WHAT IS FLUENCY AND HOW DO WE DEVELOP IT?

By Philip Shigeo Brown, International Teacher Development Institute

"I want to speak English fluently."

"I have to write reports in English."

"I want to read English magazines, books and websites."

"I'd like to understand movies in English."

Whether expressed directly or indirectly, the need for fluency inherently exists within all of these commonly expressed goals and motivations for learning English. And, as teachers, we know that learners often have a number of obstacles to overcome to achieve them, whether they are learning in ESL contexts, such as Canada, or EFL contexts like Japan. Firstly, goals that students initially make may be unrealistic and are typically too vague, too big or long-term; and many students lack confidence in their English abilities, often compounded by a sense of "relative failure" (Skehan, 1996, p.16) to develop communicative skills, and perhaps a "fixed" as opposed to a "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006, 2016). This can be reflected in negative beliefs, attitudes, and statements such as:

"I can't speak English."

"English is difficult."

"I don't understand grammar."

"I'm not good at learning new words."

Even where this is not the case, students (and teachers) may have limited (or evolving) knowledge and understanding of fluency development beyond the often said "practice makes perfect." So, even where students are encouraged and enthusiastic about using another language both in and out of class, what kind of practice leads to real fluency gains? Notably, syllabus and materials design tend to introduce new topics, grammar, and vocabulary each week while the recycling of language that is needed not only to develop fluency but also to aid retention is limited (Sweller, 2017). So what is fluency and how do we develop it?

Following a brief review of how fluency is defined and measured, we examine the conditions for fluency, four key characteristics of fluency activities, and how tasks can be

better sequenced to foster fluency development across the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

What is Fluency and How Do We Measure It?

Defining Fluency

In layman's terms, fluency is most often associated with speaking naturally or smoothly, or like a native. Although people also talk about reading or writing fluently, it is arguably less common, and listening fluency may get little or no mention. Similarly, researchers have mostly focused on spoken language, followed by reading and writing fluency, and to a lesser degree, listening (Muller, Adamson, Brown & Herder, 2014). Most researchers have sought to define and measure fluency with narrow, measurable, construct definitions despite the understanding that it is multidimensional with important considerations for complexity and accuracy (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Palloti, 2009; Skehan, 2009), as well as "other key factors [that] may influence fluency development, including learner variables (e.g. anxiety, attitude, and motivation) and learning variables (e.g. instruction and task complexity)" (Brown & Muller, 2014, p. 4). For most classroom teachers, however, a simple and concise definition that we can also use with learners tends to be more pragmatic:

> "fluency can be described as the ability to process language receptively and productively at a reasonable speed." (Nation, 2014, p. 11)

Echoing this in his extensive blog post *F is for Fluency*, Thornbury concurs that "fluency in fact applies across all four skills, especially if defined as 'capacity to process language in real time', where 'process' means both to produce and to understand" (2017, July 28). Taking this a stage further, Herder negotiated definitions of fluency for each of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) with his students:

Table 1. Definitions of fluency based on student input.
(Reproduced from Herder & Sholdt, 2014, p. 34)

Output
Speaking – thinking and speaking at the same time in a relatively natural speed with not so many errors, so that meaning is understood by the listener.
Writing – thinking and writing at the same time in a relatively natural speed, with a focus on expressing meaning with a relatively average number of revisions.

Input
Reading – Reading and understanding English at a speed closer to L1 readers - about 250 words per minute and understanding 75% is a good target, according to Nation (n.d.).
Listening – Listening to and understanding spoken English, to the degree necessary, in different situations. This implies that listening to friends, a university lecturer, the police, or a YouTube video all have unique needs.

As well as ensuring students developed a shared understanding of fluency specific to their needs and goals, negotiating definitions of fluency formed an important part of the process to promote a fluency-based approach (Herder & Sholdt, p. 33), giving learners agency whilst building rapport and establishing a positive learning community.

Measuring Fluency

Although language learners may be able to notice learning new vocabulary and grammar, which are more typically and easily reflected in regular test scores, they often have greater difficulty in noticing their progress with regards to fluency, especially from week to week. Thus offering even basic ways for learners to measure their fluency development can help them see their progress and feel motivated. Whilst appreciating the need for intelligibility and comprehension (and recognising the roles of complexity and accuracy), counting words per minute (wpm) is perhaps the easiest approach for measuring speaking, reading and writing fluency. For listening, learners often have to gauge for themselves how much they understand, although comprehension questions can help facilitate this. Where data is available, wpm of spoken text and or the vocabulary or reading level may also be recorded (e.g. for CDs accompanying graded readers).

Now that we have established a basic definition of fluency and means to measure it, we consider the factors that facilitate fluency development.

How Do We Develop Fluency?

Conditions for Fluency

Motivation and beliefs about language learning invariably shape student attitudes and behaviours, which in turn affect outcomes. Therefore, Finch (2014) emphasizes the importance of considering attitude change, "particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners' experience" (Cotterall, 1995, p. 203, in Finch, p. 62). So, in addition to employing a task-based framework to facilitate active involvement, Finch (pp. 62–4) recognises the value of attending to learner variables (including, but not limited to, experiences, beliefs, self-perceptions, culture, and expectations). In addition, Finch seeks to address "harmful preconceived notions of language learning" (p. 63; see also, Dweck 2006, 2016), whilst raising awareness of the language learning process.

Citing Bateson (1994, p. 41), Murphey (2014), further emphasizes that "participation precedes learning, which probably precedes fluency and accuracy" (p. 44). Therefore, socialization into a learning community, and "being involved in an activity and engaged and interacting … [are] … the first requirement[s] for learning" (p. 44). Accordingly, effective teachers understand the need to build rapport with and amongst learners; nurture a non-threatening, positive learning environment; and develop a supportive learning community, especially for learning another language where anxiety levels may be high. Recognising the

important role teachers play, Brown (2003) reiterates that fluency can be promoted if they:

> (a) encourage students to go ahead and make constructive errors, (b) create many opportunities for students to practice, (c) create activities that force students to get a message across, (d) assess students' fluency not their accuracy, and (e) talk openly to the students about fluency. (p. 8)

Assessing fluency, not accuracy, is essential to ensure that students feel allowed to make mistakes as a natural part of the learning process and fluency development. Thus encouraging "intelligent fast failure" (Matson, 1991 in Murphey, 2014, p.46) and promoting the concept of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006, 2016), whilst supported by a supportive learning environment and community, can also help learners to overcome affective factors and facilitate positive attitude change (Finch 2014), increase interaction and, therefore, develop fluency.

Furthermore, Nation (2014, pp. 20-1) identifies five ways to enhance the effectiveness of fluency development activities:

1. Teachers should ensure learners understand the importance and nature of fluency development, and know when they are doing fluency activities;

2. Learners should be given opportunities to reflect on fluency development activities and their value;

3. Fluency development activities should have clear indictors to track learners' progress;

4. Teachers can monitor and counsel learners who are not making progress in fluency development activities; and

5. Fluency development activities should be conducted regularly and properly.

Nation (2007) also makes well-reasoned arguments for a balanced curriculum (in both ESL and EFL contexts), that includes fluency development across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing with activities conducted in class: "it is important that [a fluency activity] is not just used as a throwaway activity (for example, for homework write …), but is given the time and attention that it deserves" (Nation, 2014, p. 19). Next, we therefore examine a range of skills-based fluency activities and consider their underlining characteristics.

Fluency Activities

Nation (2014, pp. 12-14) helpfully outlines nine of the most useful fluency activities, summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Nine of the most useful fluency activities (Adapted from Nation, 2014, pp. 12-14)

Listening fluency	Speaking fluency	Reading fluency	Writing fluency
Listening to easy stories Teacher reads a few pages aloud from an easy graded reader, gradually getting faster each day.	*4/3/2* In pairs, learners take turns to talk for 4 minutes on a familiar topic. They then change partners and repeat the same talk in 3 minutes, then change again and talk in 2 minutes. (Adjust the timings to suit the learners, e.g. 120/90/60 seconds.)	*A speed reading course* Learners read very easy passages (all the same length) then answer multiple-choice questions, tracking speed and comprehension scores. Nation recommends twenty 10-minute sessions for 7-10 weeks.	*10-minute writing* Learners write for exactly 10 minutes on a very familiar topic and then record the number of words per minute. Teachers respond positively to the content and quantity and do <u>not</u> correct errors.
Repeated listening to CDs Learners listen to the same recording (e.g. accompanying graded readers) repeatedly until it is easier to listen to. Playback speed might also be adjusted to make it easier/harder.	*The best recording* Learners makes a recording of a short text, listen to it then re-records it (again and again) until they are satisfied that it is 'the best recording'.	*Easy extensive reading* Learners read lots of easy material (e.g. graded readers) comfortably below their level in order to process and access very common and useful words and phrases more readily.	
Focused repeated listening The teacher writes new words on the board then reads them aloud randomly while learners listen and point. They continue in pairs, gradually getting faster.		*Repeated reading* Learners each read the same short text three times in a row, silently or aloud.	

Examining the most useful fluency activities, Nation (2014) critically identifies four key characteristics that underpin them:

1. The learners' focus is on receiving or conveying meaning.

2. All of what the learners are listening to, reading, speaking or writing is largely familiar to them. That is, there is no unfamiliar language, and there are largely familiar content and discourse features.

3. There is some pressure or encouragement to perform at a faster than usual speed.

4. There is a large amount of input or output. (Nation, 2014, p. 15).

Moreover, "by seeing how well an activity involves these four conditions", teachers and learners "can decide if an activity is a fluency development activity" (p.15). However, it should be remembered that, "Not all fluency activities meet all of these conditions, but at the very least they should meet the easy material condition…no unfamiliar language, and largely familiar content and discourse features" (p.15). So consider, for example, the following four fluency activities listed in Table 3 below. How well do they meet the four conditions for fluency? (Feel free to complete the table for yourself before reading on.)

Table 3. Four of the most useful fluency activities and Nation's (2014) conditions for fluency

Fluency activities	1. Focus on meaning	2. Familiar/ Easy materials	3. Pressure to perform faster	4. Large amount of input/output
Listening to easy stories	Yes. Learners often want to find out what happens next.	Yes, with careful material selection or adaptation.	Yes, but teachers needs to monitor their own speed.	Perhaps - 5 minutes each class (plus related tasks)?
4/3/2				
Easy extensive reading				
10-minute writing				

For listening to easy stories, prize-winning graded readers can offer interesting and accessible materials. Split stories can also be used and harness students' curiosity, promote joyful learning, engagement and motivation, as well as building rapport and community (Deacon, 2017). Next, in the 4/3/2 activity, all the criteria are fulfilled: learners repeat a talk on a familiar topic three times in an increasingly shorter timeframe; meaning must be conveyed to each new partner; and each learner has at least 9 minutes speaking and 9 minutes listening time. Thirdly, despite the notable absence of any pressure to perform

faster, extensive reading is undoubtedly a fluency activity, and its benefits have been widely published. (See, for example, Waring (2014) for a review of extensive reading and fluency.) Lastly, 10-minute writing also fulfils all the criteria; it focuses on conveying meaningful content about a familiar topic, and writing as much as possible within a limited time.

By analysing and understanding the conditions for fluency activities, we can not only evaluate their potential effectiveness, but also find ways to create new fluency activities, often by adapting existing ones (Nation, 2014). Hence, many of the most ideal fluency activities draw on learners' experiences, use previously taught (and learned!) language, and offer multiple opportunities for increasingly faster input and/or output.

Opportunities for recurring language use can also be created with related tasks, for example, as students consider, share, and discuss what happens next after each split in a story. As such, Deacon and Murphey (2001) concluded:

> Tools such as shadowing, summarizing, retelling, action logging, and newslettering increase student comprehension, negotiation of meaning, and feelings of community. These intensifying activities allow learners multiple opportunities to respond deeply to stories and experience shifts in their beliefs and attitudes. This then leads to more lively participation in and out of class.

Many teachers plan and set tasks with the intention of getting students to participate and build fluency, and some are invariably more successful than others. Having now established the key conditions for fluency and what makes an effective fluency activity, we next explore how tasks and activities can be better linked together to promote fluency development.

Linked Activities

Nation (2014, pp. 16–20) offers insights into how we might link three activities together to address a variety of language skills, with the first two activities generally laying the groundwork for the third, a fluency activity. Three sets of three activities for a short text on doing a homestay are illustrated in Table 4, below, which should be read horizontally:

Table 4. These sets of linked skills activities

	First activity →	**Second activity →**	**Third activity**
Set 1	Read the questions without seeing or listening to the text. Guess and write down your answers. (Read/Write)	Listen to the text. Check and correct your answers. (Listen/Write)	In pairs, talk about the differences between your guesses and the answers. (Speak/Listen)
Set 2	Talk to your partner about homestays. (Speak/Listen)	Read the text and write answers to the questions. (Read/Write)	Do a 10-minute writing activity on homestaying. (Write)
Set 3	Listen to an easy story from your teacher's homestay experience. Guess which part is not true. (Listen)	In small groups of 3 or 4, recall and write about your teacher's experience. (Speak/Listen/Write)	Do a 4/3/2 activity to recall the story and share which part you think was not true. (Speak/Listen)

In set 1, the first activity prepares the learner for the listening task, helping to predict what they will listen to whilst focusing on reading and writing skills. The second task allows students to make and correct mistakes in private before sharing answers with classmates. In set 2, the first activity draws on learners' experiences and helps to activate schema knowledge prior to reading. The first two activities then prepare the learner for the 10-minute writing fluency activity. Set 3 does not utilise the text but relates to the topic. The first two activities prepare learners for the third fluency activity and including something that is not true in the story helps to add engagement and interest, as well as fun and humour.

It is worth noting that the third activity need not be a fluency activity in its own right since the first two activities can help to create the conditions for fluency, (e.g. recycling familiar language and discourse). As pointed out recently by Sweller (2017), "All instructional procedures need to account for the fact that students are constantly under a high cognitive load" (p. 7). Thus, to determine the effectiveness of any given series, Nation (pp. 18–19) duly considers vocabulary learning and relative ease/difficulty of the activities, identifying a number of key points:

1. All three activities should be based on the same content material to promote recycling of vocabulary and grammar, which then makes subsequent activities easier;

2. Activities that make use of the same language items also provide greater opportunities for repeated retrieval and creative vocabulary use;

3. The activities need not have a different skill focus and may be repeated, especially if aiming for high performance in the same skill, as per Sets 2 and 3; and

4. If the third activity focuses on a productive skill (writing or speaking), one of the preceding skills should also be productive since productive skills are relatively more difficult than receptive ones. Hence in Set 1, the third speaking activity is more likely to be successful than if activity one and two had not included writing.

These points can further be used to form our assessment of the linked activities and, based on Nation (2014, p. 19), we can ask the following questions:

1. How easy are the activities 2 and 3 for the learners?

2. What language items recur in activities 2 and 3 (within being read from any text)?

3. How fluently and confidently are learners managing the content in activities 2 and 3?

Moreover, with a little rewording, these questions can also be transformed into a guided self-evaluation and reflection task (for example, see Table 5) to facilitate positive attitude change (Finch, 2014), and promote learner autonomy:

Table 5. A sample guided self-evaluation and reflection task

(1) *How easy or difficult was* **activity 2**? (Please circle the answer that best describes you.)   Too easy Easy A little easy A little difficult Difficult Too difficult
(2) *What words and phrases did you use freely (e.g. without reading/checking) in* **activity 2**?
(3) *How easy or difficult was* **activity 3**? (Please circle the answer that best describes you.)   Too easy Easy A little easy A little difficult Difficult Too difficult
(4) *What words and phrases did you use freely (e.g. without reading/checking) in* **activity 3**?
(5) *How fluent were you in* **activity 3**? (e.g. Speaking/Writing = _____ wpm) (Comprehension = _____%)
(6) *How confident did you feel in* **activity 3**? (Please circle the answer that best describes you.)   Very nervous Nervous A little nervous A little confident Confident Very confident
(7) *What will help you or what will you do to improve next time?*

Conclusion

Recognising the need for a greater understanding of fluency and some of the main issues that learners and teachers commonly face, this article has briefly considered pedagogical definitions and simple measures of fluency that are both useful and accessible to all. With further appreciation for the holistic conditions for fluency development, we can not only employ the most useful fluency activities in our classes, but also draw on Nation's (2014) four key characteristics to evaluate and create our own. In addition, we can more effectively link tasks together to ensure greater fluency development opportunities are created across the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Last but not least, linked activities can be evaluated and reflected on by both teachers and learners in pursuit of promoting fluency as well as autonomy.

References

Brown, J. D. (2003). Promoting fluency in EFL classrooms. In *Proceedings of the 2nd Annual JALT Pan-SIG Conference*. May 10–11, 2003. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto Institute of Technology. Retrieved from http://www.jalt.org/pansig/2003/HTML/Brown.htm

Brown, P. S. & Muller, T. (2014). An introduction to *Exploring EFL fluency in Asia*. In T. Muller, J. Adamson, P. S. Brown, & S. Herder (Eds.), *Exploring EFL fluency in Asia* (pp. 1–7). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Deacon, B. (2017, April). Split storytelling: One technique for enhancing the "joyful" factor in the classroom. *Contact Magazine 43*(1), 10–14. Retrieved from: http://contact.teslontario.org/split-storytelling-one-technique-for-enhancing-the-joyful-factor-in-the-classroom/

Deacon, B & Murphey T. (2001). Deep impact storytelling. *English Teaching Forum 39*(4), 10–15, 23. Retrieved from: http://www.academia.edu/23543799/Deep_Impact_Storytelling_Deacon_B_and_Murphey_T._2001_._English_Teaching_Forum_39_4_10-15_23

Dweck, C. S. (2006, 2016). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Finch, A. (2014). Fluency through attitude change. In T. Muller, J. Adamson, P. S. Brown, & S. Herder (Eds.), *Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia* (pp. 59–78). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Herder, S. & Sholdt, G. (2014). Employing a fluency-based approach to teach the TOEFL iBT: An action research project. In T. Muller, J. Adamson, P. S. Brown, & S. Herder (Eds.), *Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia* (pp. 26–41). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Housen, A. & Kuiken, F. (2009). Complexity, accuracy, and fluency in second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, *30*(4). 461–473.

Muller, T., Adamson, J., Brown, P. S., & Herder, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Exploring EFL fluency in Asia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9781137449405

Murphey, T. (2014). Scaffolding participating, agencing friending and fluencing. In T. Muller, J. Adamson, P. S. Brown, & S. Herder (Eds.), *Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia* (pp. 42–58). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nation, I. S. P. (2007). The four strands. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *1*(1), 1–12.

Nation, I. S. P. (2014). Developing fluency. In T. Muller, J. Adamson, P. S. Brown, & S. Herder (Eds.), *Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia* (pp. 11–25). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pallotti, G. (2009). CAF: Defining, refining and differentiating constructs. *Applied Linguistics*, *30*(4), 590–601.

Skehan, P. (1996). Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction. In J. Willis & D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenge and change in language teaching* (pp. 17–30). Oxford: MacMillan.

Skehan, P. (2009). Modelling second language performance: Integrating complexity, accuracy, fluency, and lexis. *Applied Linguistics*, *30*(4), 510–532.

Sweller, J. (2017). Cognitive load theory and teaching English as a second language to adult learners. *Contact Magazine, 43*(1), 10–14. Retrieved from: http://contact.teslontario.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Sweller-CognitiveLoad.pdf

Thornbury, S. (2017, July 28) Reply to comment on *F is for Fluency* blog. Retrieved from: https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2009/12/17/f-is-for-fluency/

Waring, R. (2014). Building fluency with extensive reading. In T. Muller, J. Adamson, P. S. Brown, & S. Herder (Eds.), *Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia* (pp. 213–230). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Additional Resources

Extensive Reading Central: https://www.er-central.com/

Paul Nation's website: https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/paul-nation (speed reading course, Vocabulary Size Test, *Vocabulary Resource Booklet*, publications)

Sonia Millett's website: https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/sonia-millett (Free 1000, 2000, and 2000 plus Academic Word List reading courses).

The Extensive Reading Foundation: http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/

Author Bio
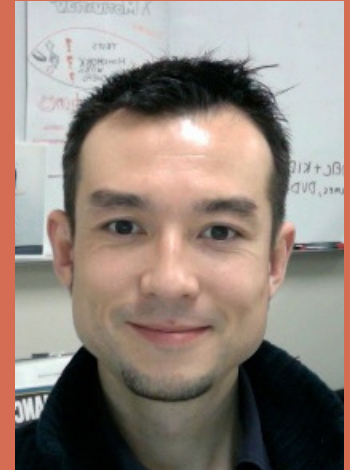
Philip Shigeo Brown is a co-editor of Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia (2014, Palgrave MacMillan) and taught in Japan from 2001-2014. Currently, Phil tutors on the University of Birmingham's MA TESOL and Applied Linguistics (distance learning) programmes, Mentors for the International Teacher Development Institute (iTDi), and is a course director for the forthcoming iTDi TESOL Certificate.