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Role of Extensive Reading in Building Fluency among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Fluency of speech is perhaps one of those skills most valued in an Indian undergraduate and least consciously cultivated in him. Students read to study for exams and write to get grades. Rarely do they read for enjoyment, and their spoken English pays the price. This paper shows that a lifelong practice of extensive reading, the regular perusal of easy, self-selected text for its content rather than as study, provides an inexpensive way to fluent speech. It first distinguishes the speed, breakdown, and repair dimensions of oral fluency from grammatical accuracy, with which fluency is routinely confused in our classrooms. It then traces five channels through which reading feeds speech: accessible vocabulary, common phrases and expressions, meaningful content for speech, reduced classroom anxiety, and the automatic command of grammar - each illustrated with a discipline-specific instance of fluent and disfluent performance. Finally, the paper proposes a semester-long comparative study, designed for an Indian higher education institution, with a practical way to measure oral fluency. Drawing on Indian and international research, the paper makes a modest claim: reading is a slow process, its effects on speaking are real. It examines the relationship between reading habits and oral fluency. It is best understood as a habit rather than a quick solution.

Keywords: extensive reading, fluency, oral proficiency, undergraduate learners

1. Introduction

The Indian undergraduate who speaks professionally before earning money does so at the job interviews, seminars, oral examinations, and group discussions. In all these venues, the audience makes up its mind in thirty seconds and that is not based on the content of the speech but rather the manner in which it is delivered. The person who speaks without pause and smoothly is viewed as prepared while the one who stammers and stops is seen as unprepared despite having relevant content.

The problem is that there are many undergraduate students who can do absolutely everything in English but cannot speak it fluently. These students comprehend the reading passage well enough and give an appropriate answer to the examination question. And then comes the part where they have to speak and their speech becomes full of silence as they keep repeating the same three sentences again and again. The disparity between what the student knows and what she can actually say within the framework of real time is a matter of fluency and not of knowledge.

2. Speaking Fluency

Accuracy and fluency are not the same thing, and the constant confusion between the two has caused much harm. A speaker might make ten errors with articles and prepositions but speak perfectly fluently and another could construct sentences flawlessly every fifteen seconds yet be totally disfluent. The teacher who corrects all the errors will ensure that her learner cannot possibly become fluent.

The concept of oral fluency can be divided into three measurable components. The speed fluency refers to the rate of speech production measured in words per minute, excluding any pauses. The breakdown fluency pertains to the occurrence and the location of pauses: the fluent person makes pauses at the end of each clause, where the listener can breathe, whereas the disfluent person does it within the phrase. Repair fluency concerns false starts and repetitions.

3. Extensive Reading

Extensive reading rests on a simple proposition that a learner who reads a great deal of text she finds easy and enjoyable will, without intending to acquire the language it is written in. This means that she chooses her own materials, reads for meaning or argumentation, does not pause on every word she does not know and continues.

These were developed by Day and Bamford into principles still accepted today, easy materials, a wide range of materials, learner selection, large quantity, reading for its own sake and a teacher who participates in reading with his class (Day & Bamford, 1998, 2002). The theory behind that idea was Krashen, whose theory claims that languages are acquired mainly through comprehending messages and that voluntary free reading provides them better than any other classroom activity (Krashen, 2004).

3.1 What Students Can Read

Suitable material includes graded readers, newspapers, popular novels, Indian writing in English, which carries the further advantage of cultural familiarity, and blogs on cricket or technology. The single firm constraint is comfort. Nation's coverage research indicates that a reader needs to know roughly ninety-eight per cent of the running words in a text to read it for pleasure unaided (Nation, 2006). Below that, threshold reading becomes labour, and the student stops. Above it, reading is fluent, fluent reading is pleasant, pleasant reading is repeated and repetition is the entire mechanism.

3.2 Intensive and Extensive Reading

Indian classrooms overwhelmingly practice intensive reading - a short, difficult passage, glossed line by line and followed by comprehension questions. It yields real analytical gains, but it is slow and it instils a habit of stopping. Extensive reading trains the opposite habit and it is this, transposed

from the eye to the tongue, that constitutes fluency. The error lies in offering only the first approach.

4. Statement of the Problem, Objectives and Research Questions

Institutionally, Indian colleges treat reading and speaking as unrelated skills in unrelated parts of the timetable. Reading is yoked to the syllabus and assessed by examination. Speaking, where addressed at all, is confined to a soft-skills module of a few weeks. Agnihotri and Khanna's attitudinal survey documented both the instrumental motivation that drives Indian learners towards English and the classroom anxiety that meets them there (Agnihotri & Khanna, 1997),

At the scholarly level, while extensive reading research has focused largely on reading outcomes such as comprehension and vocabulary, its influence on oral fluency remains insufficiently explored.

This paper places speaking fluency at the centre and asks a fundamental question: can a sustained habit of reading make an undergraduate speak with greater ease?

The study aims to

1. To establish the mechanisms by which extensive reading supports undergraduate speaking fluency.
2. To illustrate each mechanism with discipline-specific instances of fluent and disfluent performance.
3. To design a semester-length study, costed for the Indian college, capable of testing the claim.
4. To derive practical measures by which teachers may convert reading gains into speaking gains.

The study seeks to answer the following questions

1. Does a habit of extensive reading measurably improve speaking fluency, as indexed by speech rate, pause behaviour, and repair?
2. Through which channels does reading exert this influence and which appears most consequential?
3. By what classroom procedures may a teacher convert gains in reading into gains in speech?

5. Review of Related Studies

5.1 Reading as Input, and the Evidence on Reading Fluency

The most secure finding in the literature concerns fluency: fluency of the eye rather than the tongue. Iwahori, working with Japanese high-school learners over seven weeks of graded-reader reading, found significant gains in reading rate, the closest available analogue to speech rate (Iwahori, 2008). Beglar and Hunt, in a year-long study of university students, showed that pleasure

reading produced reading-rate gains proportional to the quantity read: those who read most gained most, a dose-response relationship of the kind that lends causal confidence (Beglar & Hunt, 2014). Specifically, Suk's semester-long quasi-experiment found significant gains for the experimental group in comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary (Suk, 2017). These findings are important for speech due to one reason. Reading becomes faster because recognition of words goes from effortful to automatic, automatic recognition frees up working memory, and that newly available capacity can be used for higher-order processing. Transfer that to production instead of reception, and you have the principle behind oral fluency.

5.2 From Reading Fluency to Oral Fluency

Studies indicate that reading helps to enhance our reading skill and can aid our speaking ability as well. There have been shown to be positive relationships between large amounts of reading and language improvement. However, studies on speaking as an outcome of reading are not as extensive. The purpose of this paper is to show that the effects of reading can be greater than reading alone. One reason reading can help improve speaking is because it allows the learner to see common chunks of language. As stated by many researchers, "when we are fluent in a language, we don't construct every sentence we say word by word." We come across phrases in our daily lives and store them in our memory. Reading frequently allows the learner to recall these phrases when speaking.

5.3 The Indian Context

The Indian context is not simply a backdrop against which this discussion can be held; it provides the framework within which it is carried out. Kachru talked about the naturalisation of a language that was unevenly present in society (Kachru, 1983) and Dasgupta (1993) talked about the nature of the relationship between the two in terms of an uncomfortable intimacy where English acts as an aunt and not a mother. Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy trace how examination-driven pedagogy came to dominate its teaching (Krishnaswamy & Krishnaswamy, 2006). Meganathan documents the policy consequence that English is introduced early, universally, and thinly, with fluency nowhere systematically taught (Meganathan, 2011) and Tickoo argues that exposure, not explanation, is the scarce commodity in our classrooms (Tickoo, 2003).

6. How Reading Builds Speaking Fluency

Five channels are proposed, separated for analytical clarity, though in the mind of a reader they operate together. One boundary should be stated at the outset, reading builds the resources of speech, not speech itself. Articulation and the management of interactional pressure are acquired only through speaking, which is why the programme proposed below couples every week of reading to a speaking task.

6.1 Reading Makes Words Easier to Recall

Speech is bounded by the lexicon. A speaker who must search for a word will pause, and that pause falls mid-phrase, where listeners hear trouble. Reading dissolves the constraint by attrition: a word met once is noticed, met ten times is recognised, met fifty times is retrieved at no cost. A science student who reads popular science for a semester meets evidence, by contrast, and this suggests several hundred times. At the laboratory presentation, she does not retrieve these words, they present themselves. As she spends less time searching for words, her speech becomes faster and more fluent. The key factor is not vocabulary quantity alone, but the ability to retrieve words quickly, which improves through repeated exposure to reading.

6.2 Reading Supplies Readymade Groups of Words

Fluent speakers do not assemble sentences word by word. They deploy chunks such as *on the other hand* and *as far as I am concerned*, stored and retrieved whole (Pawley & Syder, 1983). This explains an otherwise puzzling observation: a speaker with a modest vocabulary may be markedly more fluent than one with a large vocabulary and no chunks, because the second must build and building takes time that real-time speech does not allow. A commerce student who follows the business pages daily meets *market share* and *owing to weak demand*, as intact units, and in a group discussion, they emerge as intact units. She has not been drilled in them, she has read them. This channel is, in this author's judgement, the most powerful of the five (Boers et al., 2006).

6.3 Reading Supplies Matter Worth Saying

Much of the disfluency observed in our classrooms is conceptual rather than linguistic. The student stops because she has run out of thoughts. Reading is a supply line for thought and the well-read student is fluent partly because she is never empty. An arts student who reads history and current affairs can, in a debate, offer a cause, an effect, a counter-instance, and a comparison and keep going. The student who reads little exhausts the subject in two sentences and then produces the disfluency of the depleted speaker, the long pause, the *so, yeah*, the retreat.

6.4 Reading Lowers Anxiety and Raises Confidence

Anxiety is the most underrated cause of disfluency in the Indian undergraduate classroom, and Agnihotri and Khanna documented its prevalence directly (Agnihotri & Khanna, 1997). The anxious speaker monitors herself and monitoring competes for the attentional resources that formulation requires. Reading intervenes here as no speaking exercise can, offering extended contact with English where there is no audience and no cost to error. An engineering student who has read technical blogs for two semesters enters a design review already at home in the register, the anxiety subsides, and the speech steadies. What has changed is not her English but her relationship to it.

6.5 Reading Automatises Form

Fluent speech is not a controlled activity. It's not about rules, through reading, fluency arises. Automaticity is achieved by repetition of correct form, and reading is the least expensive method of absorbing correct form. Thousands of exposures to correct patterns (how to sequence tenses, how to form a relative clause, etc.) are necessary before they become 'second nature' or 'the easy way'. As he reads case notes, the medical student internalizes the shapes of clinical storytelling, and the patient who is presented with and examined is consciously created by him. Reduced repairs and fluent speech are the rewards of automatic form (Segalowitz, 2010).

7. A Proposed Classroom Study

The classroom study would implement extensive reading as an intervention to aid speaking fluency. The study would follow an Institutional Review Board approved, quasi-experimental design. Two intact classes of undergraduates would serve as participants; one would form the extensive reading group and the other would follow the regular syllabus and serve as the control group. Members of the extensive reading group would read graded readers, newspapers, and level-appropriate articles for twenty minutes each day. Students will keep short reading logs and do unprepared book talks at the end of each week to help them make connections between reading input and speaking output. At the beginning and end of the semester, students in the extensive reading group will complete two 5-minute speech tasks that will be recorded and analyzed for speed (words per minute), number of pauses and repetitions, and global ratings by the teacher. This study predicts gains in speaking fluency as measured by these metrics after prolonged exposure to extensive reading.

It is expected that extensive reading helps speaking fluency by allowing readers to express themselves with less hesitation, improved access to vocabulary items, and more confidence in speech production. However, because fluency does not develop rapidly, these improvements will take time. If these results are supported, colleges can facilitate extensive reading by creating class libraries that rotate frequently and include plenty of level-appropriate reading material. Colleges should dedicate at least twenty minutes of the weekly class schedule to free reading time and encourage students to choose books that match their interests. Extensive reading can be paired with light speaking practice by asking students to share their thoughts on the book during short, weekly book talks. Classrooms should avoid over-testing reading as this forces students to approach texts analytically. Teachers can institute extensive reading by reading with their students. This low-tech, inexpensive intervention can have a lasting impact on language growth in Indian classrooms.

8. Limitations of the Study

Duration was a weak spot for this study; a single semester is too short to show desirable results. A three-year longitudinal study would be preferable were it not for constraints of time and funding. The fluency measure was also limited in that it did not allow for finer examination via instrumental

analysis because reading was done outside of class, it could not be controlled. Also, students self-reported reading in their logs. Moreover, students were not randomly assigned to conditions; quasi-experimental assignment leaves open the possibility that some of the gain was due to differences that existed between the two intact classes before the study began. None of these limitations invalidate the study, they simply describe its parameters.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented arguments for how extensive reading helps undergraduate speaking fluency. There are five main avenues: building faster access to vocabulary words, learning helpful word combinations, discovering ideas to say, reducing anxiety about speaking, and developing automaticity. Many universities in India focus on reading and speaking as two very different skills. In doing so, they often fail to tap into how these practices could support each other. Fluency in speaking is often developed silently over years of extensive reading. Once a department sets up classrooms with good accessible books and regular uninterrupted reading time, they have built a resource for teaching that will last far longer than any week-long soft skills course. Students will speak more easily when they have read more.

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