collins English Dictionary* as:

1. able to speak or write a specified foreign language with facility
2. spoken or written with facility

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, Skehan's concept of fluency is similar to these dictionary definitions, albeit with a more specific definition of facility (1996, p.22). To him, fluency "concerns the learner's capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation".

Nation provides a slightly different definition. He says fluency can be described as "having ready access" to knowledge you already possess (Nation, 1991, p.1). The implication of this, he notes, is that "...from the very first day of learning a language, you can be fluent in the small amount of language you already know" (Nation, 2008). Where Skehan's definition applies only to language production, Nation (1991) notes that his definition applies across all four of the basic language skills, which includes the receptive skills of reading and listening, and not just the productive skills of speaking and writing. While reading and listening may be considered receptive skills, they should not be confused with being passive. With practice, students can learn to employ their receptive skills more smoothly. For example, readers can develop speed in both their extensive and intensive reading. Likewise, listeners can learn to process longer oral passages at a faster pace without the need for repetition.

Hedge (1993, p. 275) notes that some educators hold an understanding of fluency that diverges from the focus on performing language tasks with facility (i.e. spoken or written with ease). Rather, they place a focus on natural language and speaking as native speakers would in authentic situations. The implications of this alternate focus will be discussed further below.

Should Fluency Activities Be Open or Closed?

A good fluency activity should be related to a topic of interest to the students; it is clear that the more interesting the topic, the more engaged and intrinsically motivated students become. However, there are differing points of view regarding whether a fluency activity must be open and content-focused, or not. Cambridge University Press (2012), for one, advises that in contrast to accuracy-building activities, fluency-building ones should be open:

Many language learning tasks focus on accuracy. These are often 'closed' exercises in which there is only one correct answer. Fluency tasks, on the other hand, are more open. They encourage the learners to take risks and be more creative with the language because there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer.

On the other hand, Thornbury believes that prioritizing meaning over form is not necessarily the way to ensure fluency and in some cases “may actually increase the degree of dysfluency” (2009, para. 4). He points out that:

Some of our most fluent productions, as proficient speakers, are texts that we have committed to memory (tongue twisters, nursery rhymes, prayers, oaths of

allegiance, etc) that we can trot out without ANY attention to meaning (2009, para. 4).

This difference in point of view essentially stems from how one chooses to define fluency. If we define fluency in the manner Nation, so as to put the emphasis on immediate performance with ease, then both open and closed activities may be used. If we define it, though, so as to put the emphasis on natural language, then open-ended activities which approximate authentic situations are more appropriate. This workshop opted to adopt the former definition.

What Makes a Good Fluency Activity?

Echoing Nation's point that fluency comes from being able to access that which one already knows, a fluency activity should not be introducing too much new material (Nation, 2007, 6), but instead be providing students the chance to activate and master the language they have already encountered. The activity should also allow the student multiple opportunities to use the language with which they are trying to become more fluent, push the student to speak at a faster rate, and reduce the amount of unnatural pausing. This can usually be achieved by introducing a set number of required repetitions done within a time limit.

Focusing on production and speed during these fluency activities, rather than on mistakes, is key. As Harmer (2007, p.132) notes, prompting and correction needs to be done "sympathetically and sensitively". Moreover, as Lynch (1997, p.324) suggests, it is better if prompting and correction are held back "as late as possible" so as not to interfere with the students' opportunity to learn from negotiating with meaning.

It is important that the activity have an achievable goal. If the activity is too difficult, it will only frustrate the student, causing a loss of motivation and confidence and increased pausing.

Sample Fluency-Building Activities

The following activities were presented to workshop participants and selected based on the suggested criteria for choosing fluency-building activities given above, as well as for their adaptability and appropriateness to the Cambodian teaching context. Both open and closed activities were introduced. A brief rationale and explanation are provided below.

Three Things in Common

This activity is good as an icebreaker for first class introductions. It requires no preparation, but a handout may be given to the students for them to record their answers.

- 1) Have the students walk around the room and talk to three or four people they do not know well.
- 2) Students pair off and ask their partners questions until they can find three things they have in common.
- 3) Once a pair has found three things, they may record their answers and then find another partner and repeat.
- 4) When everyone has spoken with at least three different partners, the teacher may call upon students to share their findings.

Note: Students should be encouraged to avoid obvious things in common such as “Both of us are from this town” or “Neither of us can fly.” Rather, the students should try to find more meaningful connections with their classmates around which they can have brief conversations. The teacher may wish to model the activity for the class first with a student volunteer.

Class Circles

This quick speaking activity is good for getting the students up and moving. It provides several opportunities for a student to practice a target question.

- 1) Clear a space for the students to walk around.
- 2) The teacher asks the class a question such as “When is your birthday?”, “What time did you wake up this morning?”, “How long does it take you to come to school?”, “What’s your favorite food?” Any wh-question that produces a one-word or one-number answer will work; yes-no questions will not.
- 3) The students think of their own answer and then begin to move around the classroom asking other students the same question.
- 4) The students then arrange themselves in a circle, the order depending on the nature of the question with the teacher as the starting and end point. That is, if the answer to the question is numerical, the students arrange themselves from lowest to highest; if the answer is time related, they arrange themselves from earliest to latest; and if the answer is a place or thing, they arrange themselves alphabetically.
- 5) As the initial question is closed, the teacher can encourage the students to have short conversations with their classmates by asking each other follow-up questions.
- 6) After all the students have found their position in the circle, the teacher calls upon everyone to share their answers from the starting point to the end point.

Note: When the circle is complete, all of the students’ attention will be focused on the teacher making it a good opportunity for making announcements or giving further instructions.

Countdown (4,3,2,1...)

This is an ideal fluency-building activity in that it encourages language recycling and speed, while keeping the focus on content that is of interest to the student. It is adapted from Maurice's "4/3/2" (1983) as described by Nation (1991).

- 1) Have students brainstorm on some topic they are knowledgeable about (e.g. their hometown, their favorite singer, the summary of their favorite movie) for 4 minutes.
- 2) Then students form pairs. Each student talks for 3 minutes straight (no stopping, no questions) about his/her topic.
- 3) After both have spoken, they find a new partner and talk for 2 minutes on the same topic, trying to include as much of the same information as possible.
- 4) Finally, the students talk with a third partner for 1 minute each again trying to incorporate as much of the original talk as possible in the reduced time.

Word Association

This simple activity works well as a warm-up. It works to activate vocabulary the students already know. Speed is also encouraged by way of a time limit.

- 1) Students are put into pairs or groups of three. They decide who will go first.
- 2) The teacher gives the starting word (e.g. "apple") and a time limit (e.g. 2 minutes) and then says, "Go!" (Once students have gotten used to the activity, Student #1 may choose the first word.)
- 3) Student #1 says the first word he/she thinks of and writes it down on a shared piece of paper.
- 4) Student #2 then says the first word he/she thinks of in response to Student #1's word and writes it on the shared piece of paper. The same word cannot be repeated.

- 5) The students continue back and forth until the teacher says, “Stop!”
- 6) Sometimes the connection between words will be unclear to the partners, so it a good idea to give the students an opportunity at the end to ask, “What made you think of that word?”

Example:

Starting word: “apple” → Student #1: “red” → Student #2: “stop” → Student #1: “go” → and so on...

Note: Students should be encouraged to say their words within a second or two, and not stop to think or to question the connections until the end. To add a competitive element, the teacher may ask the pairs to count up their words at the end, to see which pair had the longest list. At the end of the activity is it also a good opportunity for the teacher to introduce the concepts of synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy.

Explode-a-Word

Similar to the previous activity, this works well as a warm-up and activates previously acquired vocabulary. Speed again is developed through the use of a time limit.

- 1) The teacher writes a word on the board. (The longer the word the better.)
- 2) The teacher sets a time limit of two or three minutes.
- 3) The students work either individually or in pairs to make as many new words as possible by using the letters in the original word written on the board. Each letter may only be used once in each new word, but may be re-used in subsequent words.
- 4) When time is up, the teacher says, “Stop!”
- 5) The students count up their words. The student or pair with the most number of words wins.

Note: The teacher may choose a word related to that day's lesson or a positive, inspirational word (e.g. fantastic, wonderful). As stated above, the longer the word the teacher chooses, the more options the student will have to form new words. It is recommended that the starting word has at least two vowels. As a variation, the teacher may also award points to the student with the longest or most interesting word.

Example: FANTASTIC (starting word): fan, tan, it, I, ant, tic, as, cat, an, Santa, cast....

Teacher is an iPod

This activity encourages students to take more responsibility for their listening and practices useful classroom language. It is adapted from Nation's (1992) "Controlling the Teacher."

- 1) The teacher prepares a short text to read. If the teacher wishes to put more emphasis on accuracy, a cloze activity could also be prepared (i.e. replacing several words or phrases from the reading with blank spaces).
- 2) The teacher tells the class that he/she is going to read the text and that they will have to listen carefully in order to take notes or, in the case of a cloze, fill in the missing words.
- 3) The key point is that it is the students' responsibility to ensure that they catch the meaning. The teacher informs them that he/she will act as a CD player or iPod for the class. In other words, if at any time a student would like the teacher to speak more loudly or more slowly, or would like something repeated or spelled, he/she only has to ask. This means the students are in control of their listening experience.
- 4) The teacher begins reading the text. At first the students may be reluctant to speak out, but the teacher can deliberately make it difficult for the students to follow or take dictation by

speaking too quietly or quickly. Inevitably, a student will break the ice with a request for the teacher to speak more slowly or loudly.

- 5) When the reading is completed to the students' satisfaction, the students can compare their notes or the teacher can conduct a quick quiz to check comprehension.

3. CONCLUSION

Fluency is an integral component of foreign language proficiency, however, as shown, it can be a difficult topic to discuss owing to differences in definition and approach. This workshop aimed to provide a springboard for discussion on the topic by contrasting different definitions and offering several suggestions for identifying good fluency activities.

To sum up, it was suggested that an ideal fluency activity should:

- be a topic of interest to the students.
- draw on past knowledge.
- feature repetition and/or the recycling of previously-learned language.
- encourage speed.
- be challenging without being too difficult.

Based on these criteria, several practical fluency-building activities were introduced as described. It is hoped that the discussion and the activities described here prove useful to others with similar fluency-building aims.

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