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Enhancing Oral Fluency as a Linguodidactic Issue

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Abstract

The research reviews the problem of enhancing oral fluency during a course of General English for technical learners. The range of issues discussed includes the concept of fluency, criteria for its assessment, and the factors hindering it. The methodology suggested is designed in the framework of the cognitive-communicative approach and incorporates regular free-talking sessions, talks focused on language problems and discussions centered on pop-music. The methodology stimulates the learners' motivation for developing prosodic and grammatical skills, contributes to the growth of pragmatic competence and linguistic competence, which are indispensable conditions of oral fluency as a characteristic feature of L2 proficiency.

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1. Introduction

According to the competence approach, the ability of interacting verbally is regarded as a natural outcome of language teaching and learning. One of the major characteristics of communicative competence is fluency. Oral fluency is a specific feature characterizing the level of speaking skills which manifests itself in the learner's ability to speak freely, without unnecessary pausing and with the prosody of speech, syntax and vocabulary range comparable with those characteristic of the speech of a native speaker (Polyakov & Tormyshova, 2014, p. 168). It requires a

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considerably high level of achievement. Therefore, fluency is regarded "a performance descriptor for oral assessment of foreign language learners and as an indicator of progress in language learning" (Chambers, 1997, p. 535). It makes speech comprehensible, becoming one of the conditions which ensure successful communication.

However, the educators in Russia working in the field of language teaching have been still striving to combat the legacy left by the times of "the iron curtain" when foreign languages, though being a compulsory subject at schools and universities, were never actually taught for the sake of verbal discourse. In spite of the fact that for the last 30 years some Russian citizens have been traveling around the world more and developing international contacts in business and education, for the majority of the population in this country learning English has not yet become an essential need. Consequently, most schoolchildren study English just because it is required by the curriculum, but not because they are aware of the practical purpose of language learning. It accounts for the fact that a large number of university undergraduates (as former schoolchildren), display a low level of language proficiency and are not motivated for language study, at least at the beginning of the language course at universities. Learning English is viewed by undergraduates as a hypothetically useful option for prospective employment rather than a driving need of the present day.

We can raise the question of why this attitude to learning L2, idiomatically saying "for a rainy day", should be viewed as a problem. The answer implies at least two basic reasons. The first reason is that undergraduates prefer to meet bear minimum requirements and are not enthusiastic to grasp as much knowledge, acquire and develop as many skills as they would if they were learning L2 with the full awareness of its practical value. Keeping in mind that language study needs regular and intense practice to make developing communicative skills achievable, unenthusiastic studying brings unsatisfying results. The second reason, which in a certain way, results from the formalistic approach to studying and the lack of the awareness of the practical purpose of language study, is that undergraduates display low motivation for verbal discourse in L2. Here are the conditions in which the challenging task of developing learners' oral fluency has to be addressed.

The goal of this research is to review the range of issues related to oral fluency as a linguodidactic problem, which includes the concept of fluency, criteria for its assessment, the factors hindering it and identifying the approach to develop it when teaching technical learners. The research was conducted at the Institute of Power Engineering at Tomsk Polytechnic University.

2. Background

It has to be noted that fluency was primarily viewed as a psychological problem. In cognitive psychology it is understood as the ease of processing information by the brain as a result of recognizing familiar stimuli, to which both objects and experiences refer (Jacoby & Dallas, 1981; Berlyne, 1971; Reber, et al., 2004). Perceptual fluency reveals the level of the performance of mental functions such as thinking, perception, memory, attention and a few others. Further on, perceptual fluency began to be regarded in relevance to the process of learning - a much broader process, having perception of information in its root and then followed by a number of mental operations for the purpose of digesting and assimilating perceived facts and, when necessary, producing new knowledge.

Consequently, fluency has become a pedagogical problem, and later on developed into an issue for linguodidactics. The goal of enhancing fluency is relevant to the range of language skills including speaking, reading, listening, both in the native and foreign languages. In this paper focused on oral fluency we naturally deal with speaking, and narrow the research to speaking L2. Oral fluency continues to draw the attention of the researchers (Segalowitz, 2010; Shakhtakhtinskaya, 2008; Thornbury, 2008, p. 1-11; De Jong & Perfetti, 2004; Pinget, et al., 2014; Polyakov & Tormyshova, 2014; Mirdamadi & De Jong, 2015). In linguodidactics fluency is viewed as a result of developed skills (Chambers, 1997). Language proficiency as a result of skill-learning implies the integration of a cognitive and a behavioral aspect in language learning. The cognitive aspect refers to the language system, which are defined as "plans" and the behavioral aspect is associated with converting language knowledge into fluent performance (Littlewood, 1984, p. 74) in definite situations. The consideration of the cognitive aspect in language teaching process means that attention is paid to how data is sorted and organized in the learners' minds to ensure the efficient application of knowledge and skills in the present or future.

Since the notion of fluency is applied in the reference to evaluating performance, quantitative and qualitative criteria have been isolated to measure oral fluency (Kawauchi, 1997; Bosker, et al., 2013; Raddaoui, 1997, p. 13-19;

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