

Aspects of fluency across levels of proficiency

What this research was about and why it is important

Understanding how second language (L2) speech fluency develops when proficiency improves, and to what extent different aspects of fluency progress across levels of proficiency in a linear fashion are questions L2 researchers, language testers and teachers have been interested in for a couple of decades. While it is assumed that fluency develops hand-in-hand with proficiency, there has been little research to examine whether a linear relationship is observed between different aspects of fluency (i.e., speed, breakdown and repair) and proficiency development. The research reported here set out to help fill this gap and aimed to answer the following question: To what extent can speed, breakdown, repair and composite aspects of fluency differentiate between different levels of proficiency (A2, B1, B2, and C1 in the CEFR)? Results show that an increase in proficiency were often accompanied by an increase in fluency. However, this was not the case for all aspects of fluency.

What the researchers did

- They collected data from 32 test-takers taking the Aptis Speaking test across different levels of proficiency (A2, B1, B2, and C1 in the CEFR). Each test-taker performed four different parts of the speaking test.
- After the data were transcribed, the researchers used PRAAT software to measure the temporal aspects of fluency.
- They used further manual coding to analyse the data in terms of speed, silence, repair and composite measures. The use of statistical analysis allowed the researchers to answer the research question.

What the researchers found

The results of the analysis showed that while an increase in proficiency was often accompanied by an increase in some aspects of fluency, a linear relationship was not established for all measures of fluency and across all proficiency levels. A summary of the most important findings is as follows:

- Speed and composite fluency distinguishes A2, B1, and B2 levels. B2 and C1 levels are not different in this regard.
- Length of silent pauses distinguishes A2 level from other proficiency levels. A2-level speakers pause for significantly longer than the other assessed levels.
- Frequency of mid-clause silent pauses distinguishes lower (A2 and B1) from higher (B2 and C1) proficiency levels. The higher-level speakers make fewer mid-clause silences.
- Frequency of filled pauses (e.g. *uhm*) distinguishes A2 from higher levels.
- Speakers at higher proficiency levels generally use filled pauses more frequently than lower levels, but the excessive use of filled pauses by B1 speakers makes the progression nonlinear.
- Repair measures distinguish A2 and B1 levels as the A2-level speakers produce very few and B1-level speakers the most repairs. While B2 and C1 levels engage in repairs to a moderate degree, B1-level speakers actively use repair measures to reformulate speech.

Things to consider

- Speed fluency increases along with proficiency in a linear fashion up to a certain level (B2), after which speed does not increase anymore.
- Long silent pauses and frequent filled pauses are characteristics of A2 level speakers.
- Frequent mid-clause pauses are a characteristic of lower proficiency level speakers (A2-B1).
- Repair fluency does not improve with proficiency.

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