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On the Issue of Improving Chinese EFL Learner's Spoken Fluency

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Abstract: ***Chinese EFL learners generally underperform in speaking compared with peers from other regions, as shown by IELTS and TOEFL data. This article addresses the issue of spoken fluency – a core yet difficult aspect of oral proficiency – by exploring its cognitive and linguistic foundations and suggesting pedagogical solutions. Cognitively, fluency develops through practice that moves knowledge from declarative to automatized stages, emphasizing time pressure and continued use. Linguistically, pronunciation, lexical retrieval, syntactic structuring, and discourse management are key to fluent speech. Three pedagogical directions are proposed: (1) speed-focused approaches (e.g., 4/3/2 technique, soliloquizing) to build automaticity; (2) pattern-focused approaches (e.g., lexical and discourse-based instruction) to enhance formulaic and structural fluency; and (3) speaking-promoting approaches integrating communicative and task-based methods for meaningful interaction. The article concludes that improving spoken fluency requires more opportunities for authentic speech and balanced attention to speed, accuracy, and automaticity.***

Keywords: Spoken fluency, Chinese EFL learners, Automaticity, Cognitive factors, Linguistic factors, Language pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Among the four skills in English, Chinese students seem to struggle the most with speaking. According to the statistics released by IELTS (2023), Chinese test-takers score the lowest (mean 5.7) in the speaking section, which is also significantly lower than the scores of the test-takers from other Asian countries, such as Malaysia (mean 6.3), Indonesia (mean 6.4), and the Arabic-speaking countries (mean 6.1). Data from TOEFL (Educational Testing Service, 2023) show a similar scenario. This is not surprising, given the assessment washback in the English classes in China, where students are given few chances to speak. Changes to the Gaokao (National University Entrance Examination) to include speaking have been gradually implemented across the country these years, showing a determination by the education ministry to address this issue.

In this article that is limited in length, I will take the spoken fluency for discussion as, firstly, it constitutes one of the most significant parts of speaking competence measured by the aforementioned language tests and by the CEFR standards, and secondly, it is deemed one of the most challenging skills for students to develop (Zhang, 2014; Brown, 2015; Santos and Ramírez-Ávila, 2022). While some researchers relate fluency to the speaking ability as a whole (Lennon, 2000), others perceive it as an independent component of speaking proficiency, which is associated with learner's rapidity and fluidity in performing oral discourse (Segalowitz, 2000). The Council of Europe (2020) describes spoken fluency at six CEFR levels based on how effortlessly speakers can produce lengthy oral language at natural tempo and with pauses as few or unnoticeable as possible. To summarize, speed, fluidity, and limited pauses are considered as the key features of spoken fluency.

2. Factors Influencing Fluency

The speaking process can be approached as consisting of three stages: conceptualization, formulation, and articulation (Levelt, 1989). Speaker's rapidity and fluidity in performing this process is considered to be influenced by the cognitive, the linguistic, and the affective factors (Segalowitz, 2010; Zhang, 2014; Santos and Ramírez-Ávila, 2022; Huang and Liu, 2023). In this article, I will focus on the cognitive and linguistic factors.

2.1 Cognitive Factors

Spoken fluency is highly related to the concept of automaticity in the information-processing model proposed by cognitive psychologists. DeKeyser (2007, 2017) suggests that language acquisition, like other human skills, undergoes three phases: declarative knowledge (awareness), procedural knowledge (use), and automatized knowledge (internalization, effortlessness). The advance through these phases is realized through continued practice, which first enables language learners to 'incorporate elements of declarative knowledge into broader pre-existing procedural rules' (Dekeyser, 2017, p. 17), and then promotes learners' fast and automatic retrieval of the stored declarative knowledge in meaningful contexts (Suzuki et al., 2019). However, it is not to be taken for granted that practice makes perfect. As pointed out by McLaughlin (1990), practice sometimes fails to generate a gradual build-up of fluency, and bursts of progress may happen without new instruction or relevant exposure, a phenomenon he described as 'restructuring'. Sometimes learners even experience backsliding. As observed by Lightbown and Spada (2013), when students master the use of -ed for past tense, they may occasionally apply it to irregular verbs, saying 'I seed' or 'I sawed' – an overgeneralization error they would not make previously. Despite these shortcomings, the information-processing model is still widely cited by researchers for its power of explanation. Maybe practice can be trusted to make better, if not perfect.

Another cognitive factor that plays an important role in fluent speaking is the constraint of cognitive capacity, which is unavoidable given the instantaneous nature of oral communication. For most learners, selecting words, stringing them in order and with correct grammatical markers, and pronouncing them in a spur of time is far from easy, let alone automatic. Given such limited time and cognitive resources, a balance needs to be established between accuracy and fluency

(Skehan and Foster, 1999), and speakers need to develop their strategy to lower cognitive burden wherever possible during the formulation stage. To that end, fluent speakers often resort to predictable patterns, which include formulaic units or chunks, idiomatic expressions, and language that is conventional in a specific genre (Ellis et al., 2008).

2.2 Linguistic Factors

For spoken language, the factor of articulation or utterance is unique and pivotal. According to Segalowitz (2010), like cognitive fluency, utterance fluency – including pronunciation, stress, and tone – is an integral component of spoken fluency. Besides, intelligible and natural pronunciation influences listener's perceptions of fluency (Zhang, 2014). However, as Zhang (ibid) further points out, the linguistic distance between English and Chinese makes it more demanding for Chinese EFL learners to perform well in this respect. Different languages use different sound spectra for linguistic use. For example, the consonant /th/ cannot be found in Mandarin and other major Chinese dialects, which means learners in China may need more instruction and practice to raise their phonetic awareness of such sound and, physically, to get their voice organs more familiar with pronouncing it. To make it more complicated, the Chinese languages are so different among themselves that speakers of different Chinese dialects encounter many more individual difficulties than common ones in uttering English. For instance, speakers from some southern provinces tend to confuse /l/ and /r/, whereas many Mandarin and northern-dialect speakers struggle to produce the consonant /v/ and they are also inclined to give tones to English syllables, e.g. pronouncing 'bad' with a falling tone. Another issue of utterance fluency raised by Burns and Seidlhofer (2020) is the sound segments. They demonstrate that, though speech is continuous and without clear borders, speakers tend to minimize their articulatory effort through connected speech. The use of assimilation, elision, and linking makes speaking more fluid and natural in tempo. If learners attempt to pronounce every sound correctly and in full, it will be hard for them to speed up their production, and the production will sound unnatural to listeners.

The second linguistic brick of spoken fluency is learners' fast access to vocabulary and syntactic structures (Levelt, 1989; Zhang, 2014). Researchers have shown that whether students can find an appropriate word to say or not and how fast they can make it often depend on the size of the receptive vocabulary they have already built on through reading and listening (Levelt, 1989; Nation, 2001). This evidence may indicate that spoken fluency and, more generally, speaking proficiency are not isolated from the proficiency and development of the receptive skills. Meanwhile, grammar in oral production seems to pose additional hurdle for students, as they often make those grammatical mistakes during speaking which they have already mastered to some degree in reading and writing. Larsen-Freeman (2001) suggests that it is difficult for learners to transfer correct language forms to speaking under the time pressure. In fact, due to the limited cognitive capacity available as discussed earlier, neither speakers nor listeners seem to expect or need 100% accuracy in spoken interaction. Various studies have shown that listeners can tolerate some grammatical errors – sometimes even do not notice them – because their focus is more on the meaning of the interaction (Hanulíková et al., 2012; Asano and Weber, 2016). This tolerance may further emphasize the role which fluency plays in oral communication.

One linguistic factor that is related to vocabulary and grammar is the spoken units or chunking as mentioned by Burns and Seidlhofer (2020). There seems to be certain spoken patterns for speakers to structure their utterance to facilitate listener's comprehension, which is often achieved through chunking utterances into groups of one meaning or tone unit. This observation somewhat overlaps with the strategy speakers use to reduce cognitive burden as discussed earlier, but the differences here point to the perspective from the listener's side. Units of meaning and tone render the oral production in a natural tempo and flow, which are among the perceived features of fluency by listeners (Segalowitz, 2010).

Another linguistic feature of fluency worth mentioning is the strategies or techniques to repair pauses. One such technique that has attracted much academic attention is the use of fillers, such as "um", "uh", and "you know". Some scholars regard fillers as a useful tool to address the time pressure and cognitive constraints during speaking, allowing speakers more room to form upcoming ideas, plan utterance and retrieve lexical tokens while maintaining the conversation flow (Peltonen, 2017; Kosmala and Morgenstern, 2019). Though these findings are intuitively appealing, they have been challenged by other researchers, who argue that fillers may delay rather than expedite spontaneous speech, and that the overuse of fillers is actually a symptom of disfluency (Arnold et al., 2007; De Jong, 2016). While a comprehensive understanding of the role which fillers play in speech is still subject to empirical validation, it is agreed that the use of them, if judicious, can somewhat help the flow and fluency of oral production.

Finally, spoken fluency is not only about uttering individual sentence with rapidity and fluidity, but also about speaking fluently at length beyond the sentence level (Council of Europe, 2020), especially when it is defined broadly as mentioned earlier (Lennon, 2020). Thus, turn-taking, topic management, discourse patterns, and genre patterns are also important for speaking for various purposes (Burns and Seidlhofer, 2020). These skills and knowledge can be used to improve the flow of interaction and the conveyance of meaning in extended oral production. For example, speakers sometimes follow certain patterns or templates to present their researches to the audience at an academic conference.

3. Pedagogical Recommendations

The cognitive and linguistic factors discussed in the last section can be synthesized into three areas for pedagogical consideration: time pressure, cognitive pressure, and automaticity. In this section, I will recommend some teaching designs and measures around these three areas.

3.1 Speed-Focused Approaches and Activities

Time pressure is deemed as an important pedagogical tool for developing spoken fluency. In fact, many teaching designs have been proposed to better enable learners to handle the

time constraint, among which the 4/3/2 technique is often discussed (Santos and Ramírez-Ávila, 2022; Huang and Liu, 2023). This technique requires the teacher to prompt learners to deliver the same speech to a conversational partner under three different time limits: 4 min, 3 min, and 2 min. In other words, learners must accelerate their oral production. Given such timed repetition in a well-designed context, this technique has shown its merits in improving learners' fluency in unscripted speech (Boers, 2014). Repeated practice may better enable students to complete the cognitive process of skill learning, transferring their declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge and finally to automaticity. It also provides chances to repeat and become more familiar with the pronunciations that are difficult to Chinese EFL learners due to the phonetic and phonological differences between English and Chinese languages. Besides, the decreased time limits can urge learners to use more connected speech to improve their speed and fluidity. The 4/3/2 technique has received many positive reviews in the literature (Yang, 2014; Thai and Boers, 2016; Santos and Ramírez-Ávila, 2022), but some empirical studies have identified its weaknesses in making students feel bored (Asri and Muhtar, 2013) or unsafe (Huang and Liu, 2023), and in neglecting other important aspects of speech such as complexity and accuracy (ibid). To improve its potency in class, teachers are thus advised to build a strong motivation in students, for example, by using assessment (Santos and Ramírez-Ávila, 2022); and to integrate this technique with other activities to provide more comprehensive instruction.

A self-practice version of 4/3/2 variety is the soliloquizing (self-talk), first proposed by Li and Zhou (2001) to address Chinese EFL learners' spoken fluency. Similar to the original version, soliloquizing prompts learners to repeat under decreasing time limits a contextualized discourse created by themselves, as if they are speaking in a conversation, only that the dialogue is without a real conversational partner. An example of such prompts is as follows:

Q: Can you introduce me to the high school you are attending?
Keywords: location; history; your class; activities; specialties.

According to Huang and Liu (2023), this activity gives learners additional opportunity outside class to improve fluency on their own and in a self-decided environment that makes them feel less anxious and insecure. More importantly, soliloquizing requires learners to constantly invoke their schemata (top-down) while actively seeking and retrieving the suitable words and structures (bottom-up), an interactive processing that adds to its efficacy (ibid). However, as a self-practice version, learners may need even more motivation in following its procedures.

3.2 Pattern-Focused Approaches and Activities

As discussed earlier, fluent speakers often resort to chunks, formulaic units, and patterns in terms of meaning, structures, and tones to cope with the cognitive demands in speaking activities. Thus, these patterns become another pedagogical tool for tackling the issue of spoken fluency.

One language teaching approach that is particularly based on patterns is the Lexical Approach. Contrary to the demanding task for speakers to seek and retrieve vocabulary and grammar one after another in an instant of speaking, the Lexical Approach assumes that vocabulary and grammar are naturally inter-related so that they can be merged and lexicalized into ready-made units or chunks conducive to fluent speech (Richard and Rodgers, 2014). For example, 'I'd like to' is learned as a lexical chunk instead of a grammar structure of conditions. One activity often used in class is the use of corpora to facilitate the noticing of chunks. O'Keefe et al. (2007) give details about how teachers can raise learners' awareness of chunks through both deductive and inductive procedures. Text-chunking is another activity often used, in which students are asked to highlight word strings in an authentic text which they believe to be close-knit collocations. Peer discussion and online concordance tools are then used to check the results. While the Lexical Approach receives many positive comments (Biber et al., 2004; Ellis and Shintani, 2013), opposition is also strong in that a substantial part of English language is not formulaic, and that the amount of input needed to make this approach work is forbidding (Scheffler, 2015). However, for the purpose of improving the spoken fluency in particular, it still serves as a beneficial though not comprehensive approach in class. To achieve its full potential and overcome its weaknesses, teachers may combine it with or build it into other approaches, such as the Communicative Language Teaching (Richard and Rodgers, 2014).

Other approaches that can be used to explore the patterns in language are discourse and genre-based instructions, which are particularly focused on raising students' awareness about the patterns beyond the sentence level. Spoken discourse can be approached from different perspectives to present a shared way of talk (Burns and Seidlhofer, 2020). For example, structural analysis may show students how to make their oral production sound logical and natural by making it more cohesive and coherent. Functional analysis may show students some templates for certain purposes, e.g. speech at a friend's wedding. Strategies of repairing pauses like the fillers can also be part of the discourse-based learning. Genre-based instruction may work similarly in this respect. However, teachers need to be careful not to let patterns and regularities stifle learner's self-expression and creativity, given a similar caution raised by Hyland (2007) in discussing writing.

3.3 Speaking-Promoting Approaches and Activities

Besides the speed and pattern-focused activities and approaches that have some specialized elements in promoting spoken fluency, what Chinese EFL learners need desperately is simply more class time dedicated to speaking: they need more practice and meaningful use of language to get closer to automaticity. To realize that, more communicative teaching approaches need to be installed in class appropriately. Compared to the Grammar Translation and Audiolingualism prevalent in current English classes in China, approaches like the Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching are more learner-centered, maximizing student talk time (STT) and including more activities for improving fluency rather than accuracy alone (Thornbury, 2017). However, it is not to be understood that CLT or TBLT

should replace the more traditional teaching methods because teachers need to recognize learner's needs in the educational context in China. For example, the Grammar Translation is significant for Chinese students because there are translation tasks in the high-stake exams like Gaokao, which can be life-changing. A principled integration of different techniques and approaches is recommended to benefit students in a more comprehensive way (e.g. Richards and Rodgers, 2014; Santos and Ramírez-Ávila, 2022).

The integration of the receptive and the productive skills may also worth some attention, since the development of speaking proficiency and fluency is often facilitated by the development of receptive skills, as discussed earlier (Levelt, 1989; Nation, 2001). For example, teachers can set up a discussion or debate activity following a reading task, or an oral synthesizing task to report on multiple listening materials. During these speaking tasks, learners are given additional opportunities to recycle and internalize the declarative knowledge about lexical or language items just learned, which is important for language learning as indicated by DeKeyser (2007, 2017).

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have raised the issue of spoken fluency as a weakness of Chinese EFL learners. To address this issue, a theoretical basis from cognitive and linguistic studies has been established. The cognitive perspective shows the cognitive pressure for speakers under time constraints, and the importance of continued practice in the advancement of knowledge from declarative, procedural, to automatized stage. The linguistic perspective shows the various factors that play a role in fluency on different linguistic levels, from the sound, lexis, structure, to the discourse level. Based on this theoretical foundation, I have proposed pedagogical activities and approaches under three categories: speed-focused, pattern-focused, and speaking-promoting. It is to be noted that none of these should be used in an isolated way, and the integration of various possibilities in class is recommended. This article does not assume to be a thorough investigation of the issue. The definition of fluency can merit further discussion, and there can be more factors behind it. Moreover, further study is recommended to include accuracy into discussion, too.

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