How to incorporate qualitative analysis into experimental research — Why Japanese students studying in the UK did not improve their fluency?

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<https://doi.org/10.36505/ExLing-2010/03/0013/000133>

Abstract

This study investigated the longitudinal improvement in fluency of three Japanese participants who studied at a graduate school in the UK. In addition to quantitative analysis of videotaped conversations focusing on core components of fluency, such as speech rates, dysfluency markers and pauses, qualitative analysis, including protocol analysis and journal analysis, were also employed to discuss why they did not improve in fluency as originally expected. The analyses revealed that these participants did not have as many chances to communicate with native speakers as originally expected, and that a sociocultural factor of being excessively afraid of making mistakes might be a reason that prevented their natural improvement.

Key words: fluency, speech rates, dysfluency markers, pauses, sociocultural elements

Introduction

In order to measure learners' linguistic ability, three constructs – fluency, accuracy, and complexity – are often considered the key constructs (i.e. Skehan 1998). Especially, fluency plays an essential role in spoken language which can be characterised by fragmentation and involvement (Chafe 1982). Although fluency is a widely-accepted term, it is difficult to define and measure it precisely, including how to treat dysfluency markers or pauses. In this study, how the measurement of fluency can be operationalised, how the participants – three Japanese learners of English – improved or did not improve in fluency during their stay in the UK, and what are the reasons if they did not improve as expected will be discussed. Especially, in order to discuss the third point, qualitative approaches such as the analysis of post-interviews and journals are employed in addition to quantitative approach. Incorporating a qualitative approach is especially suggestive for English learners in Eastern countries, who sometimes have complex cultural and personal reasons that prevent them from attaining high level of performance. Therefore, the benefit of combining the two approaches is also discussed.

Definition of Fluency

Fluency has been defined in several different ways. In the field of second language acquisition, it is associated with “the processing of language in real time” (Schmidt, 1992: 358) and is often contrasted with the term, *knowledge*, such as lexical or grammatical knowledge. In Lennon (1990), fluency is regarded as “a purely performance phenomenon” and defined as “an impression on the listener’s part that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently” (1990:391). In the article, the core elements that enable us to measure fluency are also discussed: speech rates, dysfluency markers and pauses. In this study, therefore, these three elements were measured to discuss fluency.

Methodology

This longitudinal study measured and analysed the development in fluency of three Japanese learners of English who stayed in the UK for one year. The details of methodology are summarised below.

Research Questions

For this research, the following three specific questions were formulated. In this paper presentation, 1) and 3) will be focused.

- 1) How would the fluency of the three Japanese improve during their stay in the UK for one year?
- 2) How their improvement in fluency and in communication are related?
- 3) If they do not improve in fluency, what reasons are considered?

Participants

The data was collected for one year from three Japanese learners of English who studied at a graduate school in the UK. All of them had a high proficiency score (measured by a TOEIC test) even before their study in the UK; however, they had not had many chances to use English in actual communication in Japan. In this sense, they seemed to be ideal research participants who would show a lot of improvement in fluency during their stay in the UK.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

For the data collection, a multi-method was employed in order to make my analysis as objective and precise as possible. In addition to the main data obtained by the monthly videotaping of conversations between each Japanese participant and a native speaker of British English, retrospective comments of these conversations, comments in post-interviews, and journals about their life in the UK were collected. The main data was analysed to measure fluency, including speech rates, dysfluency markers and pauses, using voice-analysing software, Praat. As for disfluency markers, fillers, false starts and repetitions were included, but not self-corrections, which might have stemmed from grammatical or communicative purposes. The rest of the data was used to interpret the quantitative results.

Analyses and Discussion

The analyses revealed that none of the three participants showed any visible or statistically significant improvement over the one year period (as a result of ANOVA with two-way layout without repetition). This result can be explained as follows: 1) they stayed either in London or Oxford where many Japanese also resides and naturally they got together and spoke in Japanese; 2) in their programme, most of the students were from abroad and they had many fewer chances to speak with British students; and 3) since they had a lot of reading assignment, they tended to stay home, working on the assignment, rather than to communicate with others. All of these reasons reveal that studying in an English-speaking country does not necessarily guarantee the opportunities to communicate in English.

Especially, one of the participants retained extremely low speech rates, 60 wpm (including pauses), and her pauses accounted for as much as 10% of her floor-holding. In a post-interview, she commented that she needed the pauses to make better sentences. This value – making much of accuracy, even costing fluency – partially stems from her personality of being a perfectionist, and partially from the cultural trait of Japanese, who feel that making mistakes is shameful. However, she noticed gradually that taking long pauses is not advantageous because people treat her as those who cannot speak English fluently. In fact, her speech rates and her communicative attitude seem to have fixed her role as a passive listener (Shea 1994), which might be a reason that slowed down her improvement in fluency.

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