

Review of “Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia”

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Achieving fluency in English language communication is a goal for many English as foreign language (EFL) learners. However, given limited input and exposure to English outside classrooms, fluency has become a challenge for both language learners and teachers. The book, “Exploring EFL fluency in Asia,” offers a timely contribution to EFL teaching and research regarding fluency development.

This edited volume comprises 18 chapters subdivided into five parts. Part I offers an overview of the notion of fluency in curriculum and teaching. In the remainder of the book (Part II to Part V), different contributors discuss specific issues related to fluency in speaking (Part II), writing (Part III), reading (Part IV), and listening (Part V). The individual chapters in each of these parts present both theoretical analyses and empirical studies on fluency in learning and teaching processes.

The five chapters in Part I examine the various ways in which the construct of fluency can be integrated into the language teaching curriculum. This part begins with Paul Nation’s discussion (Chapter 1) on the methodology of fluency development. He proposes that effective fluency activities in language teaching should be gauged by four conditions: a focus on meaning, easy materials, time pressure to go faster, and quantity of practice. He maintains that teachers should consider designing linked skills activities which develop learner fluency through repetition. While Nation focuses on teaching activities, Herder and Sholdt reflect in Chapter 2 on their action research of how a fluency-based approach has been used to teach TOEFL iBT test preparation in a Japanese university. The approach first raises students’ awareness of fluency, and then uses a variety of fluency-based activities to practice speaking, writing, and reading. While their data show that students improve their fluency in all skills, the two authors look forward to conducting a larger-scale, quantitative study to further validate their findings. The following two chapters address the affective dimension of fluency development. Murphey (Chapter 3) introduces how his ‘inging SPAFF’ principle (scaffolding, participating, ageing, friending, and fluencing) can facilitate learning in general and develop fluency in particular. With the belief that participating precedes learning, Murphey also illustrates through two case studies how EFL learners at different levels are scaffolded into participation and engage in the co-construction of fluency. In Chapter 4, Finch similarly demonstrates the importance of affective factors such as confidence, motivation, and independence in developing fluency in a foreign language. He describes a change of attitude among a group

of Korean university students and teachers towards innovation in a teaching program from 1998 to 2012. It is observed that students are more willing to speak in English both in and out of classes as the program innovation progresses. Meanwhile, teachers' positive attitudes towards the program also increase over time. In the last chapter of Part I (Chapter 5), Peppard investigates the importance of prefabricated lexicogrammatical patterns in developing fluency. Under the hypothesis that prefabricated patterns make up a large part of everyday communication and should play a major role in fluency, the author compiles a pedagogic corpus and investigates the effects of a functional-lexicogrammatical syllabus in fluency development among three groups of university students. It is found that such a syllabus can effectively promote students' awareness of the prefabricated patterns and hence facilitate fluency.

Part II of the book focuses on speaking fluency, since the construct of fluency is traditionally derived from speaking. This part includes three chapters. Kirk in Chapter 6 addresses spoken fluency in the classroom and begins by summarizing different aspects of fluency such as cognitive fluency, utterance fluency, perceived fluency, and interactive fluency. He then highlights how some classroom activities, such as drills and dialogue memorization, can address these different aspects of fluency within a communicative framework. For instance, repetition drills can develop cognitive fluency which should result in gains in utterance fluency and perceived fluency. Memorization of dialogues can address the interactive aspects of fluency and confluence. Chapter 7 by Onoda explores how oral fluency of EFL students is enhanced by a focus on language automatization in a Japanese university classroom. The study integrates automatization into stages of input, practice, and production as a pedagogical intervention and measures students' oral fluency by speech rate, total length of unfilled pause, and frequency of pauses, respectively. The results suggest that students' oral fluency improved as a result of such pedagogic intervention. In a similar vein, Chapter 8 examines how the manipulation of task conditions influences EFL oral fluency. In this chapter, Ishikawa investigates how increasing task complexity in intentional reasoning may affect the oral production of a group of Japanese college students. Overall, the results show a decrease in fluency as the cognitive demands of the tasks increase.

Part III includes three chapters which zoom in on different aspects of writing fluency. In Chapter 9, Muller studies the effects of free writing activity on fluency in two high schools in Japan. He predicts that students who practice free writing on a regular basis in the classroom would gain in writing speed. However, the study exhibited mixed results: students from the National College of Technology did not improve much in writing fluency, but those from a private high school gained significantly in their writing speed. The author cautions that although free writing can be easily used as a pedagogical tool in classrooms, teachers should consider such factors as the amount of time for practice and the topics used for free writing. The next two chapters in this part are concerned with fluency assessment. In Chapter 10, Fraser proposes a framework for assessing fluency in L2 output. The framework offers a set of criteria against which both spoken and written fluency can be measured. To test the validity of the framework, she used it to assess two cohorts of Japanese high school EFL learners' written and spoken production. The comparison between the two groups shows that the framework is capable of distinguishing and quantifying differences in fluency among L2 learners. Likewise, Latif proposes a measurement of writing fluency in Chapter 11. After a critical review of product-based and process-based indicators of writing fluency, he raises the issue of how writing fluency can be validly measured. He evaluates product-based indicators as questionable, because, firstly, they only reflect some aspects of text quality; and secondly, they are derived from speaking fluency measures which may not be applicable to writing. Based on a review of process-based indicators, he recommends the use of the "mean length of translating episodes" as a more reliable and valid writing fluency indicator.

Part IV addresses reading fluency and is made up of four chapters. In Chapter 12, Waring summarizes the benefits of extensive reading in developing fluency. For example, extensive reading can improve vocabulary development, increases learner autonomy and motivation. There is also compelling evidence that extensive reading not only leads to development on fluency, but also

on other aspects of language acquisition. Hence extensive reading, as Waring argues, may improve overall academic achievement. He maintains that, when using extensive reading to facilitate reading fluency, practitioners should instruct learners to select appropriate materials that are matched to their level so as to maximize the benefits from the extensive reading. Chapter 13 reports a case study of an extensive reading program in a Chinese high school in Shanghai. In this study, Mu He compares two experimental groups using free reading and complementary reading, respectively, with a control group for their development in foreign language acquisition. The results show that both extensive reading groups gain significant improvement in overall proficiency and in specific areas including grammar, listening cloze, reading, and writing. In Chapter 14, Atkins looks into how timed reading can improve reading fluency. The writer points out that current understanding of timed reading is problematic, because simply measuring the rate of reading fails to take into account whether students are comprehending what they read. Therefore, the study investigates both reading rate and comprehension with Japanese university students. The results support the claim that timed reading leads to gains in reading fluency. Pedagogically, the author proposes to incorporate timed reading into existing curricula, although it is necessary to consider the vocabulary and background knowledge of the readers. The last chapter in Part IV (Chapter 15) zeros in on the reading fluency of a special cohort of EFL learners with language related disabilities such as dyslexia. Here, Goldfus reports how an intervention program improves reading fluency in the classroom for these learners. This quasi-experiment shows that the students in the intervention program gained more than the comparative group.

Part V wraps up the book by addressing listening fluency in three chapters. In Chapter 16, Rost proposes three complementary frameworks for developing listening fluency: top-down, bottom-up, and interactive. Each framework is grounded in research literature and a variety of learning activities are proposed. For example, Rost defines interactive fluency as the interaction and collaboration between the listener and the speaker, and points out that instruction of active listening strategies and listener-initiated negotiation can improve this aspect of fluency. In Chapter 17, Carreira underlines that connected speech constitutes a major difficulty for EFL learners at a lower proficiency level. She therefore argues for the use of songs to teach connected speech and demonstrates how a group of Japanese university students improved significantly on their dictation and listening test scores through this method. She also suggests that teachers should use authentic materials such as songs to teach connected speech, because songs can motivate students and create an interesting and relax learning environment. In the last chapter of the book (Chapter 18), Tsai reports an empirical study of the effects of autonomous listening on the development of listening fluency. Over eight weeks, a group of EFL students in a national university in Taiwan is instructed to access online listening materials automatically in order to prepare for weekly tests. Data show that more motivated learners benefited from the autonomous listening and showed improvement in listening comprehension. In comparison, the less motivated learners fail to improve due to their reluctance to spend extra time on autonomous listening. Pedagogically, Tsai proposes that less motivated learners should be given more support prior to autonomous listening in order to help them to become more engaged.

This book distinguishes itself through its strengths in several areas. To begin with, while fluency is often narrowly used as a measure of oral performance (Guillot, 1999), it is inspected in this book from a broader perspective. As acknowledged in the introduction, an important rationale behind this book is to treat fluency as a multidimensional notion which cuts across different language skills. The chapters exploring fluency in writing, reading, and listening show how the construct evolves and influences learning of specific language skills. In addition, the book offers valuable insights into classroom fluency activities informed by research. As there is very limited need and opportunity for learners to use English in an EFL context, the classroom may be the most important place for them to develop fluency in a foreign language. To maximize the benefits from classroom pedagogy and activities, robust evidence from research is essential. Hence, this book provides evidence for the effectiveness of various pedagogical methods and activities. Another

noteworthy point about this edited volume concerns its organization. The five parts in the book follow a sequence from general to specific, familiar to less familiar. Although each chapter is autonomous and self-contained, authors make frequent cross-references to other chapters whenever they are relevant to the discussion. Such a feature enables interested readers to pursue and follow up on those references and can thus broaden their understanding of a particular topic.

This book will be useful to both researchers and practitioners of language acquisition, particularly those who are based in EFL contexts in Asia. For researchers, the findings reported in this book may provide new insights into the current research on fluency and probably some implications for the related notion of accuracy and complexity. For language teachers, especially those at the tertiary level in similar contexts, the examined pedagogies in this book could be further validated and perhaps eventually adapted for their own classrooms. The book seems to be limited by an under-representation of EFL contexts outside Japan. However, teachers from other EFL contexts in Asia should still find this book relevant, because their teaching situation is likely to overlap to a large extent with those described here. Overall, this book is a valuable addition to the literature on researching and teaching fluency in the field of applied linguistics.

Reference

Guillot, M.-N. (1999). *Fluency and its teaching*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.