Buletinul Ştiinţific al Universităţii Politehnica Timişoara
Seria Limbi moderne

Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timişoara
Transactions on Modern Languages

Vol. 24, Issue 1 / 2025

Accuracy vs. Fluency in ESP Classes

Mirela COSTELEANU*

Abstract: Both accuracy and fluency play an essential role in the process of ESP learning and teaching. The first question that arises when discussing fluency and accuracy is whether they are equally important or if one of them should take precedence over the other. The grammar-translation method prioritizes accuracy in language use, encouraging students to focus on precise grammar rules and vocabulary translation. The systematic study of grammar rules helps learners to understand and master complex language structures, preparing them for academic and professional settings where language proficiency is required. Nowadays, strong written and oral communication skills are highly prized in the professional world, which is why language learners are expected not only to read and write well, but also to speak the language fluently. When teaching beginners, language teachers focus on equipping them with a solid foundation which can only be associated with rigorous language training in the classroom. Although accuracy is not synonymous with a total absence of errors, beginners are expected to be able to manipulate the language system in a spontaneous way. Once they master the language forms, students should be given enough opportunities to develop their fluency while using the language more freely. Thus, accuracy and fluency are practised simultaneously.

Keywords: accuracy, fluency, proficiency, communication, misunderstandings

1. Introduction

ESP teachers need to consider various aspects when developing their instructional strategies and selecting class activities. The debate on whether accuracy is more important than fluency or vice versa is a nuanced one and the decision largely depends on the learners' goals and needs as well as on the learning context.

Accuracy and fluency are two distinct aspects of language learning. Some learners associate language proficiency with the ability to speak and write effortlessly. Thus, to their minds, someone who has difficulty in finding the right

* Lecturer, Department of Applied Foreign Languages, The National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest, Pitești University Centre, Romania

BUPT

words when trying to convey their thoughts and ideas can hardly consider themselves to be proficient in English. Other learners equate language proficiency with the ability to speak and write correctly. In their view, someone who is unable to produce error-free sentences because they do not have a deep understanding of how to use grammar, vocabulary and punctuation still has to pay efforts to become a proficient user of English.

Defining accuracy and fluency may be problematic, as the definitions of the two terms may vary slightly depending on the context, perspective or the focus of the language learning and teaching. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005, 11), the term *accuracy* refers to "the state of being exact or correct" or "the ability to do something skillfully without making mistakes". Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) define linguistic accuracy as "the ability to be free from errors while using language to communicate in either writing or speech". Accuracy is defined as "the ability to produce the L2 with target-like and error-free language" (House, Kuiken, Vedder 2012, 2). It is closely related to the syllabus, form-based and teacher-dominated (Brumfit 1984). More traditional teachers tend to prioritize accuracy over fluency. Their main objective is to teach their students how to use language correctly and appropriately. They focus on activities aimed at improving students' grammar knowledge, spelling and pronunciation.

Fluency generally refers to learners' ability to speak and write easily at a reasonable speed with mistakes that do not impede communication. It is seen as "the ability to produce the L2 with native-like rapidity, pausing, hesitation, or reformulation" (House, Kuiken, Vedder 2012, 2), being described as the most neglected reading skill (Allington 1983). Fluency is student-dominated and meaning-based, for which reason its relationship to the syllabus is unpredictable (Brumfit 1984). Fluency in reading is "the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy and to read with appropriate prosodic word stress and phrasing while understanding the text" (Grabe, Yamashita 2009, 404). The history of fluency in the field of reading may be described as intelectually spasmodic, with periods of great effort and creativity, followed by periods of relative disinterest (Wolf, Katzir-Cohen 2001). Writing fluency implies the sense of fluent production the written text can reflect (Argaman, Abu-Rabia 2002), and the speed of lexical retrieval while writing (Snellings, Van Gelderen 2004).

Today, intercultural communicative competence is seen as the main objective of foreign language learning. The ability to speak fluently is highly valued. Yet, accuracy acquisition is far from being neglected, but the methods and activities aimed at developing it are rather practical than theoretical.

Ideally, elements of both accuracy and fluency are incorporated in foreign language classes. English proficiency is defined as the level of fluency as well as the level of accuracy since a learner can be fluent in English and still make a lot of mistakes which can result in misunderstandings when communicating. However, feeling comfortable when expressing one's thoughts in a coherent and natural way is as important as speaking accurately. Every teacher's responsibility is to design a

BUPT

balanced course which allows students to work on both fluency and accuracy, irrespective of their priorities.

2. Is accuracy more important than fluency?

Whether accuracy is more important than fluency largely depends on the learners' learning goal and needs. Someone who aims to use English in formal settings will need to be able to use it accurately. Otherwise, misunderstandings between interlocutors may cause serious problems or lead to awkward situations. On the other hand, achieving fluency is of paramount importance to those learners who need to be able to use English in casual or social situations.

As far as engineering students and engineers are concerned, one might be tempted to assume that fluency takes priority over accuracy. Indeed, most of their activities, both in the classroom and in the workplace, have to do with numbers, not words. They are practical people who are used to conveying a message in as few words as possible. Yet, accuracy is as important as fluency in their case as they are expected to be able to write instructions, specifications and technical reports correctly and to explain processes and designs clearly to their colleagues, clients and superiors who are not specialists in their field. Engineers often work in teams, sometimes in multilingual teams. They take part in discussions, meetings and brainstorming sessions, where they need to be able to explain issues quickly and effectively. If all the participants are familiar with the technical concepts discussed, the interactions are likely to be successful. Even in such situations, accuracy is critical. Communicating with non-technical stakeholders requires a good knowledge of grammar and an extensive vocabulary. Mastering the technical terminology and having solid grammar knowledge will allow them to communicate clearly and precisely.

3. Challenges of acquiring fluency vs. accuracy

The success of fluency acqusition depends on a number of factors. One of these factors is the learners' personality. Introvert people do not generally feel at ease when expressing their thoughts freely and naturally because of the fear of making mistakes and losing face in front of the other participants to the interaction. Extroverts, on the other hand, are usually stereotyped as being outgoing and talkative and therefore better at becoming fluent speakers, as they are more likely to contribute in the class and welcome opportunities to practice (Pritchard 2007, 77).

Another factor that influences fluency acquisition is the learners' age. It is a well-known fact that children pick up languages more effortlessly than adults. The latter are more reluctant to take risks than the former. As Pritchard points out, adults seem to doubt their ability to learn and fear looking silly or being rejected if they make mistakes (2007, 69). Stengel (1939) compares adult learners to people wearing fancy clothes. They may be willing to wear them, but their willingness is often diminished by their fear of ridicule and criticism. Tsui (1996, 156) shows that "when communicating in a language in which they are not fluent, learners cannot help but feel that they are not fully representing their personality and their intelligence".

BUPT

Helping these students boost their self-confidence in communicating can be more challenging than developing their accuracy in written form.

Fluency acquisition is also greatly influenced by the amount of practice time. Building fluency and continuous practice go hand in hand. Fluency may become hard to acquire if the learners' opportunities to take part in spontaneous conversations are few. If they have little access to environments where the target language is used naturally in everyday situations, their chances of becoming fluent speakers are diminished. A good level of English is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to be successful in face-to-face interactions with native speakers. Thus, when interacting with them, learners may be surprised to see that they often break strict grammatical rules. Their relaxed style of speaking is different from the one they were taught at school. People tend to use common words and to avoid long sentences. They speak fast and do not articulate words as clearly as they do when they are in a formal setting, which makes them more difficult to follow and understand. Also, the frequent use of idioms, slang and regional expressions is usually confusing. The tone used in social interactions is different from the one used in academic settings. The former is more relaxed and friendlier, allowing for jokes and sarcasm. The latter is more rigid, impersonal and emotionless. Sometimes, what is perfectly acceptable in formal style may sound unnatural in informal style. In social interactions, it is the ability to communicate quickly and naturally that matters the most whereas in an academic or professional setting it is accuracy and clarity that are highly valued.

Becoming accurate in English may be challenging for various reasons. Accuracy demands thorough knowledge of grammatical rules. The complexity of verb tenses is overwhelming. Word order can be confusing because the comparison with the Romanian language may be misleading. The use of articles and prepositions may also lead to errors. The large number of idioms and phrasal verbs, which often lack direct translations, can confuse learners.

The vastness of the English vocabulary can be overwhelming, but what learners need to remember is that they do not need to be familiar with every word they encounter to be able to communicate effectively. Being a good communicator relies on using one's vocabulary productively while compensating for gaps with other skills.

English pronunciation does not usually match spelling. Similar spellings may have different pronunciations (*tear* as a verb has a different pronunciation from *tear* as a noun). Sounds not found in Romanian pose a lot of difficulties to Romanian learners who find them difficult to pronounce.

Although language transfer can result in correct usage, it often leads to errors when the grammatical rules of L1 and L2 differ significantly. A Romanian learner, for instance, is often tempted to say "I have ten years old" instead of "I am ten years old" because the Romanian language uses the verb *a avea* for age.

In real-time communication, learners need to simultaneously focus on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and meaning, which can be overwhelming.

BUPT

4. Is the need for accuracy and fluency influenced by the learners' professions?

Different professionals often prioritize specific needs in their L2 learning. Engineers, for instance, are problem solvers. They need to communicate effectively in order to make sure that their ideas are well understood by both technical and non-technical stakeholders. They need to share information with their colleagues and stakeholders on a daily basis. They need to write reports, proposals, emails in which they have to write clearly and concisely to avoid ambiguities. Information sharing is fundamental to the success of engineering projects, which is why they need to explain complex processes to non-specialists and share information with the other members of the team. Being able to speak accurately allows them to avoid misunderstandings, to use resources such as time and energy effectively and to achieve the best results.

Although in engineering accuracy is generally prioritized over fluency, being a fluent communicator allows for smoother communication. During meetings and discussions, time is usually limited and people who are not good at speaking fluently are usually reticent about expressing their thoughts and ideas because of their fear of not being able to do it quickly and effectively. Being fluent in English allows participants to engage naturally in discussions, to ask and answer questions. It helps them to feel in control of the project they are discussing, which has a positive effect on team dynamics and decision making.

Professionals in the humanities field often have very different communication styles from those of engineers due to the nature of their work and audiences. They focus on discussing abstract ideas and perspectives. While engineers use technical terminology specific to their field, humanities professionals use a broader vocabulary. The former prefer using straightforward, concise sentence structures whereas the latter tend to use more varied sentence structures which allow them to explore subtle nuances and layers of meaning. Engineers' communication is factual, objective and neutral. They use empirical data to support their arguments. They generally communicate with other technical professionals who share their technical knowledge, which is why they speak about processes without any extensive explanation. Since professionals in the humanities field address a more interdisciplinary audience, they need to come up with ways to get their ideas across to all the various professionals that make up the audience. They often prioritize fluency over strict accuracy as the flow of thought and engagement with the audience is more important than grammatical precision.

5. Fluency focused classes vs. accuracy focused classes

Raising learner awareness about the importance of fluency has been shown to help learners develop a better understanding of fluency and to encourage them to use various strategies that lead to fluent communication (Seifoori, Vahidi 2012; Tavakoli, Campbell, McCormack 2016). In fluency focused classes, teachers devote a lot of time to activities aimed at developing students' ability to use language smoothly and quickly in real time: speaking activities (role plays, debates, storytelling, speed discussions), listening activities (interactive listening, dictogloss), reading activities

BUPT

(timed reading, jigsaw reading), writing activities (collaborative writing, quick writes) etc. Students are encouraged to speak freely, without being afraid of making mistakes.

During these activities, correction should be provided tactfully. Immediate correction may have a negative effect on the success of the activity, disrupting communication and affecting the students' self-confidence. Teachers should delay correction in order not to interrupt the activity. They can reformulate students' incorrect sentences, encourage the students to correct their own mistakes or explain themselves what was wrong in the students' answers especially if it is a recurrent mistake. When teachers provide correction, they should take into account their students' language level. Beginners tend to demotivate if they are corrected very often, which is why only their major errors should be corrected. Intermediate and advanced learners are more likely to benefit form being corrected once they understand that making mistakes is inherent to foreign language learning.

In accuracy focused classes, teachers prioritize grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and sentence structure. They use grammar activities (gap-fill exercises, drills, error correction exercises), vocabulary exercises (word formation, fill-in-the-blanks exercises, collocation practice), pronunciation exercises (recording and feedback, minimal pair practice), speaking activities (question - answer practice, sentence drills), writing activities (dictation-controlled writing), reading activities (cloze reading, sentence ordering) etc. Teachers should correct students immediately and explicitly during activities aimed at enhancing accuracy. In this way, they make sure that their students internalize correct usage of newly introduced grammar and vocabulary. However, immediate correction should be provided tactfully so that it becomes supportive and constructive.

6. Conclusion

Both accuracy and fluency are foundational pillars in the process of ESP learning and teaching, each of them having its own merits since they address divergent facets of linguistic proficiency. In the early phases of language acquisition, accuracy may be described as the bedrock of language mastery, leading to a firm foundation, which allows learners to construct their linguistic capabilities. Activities aimed at enhancing fluency stimulate learners to use their existing resources to express their thoughts and ideas naturally and freely. It is essential for language teachers to strike a balance between accuracy and fluency to ensure learners develop both the confidence to communicate effectively and naturally and the ability to use the language correctly. Prioritizing one over the other can hinder learners' overall proficiency, which is why a balanced approach fosters well-rounded language skills.

References

1. Allington, Richard L. 1983. "Fluency: The neglected reading goal." *Reading Teacher,* 36(6): 556- 561.

BUPT

2. Argaman, Osnat, Abu-Rabia, Salim. 2002. "The influence of language anxiety on English reading and writing tasks among native Hebrew speakers." *Language Culture and Curriculum*, 15(2): 143-160.
3. Brumfit, Cristopher J. 1984. *Communicative methodology in language teaching: The roles of fluency and accuracy*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Grabe, William, Yamashita, Junko. 2002. *Reading in a Second Language, Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge Applied Linguistics.
5. Housen, Alex, Kuiken, F., Vedder, Ineke. 2012. "Complexity, accuracy and fluency" in *Dimensions of L2 performance and proficiency*. John Benjamin's Publishing House.
6. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2005
7. Pritchard Newcombe, Lynda. 2007. *Social Context and Fluency in L2 Learners; The Case of Wales*. New Perspectives on Language Education.
8. Seifoori, Zohreh, Vahidi, Zahra. 2012. "The impact of fluency strategy training on Iranian EFL learners' speech under online planning conditions." *Language awareness*: 101-112. https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2011.639894.
9. Snellings, Patrick, Van Gelderen, Amos, De Glopper, Kees. 2000. "The effect of enhanced lexical retrieval on second language writing: A classroom experiment." *Applied Psycholinguistics,* 25(2): 175–200.
10. Stengel, E.1939. "On Learning a New Language." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 20: 471-479.
11. Tavakoli, Parvaneh, Campbell, Colin, McCormack, Joan. 2016. "Developments of speech fluency over a short period of time: effects of pedagogic Intervention." *Tesol Quarterly* 50(2): 447-471.
12. Tsui, Amy B.M. 1996. "Reticence and Anxiety in Second Language Learning." in K. Bailey and D.
13. Wolf, Maryanne, Katzir-Cohen, Tami. 2001. "Reading fluency and its intervention." *Scientific Studies of Reading* 5(3): 211-239.
14. Wolfe-Quintero, Kate, Inagaki, Shunji., Kim, Hae-Young. 1998. *Second language development in writing: Measures of fluency, accuracy, complexity*. University of Hawaii Press.

BUPT