



# Is fluency being 'neglected' in the classroom? Teacher understanding of fluency and related classroom practices

**BY: PEDRAM RAZEQI  
MA STUDENT OF TEFL**

**This paper reports on a study examining second language (L2) teachers' understanding of speech fluency and their self-reported classroom practices for improve it.**

**There is little disagreement among second language (L2) teachers and researchers that many L2 learners hope to become competent and fluent speakers of the language they are learning.**

**From a research perspective, fluency is an important research focus as it not only characterizes one of three key features of oral performance, i.e. complexity, accuracy and fluency.**

# Fluency from a research perspective

**In broad sense:** fluency is often used to represent 'mastery' of the language, and reflects what is sometimes termed 'general proficiency' in language teaching and testing. it can be used to refer to the skills of reading, writing or speaking, fluency is normally used in reference to 'spoken command of a foreign language'.

**In narrow sense:** fluency a key characteristic of speaking ability and mainly refers to ease and automaticity of speech. In this sense, fluency is only one of the several aspects of speaking ability, and differs from other characteristics such as grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity.

This paper considers Koponen and Riggensbach's (2000) definition of fluency as 'flow, continuity, automaticity, or smoothness of speech'.

Research in this area has managed, at least to some extent, to analyze the complex construct of fluency by dividing it into separate aspects (e.g. utterance fluency) and sub-constructs (e.g. speed, breakdown, repair).

# Fluency in L2 teaching

Classroom activities and practices that L2 fluency research has consistently reported to have positive effects on fluency:

- 1. Formulaic sequences:** The findings have consistently shown that practicing use of formulaic sequences promotes fluency.
- 2. Pre-task planning time:** large number of studies have reported that fluency is positively affected when learners are given the opportunity to plan before they perform a task.
- 3. Task repetition:** The effects of repeating a communicative task has been found to increase fluency of oral performance.
- 4. The 4/3/2 technique:** This technique refers to a classroom activity which involves task repetition with increasing time pressure, i.e. learners are required to speak on a chosen topic for 4, then 3, and finally 2 minutes.
- 5. Awareness-raising activities:** The existing evidence suggests that raising learner awareness about the characteristics of fluent speech (e.g. by listening to and commenting on native speakers' performance of a task) can help promote fluency.

# Research questions

## 1. What does L2 speech Fluency mean to language teachers?

How do L2 teachers define fluency?

How confident are they in promoting fluency in classroom?

How familiar are they with research findings in L2 fluency?

## 2. How do language teachers promote fluency in classroom?

# How do teachers define fluency?

According to table 1, while **16.7%** of the teachers reported a limited or no knowledge of fluency, more than **80%** of the teachers reported they knew what speech fluency means either to a large or to some extent. A relatively large number of the teachers, (**11.9% and 59.5%**), reported that they knew to a large extent and to some extent respectively what factors contributed to fluency, with **28.6%** acknowledging their knowledge was limited or non-existent.

**Table 1.** Teachers' understanding of speech fluency.

	To a large extent (%)	To some extent (%)	To a limited extent (%)	Hardly at all (%)
I know what L2 speech fluency means	19.0	64.3	16.7	0
I know what factors contribute to speech fluency	11.9	59.5	27.4	1.2

# How confident are teachers in promoting fluency?

According to Table 3, the participants' self-reported knowledge of and confidence about promoting fluency in classroom were divided. While **52.4%** reported at least some knowledge of teaching fluency in classroom, **47.6%** suggested they had limited or very little knowledge of this. When asked the question in a more general sense, the participants expressed more confidence about helping their learners improve fluency with 69% of the teachers choosing to some extent or to a large extent choices.

**Table 3.** Teachers' confidence in promoting fluency in classroom.

	To a large extent (%)	To some extent (%)	To a limited extent (%)	Hardly at all (%)
I know how speech fluency can be taught in L2 classroom	10.7	41.7	39.3	8.3
I know how to help my learners improve speech fluency	8.3	47.6	36.9	7.1
I know the kind of activities that help promote speech fluency	10.8	48.2	38.6	2.4
I know learning strategies that help learners improve their L2 speech fluency	9.5	51.2	31	8.3
I feel confident about helping my learners improve their speech fluency	23.8	45.2	28.6	1.2

## How familiar are teachers with research findings in L2 fluency?

As indicated in Table 4, while **59.5%** of the participants reported some familiarity, more than **40%** of the teachers reported limited or hardly any familiarity with fluency research findings. It is interesting, however, to see that a larger proportion of the teachers, i.e. **72.6%** thought that fluency research at least to some extent can help them with their classroom practice.

**Table 4.** Teachers' familiarity with fluency research.

	To a large extent (%)	To some extent (%)	To a limited extent (%)	Hardly at all (%)
I know recent research findings about how to promote speech fluency	39.3	20.2	4.5	33.3
I think recent research in speech fluency can help me with my classroom teaching practice	39.3	33.3	19	8.3



# How do teachers promote fluency in classroom?

According to Table 5, the largest category of the activities proposed by the teachers was the free production activities (53.6) which are aimed at helping learners develop their speaking ability in general. While 22.6% of the slots were left blank, 13.5% of the activities were those that help develop other aspects of L2 ability, e.g. reading, listening and vocabulary knowledge, which we consider useful for developing the general L2 proficiency. The percentages for the first four categories were very small, with only a sum of 10.4% of the total number of the reported activities coming under these headings.

**Table 5.** Activities the teachers reported to use to promote fluency in classroom.

Categories of fluency-focused activities	Frequency	Percentage	Examples from the data
Consciousness-raising	4	1.6	Asking students to listen to their recorded performance; making them aware of the importance of uninterrupted speech
Planning, rehearsal and repetition	7	2.8	Surveys around the room by repeating the same speaking activity; Give students one minute to plan before they perform a task, and ask them to repeat it.
Formulaic language, discourse markers and lexical fillers	8	3.2	Teaching and practicing lexical chunks; memorizing prefabricated chunks
Fluency strategy Training	7	2.8	Introducing fillers as a strategy; repair strategies
Communicative free production activities	135	53.6	Role-plays, debates, pair and group work, information-gap activities; conversations
General L2 proficiency	34	13.5	Listening to native speakers; practicing listening, reading and writing; vocabulary learning; translation
None	57	22.6	No examples provided by the teachers.

Notes.  $N = 84$ ;  $n = 252$ .

# Discussion and Conclusion

**The qualitative data analysis implied that teachers' definitions of speech fluency are not of a dichotomous nature and often seem to inhabit the space somewhere between a broad and narrow definition.**

**This article analysis suggests that general speaking ability and general L2 proficiency (the two largest categories of responses), are central to teachers' understanding of fluency.**

**The results also suggested that defining fluency in its narrow sense receives only a relatively small proportion of the teachers' attention.**

**The teachers demonstrated an awareness of the underlying cognitive processes involved in language production (e.g. automaticity and ease of processing), and displayed an understanding of the building blocks (e.g. range of vocabulary and correct grammar) needed to facilitate L2 processing demands.**

# Discussion and Conclusion

**The finding, that only a small percentage (13.4%) characterized fluency in a narrow and focused sense was rather surprising since we had assumed language teachers would allude to a narrower and perhaps more focused view of fluency and certainly one which sets fluency apart from complexity and accuracy.**

**With regard to our second research question, the data analysis implied that a relatively small proportion (10.4%) of the activities suggested by the teachers were of the sort that have been identified as fluency-enhancing by research.**

**The congruity of the findings between teachers' definitions of fluency and their suggested activities is perhaps evidence to the existence of a 'symbiotic relationship' (Foss & Kleinsasser, 1996, p. 441) between teachers' understandings and their practices.**

# Discussion and Conclusion

Rossiter et al. (2010) referred to fluency as a neglected component in language teaching as the books they investigated relied heavily on generic speaking activities with limited attention to evidence-based, fluency-focused practices.

This article shows that there does appear to be a gap between fluency research and language pedagogy.

The current research also revealed that the majority of the teachers in this study conceive of fluency in a much broader sense than that which is used for research purposes and that teachers are providing students with general speaking practice through the use of free-production activities.

**So we can say that, fluency, in its focused and narrow sense, might very well be neglected in L2 classrooms.**