

Most teachers will be familiar with the two distinct types of learners described in the extracts below. There are students whose language is virtually error free, but who are painful to interact with because the production of every word is such a struggle. Others, like Sachiko-san, are fast and fluent speakers, but their language is practically unintelligible because of the errors they make. A happy balance would be learners who are able to fine-tune their output so as to make it intelligible, but who, at the same time, are equipped with a core of

Accuracy is judged by the extent to which the learner's output matches some external standard – traditionally the output of an idealised native speaker. This standard has been called into question in the light of both the spread of English as an international language, and the development of different 'Englishes', to the point where it may now be impossible to agree on an acceptable standard. Nevertheless, most teachers have fairly reliable intuition when it comes to assessing a learner's command of the linguistic systems, such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Accuracy, fluency and complexity

Scott Thornbury
challenges the Presentation •
Practice • Production model.

readily available, fairly automatic, language, so that they can cope with the pressures of real-time communication. The purpose of practice activities is to target these two objectives: precision when applying the system, and automatising of the system. We call these objectives, respectively, accuracy and fluency.

Fluency is an even more elusive concept. Its non-specialist meaning of 'relatively effortless and fluid speech' was side-lined by communicative theorists in the seventies, when they attempted to re-define fluency in terms of communicative competence. Fluency came to be equated with language use, and fluency activities were those where the focus was on the message, not the form. However, this distinction seems to be a misleading one. It seems perfectly feasible to have message-focused speech events where there is, nevertheless, a strong incentive to be accurate (think of air traffic controllers); and it is also possible to have fairly meaningless speech events where the focus is on fluency (tongue twisters, for example).

Hence, the formula that 'accuracy = form', while 'fluency = meaning' has been called into question, and there is a case for reclaiming the traditional meaning of fluency. According to Skehan, for example: 'Fluency concerns the learner's capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation.' Research into the exact nature of fluency suggests that it is not so much a matter of the speed of delivery, but more to do with the length of the 'run' – the more words you can put together without pausing, the more fluent you are. Of course, fluency at the

These extracts describe two English language learners. Both are taken from travel books and both are set in Japan.

“Talking with the [students] has been a trial of patience as I watch their faces work like computer screens. Inside, their brains are composing sentences, searching for the most appropriate word, then running the draft past their mind's eye for grammatical mistakes. Finally, the sentence is allowed out. I reply. They look uncertain, sometimes ask for a re-run, before their facial screen goes blank while a new sentence is under construction. They seem terrified of making a mistake, which is no way to become fluent. Yet their knowledge of formal grammar is far greater than Australian undergraduates and they have extensive vocabularies.”

[McQueen *Tokyo World* William Heinemann]

“Sachiko-san was as unabashed and unruly in her embrace of English as most of her compatriots were reticent and shy. She was happy to plunge ahead without a second thought for grammar, scattering meanings and ambiguities as she went. Plurals were made singular, articles were dropped, verbs were rarely inflected, and word order was exploded – often, in fact, she seemed to be making Japanese sentences with a few English words thrown in. Often, moreover, to vex the misunderstandings further, she spoke both languages at once.”

[Iyer *The Lady and the Monk* Black Swan]

Accuracy, fluency and complexity

►►► expense of accuracy may result in long but incoherent runs, so the ideal learner is the one who can balance the demands of real-time processing with the need to be reasonably accurate.

Complexity

There is a third type of student, however: the one who is reasonably intelligible and at the same time fluent, but who can express only a relatively limited range of meanings. If such students are going to make any headway in the language, it is not enough simply to be able to speak fast and accurately. They also need to be able to re-organise (or restructure) what they know in order to make it more complex. Here, for example, is how the novelist Christopher Isherwood improved the complexity of his German, thanks to a tip from a friend:

"Humphrey said suddenly, 'You speak German so well – tell me, why don't you ever use the subjunctive mood?' Christopher had to admit that he didn't know how to. In the days when he had studied German, he had left the subjunctive to be dealt with later, since it wasn't absolutely essential and he was in a hurry. By this time he could hop through the language without its aid, like an agile man with only one leg. But now Christopher set himself to master the subjunctive. Very soon, he had done so. Proud of this accomplishment, he began showing off whenever he talked: 'had it not been for him, I should never have asked myself what I would do if they were to ...' etc, etc. Humphrey was much amused."

[Isherwood *Christopher and His Kind* Eyre Methuen]

As well as developing accuracy and fluency, practice activities can also provide the kind of learning opportunities associated with restructuring: through using language, learners come up against situations which force them to re-organise their current knowledge. Thus, a third type of practice is directed at complexity.

The PPP model

Traditionally, these three components of proficiency – accuracy, fluency, and complexity – have each been targeted in the three-stage PPP model.

- Increasing the complexity of the learner's developing grammar was the goal of the initial **Presentation** stage.
- Accuracy was developed through controlled **Practice** activities.
- Fluency was in the **Production** stage. The assumption underlying this linear model was that language learning followed a kind of production line, each item being taught, fine-tuned, and then made automatic, in order that it might be added to the existing store of accumulated items. Fluency – according to this model – is simply automatised accuracy, and accuracy is simply complexity realised as output.

By correcting errors, teachers convey the message that accuracy is important

Recent developments in the study of language acquisition suggest, however, that there is not one unitary language 'bank' that we draw on in the production of language, but that there are, in fact, two stores, working roughly in tandem. On the one hand, there is a store of memorised words, expressions and even whole sentences – a store that is analogous to a dictionary-cum-phrase book. On the other hand, there is a rule-based system, which is capable of generating original utterances through the application of a set of rules – analogous to a grammar. While the memory-based system is able to deliver at speed, the rule-based system takes longer. It is therefore likely that when we are processing language under real-time constraints, we tend to rely on the memory-based system, retrieving whole chunks of language at a time. Fluency is therefore very much dependent on having a stored bank of memorised chunks, and having the ability (which comes from practice) to retrieve these chunks at speed.

Accuracy, on the other hand, seems to be a function of the analysed system. When we have time and sufficient incentive to apply rules to the production of language, language tends to be more grammaticised, hence more

accurate. Typically, this occurs when we are writing. Traditional accuracy practice activities, such as drills, seem to work against the application of a rule-based system, since they are done at speed. In fact drills, because they encourage the development of fluid production, and because they are often focused on the repetition of chunks of language, might better be classified as fluency activities.

Practising accuracy and fluency

What, then, are the characteristics of accuracy activities? For learners to be able to devote attention to 'getting it right', ie to engage the rule-based system, they need time. Research suggests that learners become more accurate in proportion to the time they have available. They can use this time to plan, monitor and fine-tune their output. It may therefore be counterproductive to rush students

through activities designed for the practice of accuracy, since they also need to devote attention to form. It will help if they are not attempting to express meanings which are complex or novel. For example, telling a story with which they are familiar will be easier to fine-tune for accuracy than if they create a new story from scratch.

Learners also need to *value* accuracy, that is, they need to see that without it, they risk being unintelligible. This means that they need unambiguous feedback when they make mistakes that threaten intelligibility. By correcting learners' errors, teachers not only provide this feedback, but they convey the message that accuracy is important. Knowing they are being carefully monitored often helps learners monitor themselves.

And what makes for a good fluency activity? Fluency activities are aimed at the process of automatising. Too much attention to form may jeopardise fluency, since it tempts learners to use analysed language rather than memorised language. One way of diverting attention away from form is to design practice tasks where the focus is primarily on meaning, through the use, for example, of communicative activities, such as information-gap tasks. As pointed out earlier,

communicative tasks are not fluency tasks by definition; they simply provide good conditions for the development of fluency, since attention to form is 'distracted' by the need to produce and process language in real time. Drills and jazz chants are also a form of fluency practice, since they encourage the rapid delivery of chunks, and their repetitive nature facilitates memorising. A combination of a meaning-focused but drill-type activity would be something like 'Find someone who...', in which students mingle, repeatedly asking a formulaic question (such as 'Have you ever been to ...?') in order to complete a class survey.

Of course, the ideal activity would be one in which both accuracy and fluency are involved. Such an activity would need to have an element of real-time processing, while at the same time providing the time and incentive for analysis. Internet chat is a medium which combines some of the real-time effects of speech but which, because it is written, allows a measure of monitoring for accuracy. Having students take part in chats is an excellent way of balancing the demands for fluency (using memorised language) and the demands of accuracy (applying rules). But chat programs are not the only medium: the same effects can be created in the class with pen and paper. Students in pairs simply 'talk' to each other, but write their conversations rather than speak them. Here, for example, is how two teenagers 'performed' a roleplay – passing the paper back and forth between them – in which a boy asks his mother if he can get a tattoo:

B Mum, I want to ask you something.

M What is the question?

B I want to get a tattoo.

M You can do what you want.

B OK.

M OK what?

B I'm going to get a tattoo.

M But with one condition. It has to say 'I love mum'.

B Are you crazy?

Targeting complexity

As previously mentioned, complexity has traditionally been targeted at the presentation stage of the lesson. Learners are expected to learn a new rule, and straightaway incorporate it into their 'mental grammar'. More recently there has been some scepticism as to whether this really happens. There is a growing belief that the

How old is old enough?



True or False?

In Britain ...

- 1 ... you have to vote when you are 18.
- 2 ... you don't have to marry until you are 16.
- 3 ... you should pay for a seat on trains once you turn five.
- 4 ... you don't have to do military service.
- 5 ... you don't have to go into a pub until you are 14.
- 6 ... you can buy cigarettes once you turn 16.
- 7 ... you shouldn't smoke until you're 16.
- 8 ... you shouldn't open your own bank account until you are 18.
- 9 ... you can't buy a pet yourself until you are 12.
- 10 ... you can drive when you are 17, but you must have a licence.
- 11 ... children under 12 should see a dentist regularly.
- 12 ... you have to start your education by the time you are five.

Answers 1 F (you can vote) 2 F (you can't marry) 3 T (or you must pay) 4 T 5 F (you mustn't go) 6 T 7 T (but this is a matter of opinion, not law) 8 F (you can't open) 9 T 10 T 11 T (but this is a matter of opinion, not law) 12 T

restructuring of their mental grammar is more likely to occur during practice activities. Restructuring is sometimes experienced by learners as a kind of flash of understanding, but more often, and less dramatically, it is the dawning realisation that they have moved up another notch in terms of their command of the language.

One school of thought argues that communicative activities (such as information-gap tasks) provide a fertile site for restructuring. When communication breakdowns occur, learners are forced to take stock and re-think, and, hopefully, negotiate their way out of the breakdown. Negotiation of meaning – the collaborative work done to make the message comprehensible – is thought to trigger restructuring. In fact, some early proponents of the communicative approach considered that this was all that was necessary for language acquisition to take place.

Other theorists have argued that a prerequisite for restructuring is noticing: you have to notice features of the input you are receiving, and at the same time you have to notice the difference between your output and the target. One way of getting learners to notice features of the language is to 'lead them up the garden path', that is, to put them in a position where they over-generalise their current knowledge and are then shown the effect of their

error. Such an approach shortcuts the traditional presentation stage and plunges learners in at the deep end (see boxed example above).

Both communication breakdown and enforced error are ways in which learning is problematised, and it is arguable that, unless learners encounter problems, there will be no push to restructure their present competence. 'Safe' instructional models such as PPP are designed to pre-empt problems, whereas 'deep-end' approaches, such as task-based instruction, force learners up against the limits of their competence.

Grammar interpretation tasks

One activity type that is directed at problematising the present state of the learner's knowledge is the grammar interpretation task. This is a kind of receptive practice activity in which learners are forced to engage with features of the language that they might otherwise have overlooked. There is no immediate pressure to produce the feature – simply to note its existence and its effect. This kind of consciousness-raising, it is argued, may just be sufficient to trigger adjustments in the learner's mental grammar.

The boxed exercise, for example, is a grammar interpretation task (which will almost certainly lead to errors) that targets modality. Try it for yourself to

Accuracy, fluency and complexity

▶▶▶ see the sorts of problems you think students will encounter.


When I did this task with a group of intermediate learners in Spain, they started off by focusing on the sentences at the level of vocabulary (eg *vote* – 18), ignoring the finer shades of meaning encoded in the modal verbs. Hence, they answered true to the first and second sentences. Only when these were shown to be false, did they start to get wise to the fact that the truth of the sentences was dependent on understanding the differences between *have to*, *should*, *must*, *can* and their respective negative forms. They were learning while practising. As a follow-up, I asked them to correct the false sentences, translate these into Spanish, and then translate them back into English. Finally, they

devised a quiz about similar rights and responsibilities in Spain.

While such a task cannot guarantee restructuring the learners' mental grammar, it provides good conditions for noticing – better conditions, perhaps, than had I simply 'presented' the forms and their meanings. By problematising a language feature in the context of a practice task, learners not only notice it, but they notice that it matters.

A reassessment

In attempting to re-define the three goals of language teaching, I am not suggesting that, in order to target accuracy, fluency and complexity, whole new task types need to be

devised. Most standard task types fit comfortably into this framework – although perhaps more thought needs to be given to ways in which complexity can be targeted in practice activities rather than by means of the traditional presentation stage. What I am suggesting is that we may need to re-assess some activities in the light of a dual-mode model of language processing, and abandon once and for all the one-track model of learning enshrined in the PPP methodology. 

Skehan, P 'Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction' in Willis, J and Willis, D (Eds) *Challenge and change in language teaching* Heinemann 1996



Scott Thornbury teaches, trains, and writes materials at International House, Barcelona. His latest book, *How to Teach Grammar*, published by Longman (reviewed on page 51), has just won the Ben Warren Trust Prize.