You are required to cover material specifically tailored to their future teaching needs, but you find that nearly all the students need practice with and ask for more class time on informal conversation. What should you do in this situation? Ask two experienced ESL/EFL teachers what they would do. Were the solutions offered similar to yours?

4. You suspect that the classroom textbook you have been assigned to use in your oral skills class presents dialogues containing stilted, awkward language. How can you test this assumption? In other words, what criteria can you use to evaluate dialogue authenticity?

FURTHER READING

Ishihara, N., & Cohen, A. D. (2010). *Teaching and learning pragmatics: Where language and culture meet.* Harlow, UK: Pearson.

This is a practical introduction to pragmatics and sociocultural context as they relate to L2 teaching and learning. Much of the book consists of suggestions for systematic materials development, instruction, and assessment of pragmatics.

Jones, L. (2007). *The student-centered classroom.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Although this pamphlet does not focus exclusively on teaching L2 speaking, the excellent suggestions regarding pair and group work as well tips on classroom management, fostering motivation, and taking on a teacher-as-facilitator role make it a highly valuable addition to any language teacher's library.

Nation, I. S. P., & Newton, J. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking.* New York, NY: Routledge.

This up-to-date treatment offers both theoretical principles for teaching speaking and suggestions for promoting oral proficiency by means of a large variety of pedagogical techniques.

Underhill, N. (1987). *Testing spoken language: A handbook of oral testing techniques.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

This volume is a practical, teacher-friendly guide to the testing process that covers numerous assessment techniques and suggests how to elicit and rate spoken language and how to evaluate tests themselves.

Wong, J., & Waring, H. Z. (2010). *Conversation analysis and second language pedagogy: A guide for ESL/EFL teachers.* New York, NY: Routledge.

This textbook explains conversation analysis (CA) to the nonresearcher; it highlights key CA concepts, presents authentic tasks for analysis of conversational data, and puts forward a number of practical teaching activities.

ENDNOTES

[1] I am grateful to Alyssa Ruesch (personal communication, January 18, 2011) for sharing these ideas with me.

[2] A threaded discussion refers to online discussion postings that relate to a certain assignment or topic. The first message posted by a teacher or a student receives responses from others in the form of subsequent messages. This group of messages forms a thread.

9 Fluency-Oriented Second Language Teaching

DAVID BOHLKE

KEY QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to be fluent in a language?
- What factors make speaking a second or foreign language easy or difficult?
- How can teachers help language learners develop their oral fluency?

EXPERIENCE

Three second language students in three different classes all responded to a question asked by a teacher. Consider these scenarios.

Jason is asked what he is going to do after class. He pauses and thinks intently. He looks down, his lips moving silently as he formulates a halting but grammatically perfect sentence. The teacher asks him a follow-up question, and he continues in the same way. His second answer has an error with subject-verb agreement that he self-corrects.

Lucy is asked what she watched on television over the weekend. She immediately talks about a reality show she saw and mentions how stupid she thought it was, adding that she is looking forward to a new show that is previewing the following weekend. She speaks fairly quickly, using conversational fillers like *um* and *you know*. She speaks confidently, but her speech is full of grammatical errors.

Alex is asked to describe the people in his family. He describes them with ease, speaking faster than he normally speaks in class. He has answered this question before in other English classes with other teachers and always answers in more or less the same way. When the teacher asks him what person in his family he is most like and why, he is at a loss for an answer.

Which of the three students do you think speaks the best? How you answer may depend on what objective you think the teacher had in mind when asking the question. It may depend on what context the question was asked in and during which part of the lesson. It may also depend on what you understand fluency to mean and how important you think fluency is.

In this chapter, I discuss what happens when we speak a language, including how speech is processed and the conditions that can make speaking easy or difficult for learners. I explore what it means to speak fluently. I look at ways of improving oral fluency and the conditions that can aid its development. Finally, I suggest practical classroom activities that can assist in making students sound more fluent when they speak.

WHAT IS FLUENCY?

Fluency is often discussed in relation to accuracy. While most second language professionals tend to agree on what it means to be accurate in a language, the concept of fluency is not as easy to define. Hartmann and Stork (1976) state that a person is fluent when he or she uses the language's structures accurately while at the same time concentrating on meaning, not form. The fluent speaker uses correct patterns automatically at normal conversational speed. Interestingly, here accuracy is seen as a major part of fluency.

An early advocate of the fluency-accuracy polarity was Brumfit (1984). He contrasts the two in pedagogical contexts and makes the distinction that "accuracy will tend to be closely related to the syllabus, will tend to be teacher-dominated, and will tend to be form-based. Fluency must be student-dominated, meaning-based, and relatively unpredictable towards the syllabus" (p. 121).

Brumfit further points out that fluency is meant "to be regarded as natural language use, whether or not it results in native-speaker-like language comprehension or production" (p. 56). It involves maximizing the language so far acquired by the learner by creating natural use in the classroom as much as possible.

Fillmore (1979) proposes that fluency includes four abilities: (1) the ability to talk without awkward pauses for relatively long periods of time; (2) the ability to talk in coherent and semantically dense sentences that show mastery of syntax and semantics; (3) the ability to say appropriate things in a variety of contexts; and (4) the ability to use language creatively and imaginatively. These are abilities that language users all possess to varying degrees. Fillmore's categories are interesting in that they relate to language but also to personality. They also show that there is an interaction between language use and knowledge of the world. In particular, this is seen in the third and fourth characteristics.

Hedge (1993) describes fluency as "the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or undue hesitation" (p. 275). Similarly, Richards and Schmidt (2010) describe fluency as "the features which give speech the qualities of being natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions" (p. 222). These descriptions emphasize a smoothness of language delivery, without too many pauses or hesitations. They suggest natural language use, not necessarily speaking quickly.

Thornbury (2005) describes features of fluency centered primarily around pausing. A speaker's rate of speech is important, but it is not the only factor or even the most important one. Research on listeners' perceptions of a speaker's fluency suggests that pausing is equally important. Thornbury's four features of fluency are:

1. Pauses may be long but not frequent.
2. Pauses are usually filled.
3. Pauses occur at meaningful transition points.
4. There are long runs of syllables and words between pauses.

Fluency as a concept, it seems, includes many perspectives, and the features that make it up are still being debated. Koponen and Riggenbach (2000) conclude that "there can ultimately be no single all-purpose definition of fluency" (p. 19). Despite the subjectivity involved in defining fluency, the notion of fluency has already been shown "to be a useful concept *as is*" (p. 20). This is evident in that fluency is an important rating consideration for many oral language tests. It is also a high priority for many language learners even after they complete their formal language study. There are many reasons for this. Learners want to feel more confident in speaking to others. The use of English in business, research, and technology remains strong. For many learners, there is a need to receive a high score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Educational Testing Service, 2012c), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (Educational Testing Service, 2012d), or other exams that require spoken English. There is, therefore, pressure on teachers to show that their students can actually speak and can do so with a high degree of fluency. Many teachers thus want to find ways to incorporate more fluency development in their classes. How can these teachers create learning conditions where fluency can be developed?

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

What happens when we speak?

What factors make speaking a second or foreign language easy or difficult? Speaking is a complicated endeavor, no doubt, but an appreciation of what is involved in speaking can help a teacher provide the best conditions possible for fluency to develop.

Speech processing. We can look to cognitive science for models of speech processing. These processes of what happens when we speak can provide important insights to the language teacher. What may come naturally to a native speaker may be quite challenging to the language learner. Citing Levelt (1989), Bygate (2001) describes what happens in the planning and production phases of speaking. First, the mental process in which ambiguous or imprecise notions are made clear and more precise is called *conceptualization*. The information to be conveyed is selected based on the speaker's conceptual knowledge and other types of prior knowledge. What the speaker wishes to say may exist only vaguely. The conceptualized information is then conveyed through the *formulation* of utterances. Meaning is expressed through forms, and at this time the speaker must give attention to grammar

and lexis. The concepts are realized when the words are put together in the correct syntactic order. A speaker may depend on formulaic expressions and chunked language, such as collocations, functional expressions, and idiomatic expressions. Finally, the utterance is spoken, or *articulation* occurs. It is phonologically encoded through the activation of certain muscle groups of the articulatory system.

These three functions are what produce speech; in daily speech, they happen more or less at the same time. Success also depends on automation, "to some degree in conceptualization, to a considerable degree in formulation, and almost entirely in articulation" (Bygate, 2001, p. 16). It is challenging for beginning second language (L2) learners to manage speech fluency, since they lack automation. It is therefore difficult for them to pay attention to and process these speech processes simultaneously.

Speaking competence. For L2 learners to communicate effectively, they must have a reasonable command of grammar and vocabulary. But this knowledge alone is insufficient. Learners need to develop a wide range of other skills. Four skill areas of speaking competence are required for effective communication (Goh, 2007). (See also Goh, this volume.)

1. *Phonological skills.* Learners need to be able to blend the phonemes of the language they are learning. In addition, they must use appropriate stress and intonation.
2. *Speech function skills.* Learners need to achieve specific communicative functions in social and transactional exchanges, such as agreeing with someone, asking for clarification, or offering a reason.
3. *Interactional skills.* In face-to-face exchanges, learners must manage interactions by regulating turn-taking, redirecting the topic, and negotiating meaning, in addition to initiating, maintaining, and closing a conversation.
4. *Extended discourse skills.* Learners must often produce long stretches of uninterrupted language, and they need to structure what they say so it is easy for others to follow. This requires the use of established conventions for structuring different kinds of extended spoken language, such as narrative, procedural, expository, or descriptive discourse.

In addition to these four skills, the use of conversation management strategies can lead to more effective speaking. These may be strategies for enhancing one's message, such as asking questions in two ways to be less direct or dealing with communication breakdowns, such as rephrasing to clarify meaning. Such strategies have been identified and categorized and are now part of the syllabi of several language textbooks. In Figure 1, the use of *I mean* as a strategy for repeating or expanding on a topic is explicitly taught.

Speech conditions. The conditions under which speaking occurs play a major role in determining the degree of fluency a speaker may be capable of. These factors have been isolated and divided into three categories: cognitive, affective, and performance. Thornbury (2005) provides a useful summary.

Figure 1. Using "I mean" as a conversation strategy (based on McCarthy, McCarten, & Sandiford 2005, p. 49).

Cognitive factors.

- *Familiarity with the topic.* The more familiar something is, the easier it is to talk about. Learners usually find it easier to talk about their family, friends, school, or work than it is to talk about something unfamiliar or less personal. As seen in the Experience section at the beginning of the chapter, this may be why Alex was able to speak quite fluently on the topic of family, although he faltered when presented with a question he had not encountered before.
- *Familiarity with the genre.* Speech genres are "particular language events, which unfold in predictable and institutionalized ways and move, stage by stage, toward a recognizable completion" (McCarthy, 1998, p. 62). Giving a speech or participating in a debate, for example, will be easier if students are already familiar with these particular genres.
- *Familiarity with the interlocutors.* In general, the more familiar speakers are with the people they are talking with, the easier the conversation will be. A certain amount of shared knowledge can be assumed.
- *Processing demands.* Certain speaking activities may involve complex mental processing. For example, if a student is describing how to operate a complicated machine, a diagram will generally make the description more comprehensible.

Affective factors.

- *Feelings toward the topic or participants.* If the speaker has a positive feeling or attitude toward the topic or other people involved, speaking will generally be easier.
- *Self-consciousness.* Some learners lack confidence about their speaking skills. They can become anxious or stressed if called on randomly or put on the spot by the teacher. In the Experience section, Jason spoke haltingly and seemed more concerned with accuracy than fluency. This could possibly be attributed to his being put on the spot. He may perform better on the same task, for instance, in a smaller group.

Performance factors.

- *Mode.* Speaking face to face rather than over the phone is easier for many speakers because they can rely on gestures and body language.
- *Degree of collaboration.* Peer support can often make things easier. For many, presenting on a topic with others is easier than doing it on their own.
- *Discourse control.* On the other hand, being able to control the direction of events can be easier than being subject to others' control. As seen in the Experience section, when Lucy spoke at length about the topic with relative ease, she was able to answer the question posed but was also given freedom by the teacher to expand her answer.
- *Planning time.* The more time the speaker has to plan and prepare, the easier the task will be.
- *Time pressure.* The more urgent the task, the more pressure there will be. This can increase the difficulty for the speaker.
- *Environmental conditions.* Students tend to perform better in a relaxed and noise-free classroom.

The interaction of cognitive, affective, and performance factors with personality. To a large extent, these cognitive, affective, and performance conditions also interact with personality, so it is not always possible to predict exactly how easy or difficult any speaking activity will be for a particular speaker. Being put on the spot, for example, can have a positive effect on some people's speaking performance. Some people find that working alone will produce better results than collaborating with others. In any event, these conditions provide a useful template for gauging how fluently a speaker may perform on a particular activity. They also give us a window into the complexity of speaking for second and foreign language learners.

Developing fluency

One the most challenging aspects about teaching a second or foreign language is finding ways to help learners improve their oral fluency. This is especially true in EFL contexts or ESL settings where there is little exposure to the L2 outside the classroom or where learners share a common language. Many students, even after years of study and an extensive knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, have difficulty achieving a desired level of fluency. Inevitably, many learners feel they lack the ability to speak and suffer from frustration and low motivation. But by using their latent abilities

to focus on getting their meaning across, these learners can become successful speakers of the language.

Supporting learners. Goh (2007) suggests three ways to support learners during fluency activities. She proposes these as ways to reduce the cognitive load of students so as not to overburden them. The first is through *language support.* For example, the teacher may choose to review or preteach key vocabulary before certain activities. The second is through *knowledge support.* At times, the teacher may choose to introduce an unfamiliar concept into a lesson. The teacher will need to provide key background knowledge to assure that the learners have something to speak about and that the activity is successful. The third kind of support is *strategy support.* Using oral communication strategies can keep the students on task. One example of this is paraphrasing. If students do not know a word, they may paraphrase to get their point across. The teacher will need to teach and model these strategies and then allow students to practice them.

Pretask planning. Skehan (1998) suggests that fluency, accuracy, and complexity (the use of a wide range of structures to form more varied sentences) all demand mental capacity, and a trade-off occurs when one is emphasized more than another during a language activity. Increasing attention to accuracy, for example, is likely to hamper fluency and/or complexity. In an effort to increase fluency, a learner may rely more on language chunks, producing less accurate or less complex speech. Encouraging learners to experiment with new expressions and combinations of words may have a negative effect on accuracy and fluency.

But what happens when learners are given adequate time to plan what they want to say? Does this improve performance? And if so, which aspects of speaking show improvement—accuracy, fluency, or complexity? The research, as summarized by Goh (2007), shows that planning time does not improve all three aspects at the same time, but it does help with certain aspects of oral performance. Pretask planning provides learners with an opportunity to give attention to language areas that have not yet been automatized. It also encourages learners to use appropriate grammar forms to communicate certain kinds of meaning. When learners have sufficient time to formulate their message, they demonstrate greater language complexity. The effect on accuracy, however, remains inconclusive.

According to Skehan (1998), the pretask planning phase can have multiple purposes. This stage can introduce new language, assist learners in organizing their ideas, activate existing knowledge, recycle known language, ease the speech processing load, and encourage learners to interpret tasks in more demanding ways. Planning can be guided or unguided. In guided planning, the teacher tells the students what to focus on. In unguided planning, learners decide how best to use the planning time.

Some studies indicate that learners focus more on the content than the language when provided with planning time. Research on pretask planning indicates the following effects on oral performance (Skehan, 1998):

- greater fluency
- improved accuracy in select tasks
- more experimentation in expressing complex ideas
- more complex content as a result of deeper interpretation of task demands
- improved self-monitoring during the task

Task selection criteria. The type of tasks the teacher chooses also has an effect on fluency development. Thornbury (2005) puts forth the following criteria for selecting tasks with the aim of increasing autonomous language use. When selecting a language activity for an oral skills class, the teacher may want to consider how many of these criteria the activity fulfills.

Interactivity. An activity that focuses on building fluency should have an interactive element to it. Discussions, conversations, and role plays are interactive fluency activities, but interactivity can also be made a part of activities that at first glance are non-interactive in nature. For example, if one student is giving a speech, others who are listening should be assigned a task, such as asking questions or providing their own point of view.

Productivity. The activity needs to be productive in terms of the amount of language spoken by the learner. To achieve this, the activity needs to be designed and set up in a way that allows or even requires participants to use a large amount

of language to complete it. An activity such as a survey may be done in pairs with little or even no language, or done in the mother tongue, and it is up to the teacher to assure that students are using the target language to complete the tasks. This can be achieved through careful monitoring and encouragement by the teacher or even other students. Ideally, too, each participant should contribute to the successful completion of the task, a key characteristic of Cooperative Learning.

Challenge. In an activity that is focused on fluency, it is important for the learners to be challenged. They should be able to undertake and complete the activity with the knowledge and resources at hand. By drawing on these communicative resources, the learner will feel a sense of achievement and pride. It is up to the teacher to provide just the right amount of challenge. If the activity is too demanding, the results can be disheartening to the student.

Safety. Learners should be challenged, but at the same time they need to feel safe in their undertakings. The learners expect to take some risks, but at the same time they must know that taking such risks, and perhaps failing, is part of the process of learning and will not incur any judgment from the teacher or other learners. The teacher should set up a nurturing classroom environment of trust, respect, and even protection.

Purposefulness. The reason or outcome of an activity should be apparent to the learners. An activity in which they must work together to achieve a common aim can be very effective and motivating, such as the need to agree on the best solution to a problem. Learners appreciate knowing exactly what is expected of them. At the same time, students may be more willing to participate or complete an activity if they know they will be asked to share their ideas with another group or summarize it for the class.

Authenticity. Teachers should strive to choose or develop classroom activities that bear some relation to language use outside the classroom. Real-life language use is unpredictable, and at times learners should be put in positions where they must be spontaneous and rely on what they have at hand. At the same time, what the students discuss and learn should be of relevance to their lives. Role plays are, in effect, classroom simulations of real-life experiences and can provide students with a learning experience that is meaningful, focused, and relevant to their needs.

Task repetition. As discussed, preplanning tasks can help enhance fluency during a language activity. Another way to enhance fluency is through task repetition. When learners are exposed to the same task and context, they become more familiar with its expectations and performance is improved. One of the reasons that language learners struggle with the skill of speaking is because it is unpredictable. By repeating a task, the expectation becomes more predictable. Just as rehearsals can improve a pianist's performance, task repetition allows the learner to practice and improve, to have a second chance. And with these rehearsals, the cognitive demands are lessened, with some processes such as conceptualizing becoming more automatized.

Nation and Newton (2008) describe the well-researched 4/3/2 technique first devised by Maurice (1983). The technique requires the learners to repeat the same story or talk to three successive listeners spending four minutes for the first telling, three minutes for the second, and two minutes for the third. Nation and Newton attribute the success of this technique to three factors. First, the speaker must process a large amount of language. The speaker talks without interruption and does so three separate times. Second, the speaker plans the talk and chooses its content and language, thereby increasing the level of control over the delivery. This allows fluency to be a primary goal of the activity. And third, the speaker is helped to perform well by repeating the same message three times but with the challenge of an ever-decreasing time limit.

Bygate (2001) discusses a study in which students repeated a task, first immediately upon completing the task and then ten weeks later. The language produced by the students repeating the task after ten weeks was more fluent and complex than the language the students produced when they repeated the task on the same day. Task repetition thus provides "the basis for learners to integrate their fluency, accuracy, and complexity of formulation around what becomes a familiar conceptual base" (Bygate 2001, p. 17). Task repetition, pretask planning, and careful task selection all provide ways for the teacher to assist students in enhancing their speaking skills, thereby increasing their fluency. As noted by P. Nation (2002), a word of caution is in order, however:

> The more something is repeated, the less likely it will continue to be seen as a message-focused activity. The teaching methodology solution to this is to balance the ease provided by the repetition against a challenge provided by new but similar material, reducing time, a new audience, and increasing complexity. (p. 270)

We do not want task repetition to backfire. While the 4/3/2 technique can be an effective approach to task repetition, some learners may tire of repeating the same message, even just three times. In addition, in some cases the teacher may not want the exact same message repeated. It is then the teacher's responsibility to assure the repeated task is different enough to engage and motivate the students. Here are some ways to change the task so it is not exactly the same. The first two use two principles of the 4/3/2 technique, but the task is more interactive in nature. The repeating of the task could occur in the next or subsequent class.

- *Reducing time.* The teacher gives pairs one minute to perform a role play about shopping. The teacher then has the pairs repeat the role play, but this time in 45 seconds.
- *A new audience.* Students tell their group about an embarrassing moment, allowing listeners to ask questions. The students then tell the story again to a new group.
- *New but similar material.* A group agrees on a list of rules for the student cafeteria after they agree on a list of classroom rules.
- *Increasing the complexity of the task.* Groups have $50 to spend for a class party that includes the teacher. The students decide how they will spend the money on food, drinks, and entertainment. The teacher then tells the groups they only have $25, and the school director will also be attending.

Feedback and correction. During an activity that is focused more on accuracy than fluency, there are generally two steps that take place. First, the teacher alerts the student to the fact that an error has been made. Second, the teacher moves to the correction stage. In some cases, the teacher may need to help the student correct the error. Harmer (2007b) describes techniques that show students that an error has been made. By showing incorrectness, we generally hope that the students can correct themselves. If they cannot, the teacher has other options, such as peer correction, although this must be handled very delicately so no one student feels like he or she is the only one who does not know something. The following are all ways of alerting a student to an error:

- *Repeating.* The teacher can simply ask for repetition by saying "Once again, please," or "Can you say that again?" If using this technique, the teacher should use intonation or facial expressions that also indicate he or she is asking for repetition due to hearing an error rather than simply not hearing something.
- *Expressions or gestures.* The teacher can change facial expression, such as raising his or her eyebrows, or make a hand gesture to show that an error has been made. The teacher may even choose to demonstrate gestures for specific points, such as wrong word order or missing final *–s*.
- *Hinting.* The teacher can provide a simple hint using metalanguage. Saying the word *article* or *preposition*, for example, may be enough to get a student to self-correct.
- *Echoing.* The teacher can repeat what a student said, emphasizing the error. Saying "He BUYED a new phone?" with a questioning intonation can be a very efficient way of alerting a student to a precise error.
- *Reformulation.* The teacher can say something correctly without making a big issue of the error. If the learner says, "I'm more tall than my brother," the teacher might say something like "Oh, you're taller than your brother! That's interesting." The teacher may or may not require the student to provide the correction. In any case, reformulation is a gentle and unobtrusive method of error correction that focuses on the form while reacting to the message.

During a fluency activity, it is generally accepted that the teacher should not interrupt students to point out a grammar or vocabulary error, or to correct pronunciation. Doing so stops the communication that is taking place, shifting the focus from meaning to form. There is value when a student has to attempt to get meaning across in different ways, and interference by the teacher, though well-intentioned, may cause stress levels

to rise and learning to stop. If a teacher does choose to intervene, when should that be? Lynch (1997) feels "the best answer to the question of when to intervene in learner talk is: as late as possible" (p. 324).

Generally our tolerance of errors will be higher during fluency activities. Many teachers feel that the only appropriate time to focus on error correction is after the activity is completed. After the activity, a few minutes might be set aside to focus, as a class, on the errors the teacher noted during the activity. But there may be times when teachers *do* want to intervene. Many students want and expect correction, even during fluency work. Correction is a delicate area, and much depends on classroom atmosphere, teacher-student rapport, group dynamics, and student preferences. During a fluency activity, the teacher may find it is imperative to intervene, especially if communication is at risk.

Some of Harmer's (2007b) correction techniques that are appropriate for accuracy work are also suited for fluency work, in particular echoing and reformulation. Here, if the teacher is alerting students to errors during an activity, any correction is done gently, tactfully, and selectively. An important difference is that the teacher may well choose not to go on to the second step, that of actually requiring the correct form.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Fluency activities are often the language activities that we find in the back of textbooks or listed only in teacher's manuals or resource books. This is unfortunate as these activities, because of their placement, often get overlooked. They may be seen as less important or as optional activities that are worth doing but only if there is enough time. The following types of activities are all useful in helping develop fluency.

Information-gap activities

When we communicate with one another, we often need information we do not possess. This happens in the real world when, for example, we ask someone on the street for directions. This situation can be replicated in the classroom using the information-gap technique. "More authentic communication is likely to occur in the classroom if students go beyond the practice of language forms for their own sake and use their linguistic and communicative resources in order to obtain information" (J. C. Richards, 2006a, p. 18). Classroom information-gap activities are those in which a student has information another does not have. There is a knowledge gap between the students, and they must communicate to close the gap. In the process, they negotiate meaning. The following classroom examples all make use of the information-gap technique. For each one, the teacher divides students in A-B pairs. While these examples are pair activities, others can be done in groups.

Complete the missing information. In this information-gap activity, there is missing information that the students must work together to complete. For example, Student A has a map of a neighborhood in a city. Some buildings are already identified, but others are not. Student B has the same map, but the buildings that are already identified are different from those in Student A's map. Student A and Student B sit back to back and take turns describing and/or asking each other questions (e.g., "On your map, what's next to the post office?") to identify the information missing from their maps. In this activity, the two maps are the same, but each has information missing. Vocabulary and the required grammatical structures can be pretaught. Figure 2 shows an example of this type of activity.

Find the differences. In this activity, two students are given pictures that are similar but not the same. The students work together to find the differences. Student A has a picture, for example one of a group of people at a party. Student B has a similar picture, but it contains some differences from Student A's picture. Student A and Student B take turns describing and/or asking questions (e.g., "In my picture, Jeff is wearing a sweater and jeans. What's he wearing in your picture?") to identify the differences. Figure 3 shows an example of this type of activity.

Role play. In this activity, students simulate a real-world task in the classroom. Student A and Student B prepare to perform a role play between a hotel front-desk agent and a tourist. Student A first takes the role of the front-desk agent and looks at a card that lists the room types, room availability,

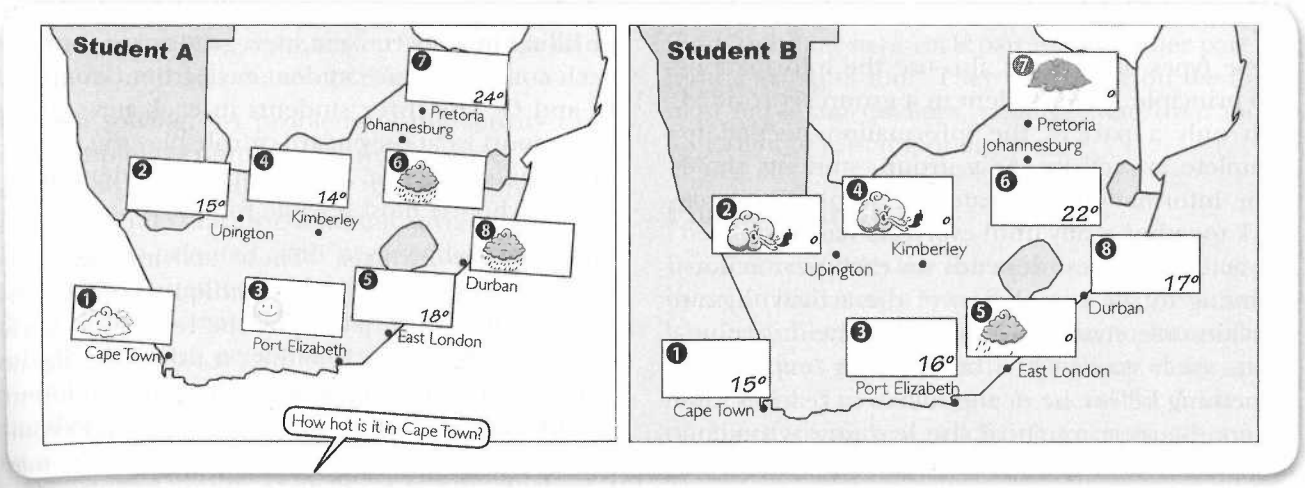

Figure 2. Sample "Complete the Information" activity. Source: *Time Zones,* pp. 55, 122, Heinle Cengage.

room prices, and check-in and checkout times. Student B takes the role of the tourist and looks at a card that lists the type of room desired, the price the tourist is willing to pay, and a request for a late checkout. They then role-play the situation without looking at each other's information. Later, they switch roles using new information. For this particular activity, the role-play cards can be created by the teacher, or to make them more authentic and personalized, Student B can add his or her own preferences and use that information.

While information-gap activities may appear to be accuracy focused, a student needs to draw on available grammar, vocabulary, and communication strategies to complete the activity. This emphasizes fluency. R. Ellis (2010) offers a useful distinction between focused and unfocused tasks. A *focused* task is one that is meant to elicit a certain linguistic structure; an *unfocused* task, on the other hand, is meant to elicit general samples of language use. Unfocused tasks are not designed to elicit a specific linguistic feature, although it is possible to predict a cluster of linguistic features that a learner is likely to need to perform the task. To emphasize fluency, it may be helpful to create or design tasks that are more unfocused than focused.

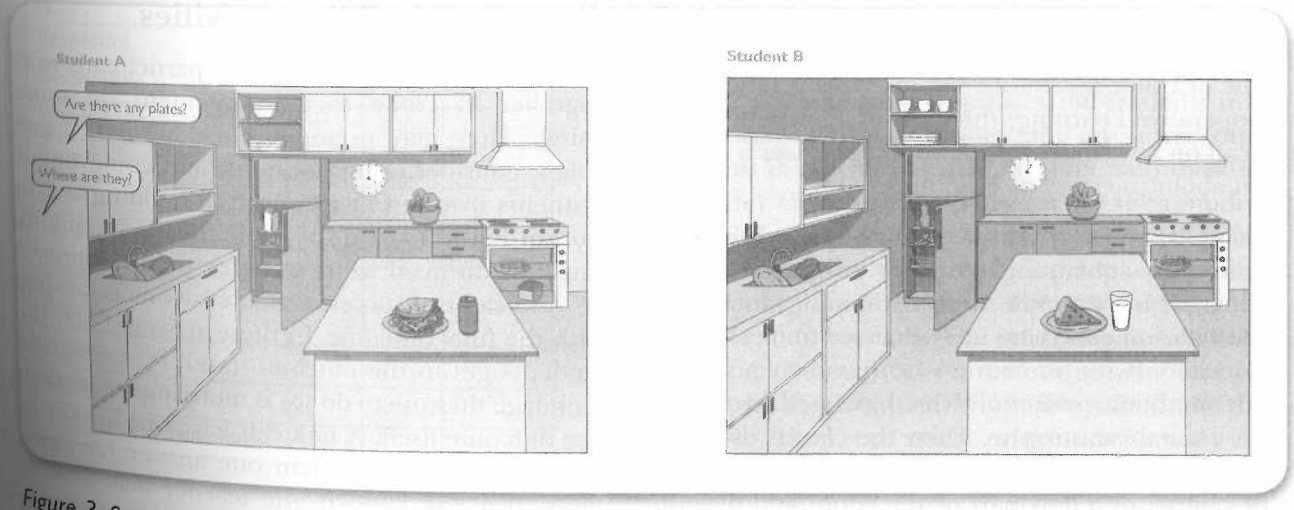

Figure 3. Sample "Find the Differences" activity. Source: *Time Zones,* pp. 65, 119, Heinle Cengage.

Jigsaw activities

These types of activities also use the information-gap principle. Each student in a group is provided with only a part of the information needed to complete an activity. As a group, students share their information to create the whole. Students work together orally until everyone has completed the activity. Success depends on each person contributing to the completion of the activity. Jigsaw activities use strategies of Cooperative Learning, where each student first becomes an "expert" on something before he or she shares or teaches it to others. Because much of the learning is student to student, the teacher's role is very much that of organizer and facilitator. These two classroom examples both use the jigsaw technique.

Jigsaw reading. In a *jigsaw reading*, a story is divided into four equal parts. Then the class is divided into Groups A, B, C, and D. Each group receives one part of the story and works together to understand it. If someone does not understand something, he or she should first try to get help from the group. If this does not work, the teacher helps. In the next step, a student from Group A and a student from Group B form a pair and share their two parts of the story. A student from Group C and a student from Group D do the same. They cannot look at each other's stories but must share the information orally. In the final step, new groups are formed, each group consisting of one student each from Groups A, B, C, and D. Students continue to share their parts of the story orally until everyone understands it and the parts can be placed in the right sequence. During each step, the teacher can provide guiding discussion questions or other tasks. And because this is based on Cooperative Learning, the teacher should be able to call on any student at random to answer a question about the story or even to retell it.

Jigsaw listening. In this activity, three different audio clips containing different perspectives are prepared, for example, one containing an interview with someone who has witnessed an accident, one interviewing someone who has seen a UFO, and one about someone who has been involved in a natural catastrophe. Then the class is divided into three groups: Groups A, B, and C. Each group goes into a different part of the room and listens to its part of the interview. Each group completes a task, such as answering comprehension questions or filling in a chart. Next, new groups are formed, each containing one student each from Groups A, B, and C. The three students in each new group now report what they heard or role-play the person describing the scene. As a group, the students then decide who the most reliable witness is.

Other jigsaw formats. These activities are just two ways to use the jigsaw technique to build fluency. There are variations to the technique, such as a four-part jigsaw listening, a three-part jigsaw reading, or a reading activity where two different groups read similar texts and later pair up to compare and discuss them. And while an activity may be called a jigsaw reading or a jigsaw listening, it is clear that more than one skill is being practiced, especially speaking. This integration of skills is one of the many benefits of this activity. Other benefits include:

- Jigsaw activities provide an efficient way to learn.
- Students are active in the learning process.
- Each individual has a unique contribution to make.
- Students take responsibility for their own learning.
- Learning revolves around student-to-student interaction.
- There is built-in task repetition.
- Students gain fluency with each retelling.
- Students are held accountable by their peers.
- Working together builds interpersonal skills.

Consensus-building activities

In consensus-building activities, participants work together to come to an agreement on something. They may present points of view, argue, listen, consider, weigh options, and compromise. Students involved in a consensus-building activity do not have to share the same ideas or opinions, but they do need to try to agree on a solution. A key indicator of success is that everyone is satisfied with the final outcome. In these activities, how the students get to the outcome (and, of course, the language they use to do so) is more important than the outcome itself. A task can have one answer (a closed task) or more than one answer (an open task). If a task is open, the teacher may want to alert the students that more than one answer is

possible. It can be discouraging for students to ask the teacher for "the right answer" only to be told there is more than one acceptable answer.

Problem solving. A problem-solving activity can be as simple as completing a word puzzle. It may require no oral output. The kinds of problem-solving activities that are communicative, discussion-based, group-oriented, and open-ended, and are thus fluency-oriented, are those like the classic "dinner party" activity. Here learners are presented with the names, personalities, and other background information of various people who will be attending a dinner party. The group must work out a seating plan that will assure an interesting and successful dinner party for everyone involved. Since there is no one correct answer, the teacher may wish to specify a time limit. When the group members find an acceptable solution, they present and defend their choices to other groups.

Ranking. A ranking activity is a form of consensus building whereby students rate something according to its relative importance to something else. It involves three steps. First, students work individually to choose from a list the most important characteristics of something, for example, the qualities of a good roommate (see Figure 4). Of the choices given, each person chooses the eight most important. In the second step, each student joins a partner to form a pair. They compare and discuss their ideas, agreeing on the six most important qualities. In the third and final step, each pair joins another pair to form a group of four. They then agree on the four most important qualities, ranking them from most important to least important.

A good roommate is . . .	You	Pair	Group
Respectful			
Responsible			
Friendly			
Patient			
Quiet			
Hardworking			
Clean			
Reliable			
Honest			
Considerate			
_____ (*your idea*)			

Figure 4. Sample ranking activity.

Fluency circle

In a fluency circle, the learners practice a dialogue in a fun and active way. The aim of the activity is not to memorize a dialogue but to internalize its structures to help make speaking easier and more fluid. The technique is useful for a variety of objectives, such as practicing a certain grammar point, reviewing vocabulary, previewing a structure inductively, or working on pronunciation, stress, and intonation. The teacher prepares a dialogue that can be personalized and gives a copy to each student. For example:

A: How are things going?
B: Not bad. How about you?
A: Pretty good, thanks. I'm a little sleepy, though.
B: How come? Did you go to bed late?
A: No, but I got up early. I didn't want to be late today.
B: What time did you get up?
A: 6:30.
B: Wow, that *is* early. I got up at 7:45. I got here in plenty of time.
A: How did you get here? Did you drive?
B: No, I took a taxi.
A: Well, that explains it! I took the bus. I had to wait forever!
B: Why don't we share a cab tomorrow?

There are three steps to the activity (see Figure 5).

Step 1. The teacher organizes the students into two circles: an outer one and an inner one. Students in the inner circle face out, and those in the outer circle face in. The teacher then models the dialogue, and the students practice it in pairs. The students in the inner circle take the role of Student A, and those in the outer circle take the role of Student B. The students can read the dialogue as they practice; meanwhile, the teacher monitors the pair work. When the pairs finish the dialogue, they start over, so there is continuous speaking. Next, the teacher signals for the students in the outer circle to rotate one person to the left. The students in the inner circle do not

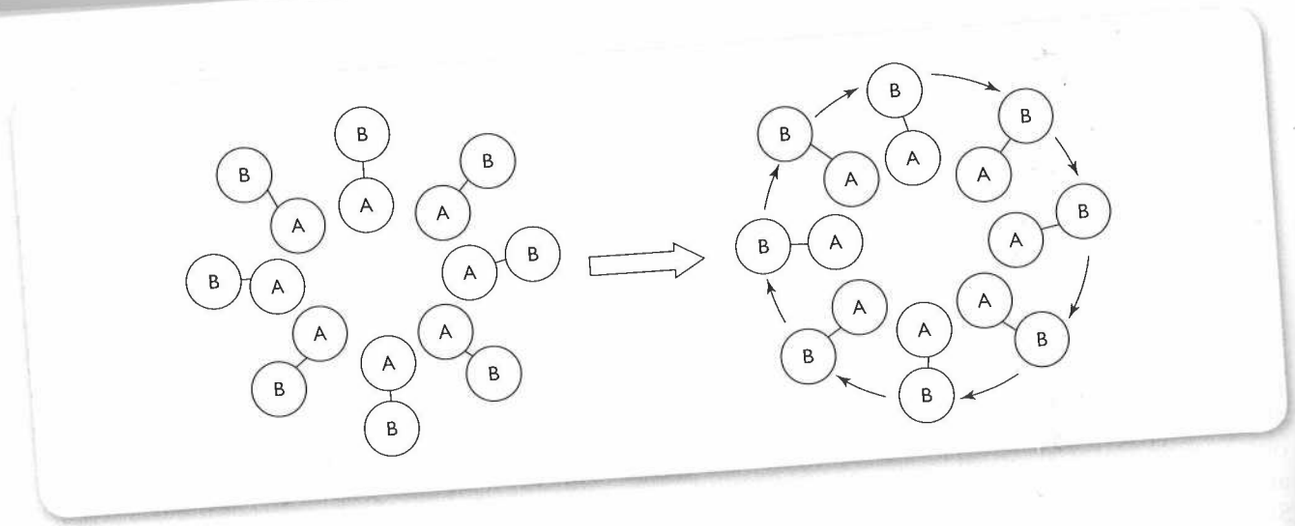

Figure 5. Fluency circle diagram.

move. The pairs then practice the dialogue with a new partner while the teacher monitors the pair work. The teacher continues to signal for the outer-circle students to rotate, so each speaker has multiple partners. To signal, the teacher stands in the middle of the inner circle and holds up a flag or raises his or her arms.

Step 2. After the students have practiced the dialogue with several partners, the teacher stops the activity and gives new instructions. This time, the teacher tells the students to use the "look up and say" technique. The students can refer to the dialogue but should not read it. Instead, they look at their partner when they speak. The teacher continues to signal for the students to rotate.

Step 3. After the students have practiced the dialogue with several more partners, the teacher stops the activity once again and gives new instructions. This time, the teacher tells the students to personalize the dialogue to make it their own. They should not use the dialogue on the paper but have a similar conversation using their own information. Some students will likely stick to the script, but others may choose to open up the dialogue. The goal is for students to have a real, natural conversation.

Using fluency circles. This technique works well for scripted dialogues and role plays, and it is also effective for question-answer exchanges or "quick interviews." For example, in the activity "speed dating," students try to get to know a large number of potential dates in a short period of time by asking and answering personal questions such as "What type of music do you like?" and "How would you describe your personality?"

Board games

Many textbooks and resource books contain question-answer or discussion activities disguised as board games. See Figure 6 for a game that practices questions and answers with *be*. There often is not a real winner in these activities, and they appear competitive but are not. Questions or discussion topics are simply seen in the form of a game to make the activity appear more fun and interesting to the students. Although questions may focus on a certain structure, such as the simple present or present perfect, these games focus on both accuracy and fluency. But, as with any activity, the use of a game must be clear to the teacher as well as to the students. It is important to let the students know why they are doing what they are doing.

Projects

Projects have been used in various educational disciplines for many years, and English language educators have exploited this tradition. In fact, project work is now part of the English language curriculum in many contexts. (See Nunan, this volume.) Projects are an extended assignment that usually lasts longer than a single lesson. There are many possible areas for project work in both ESL and EFL settings. Some examples include creating a class newspaper, designing a health poster, compiling a recipe book, creating a webpage, designing an informational brochure, and creating an advertising campaign.

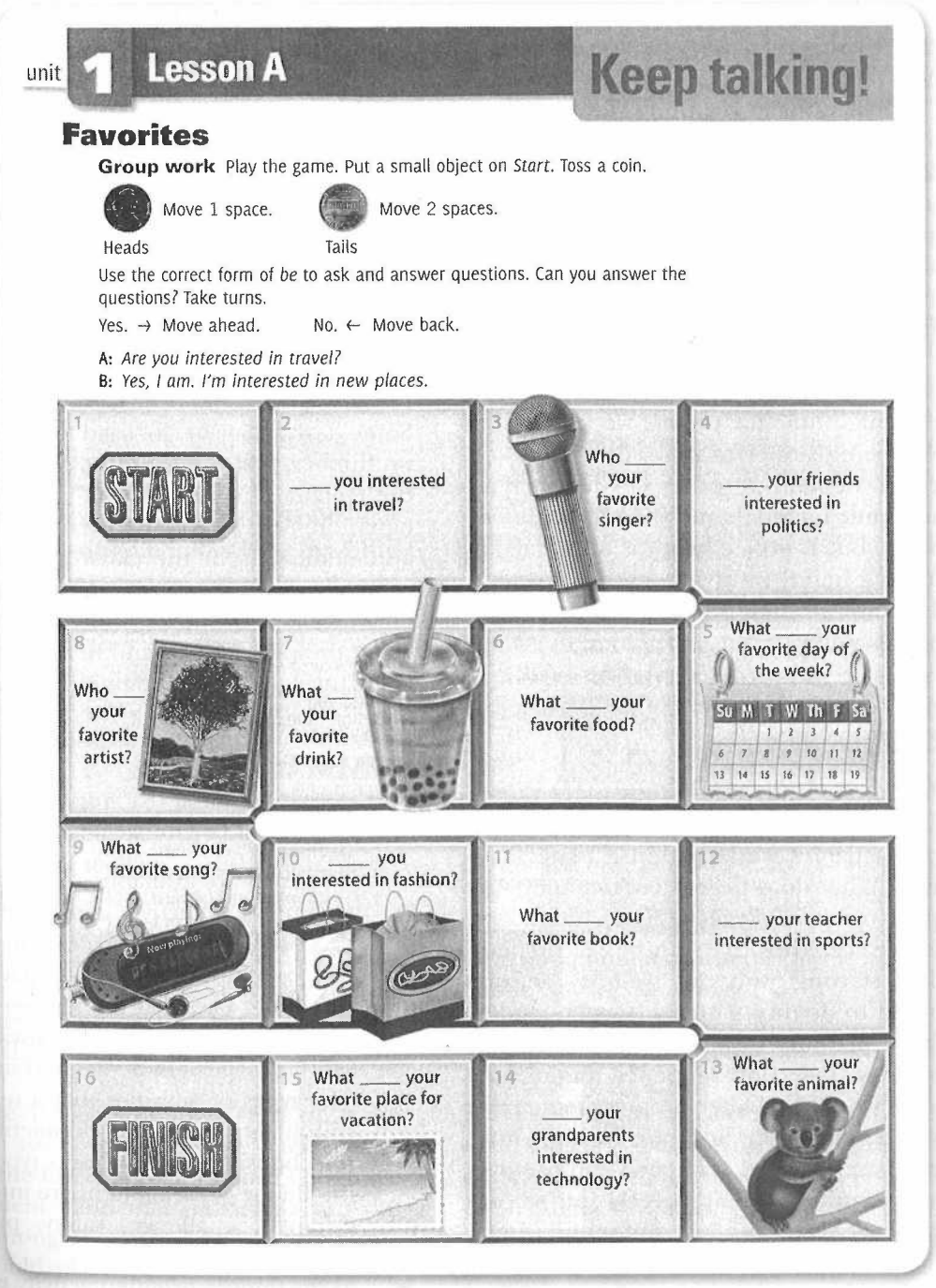

Figure 6. Sample board game (based on Richards & Bohlke, 2012, p. 125).

Hedge (1993) outlines a number of features common to most projects:

- the study and use of authentic English language materials
- an emphasis on student group-centered experiences and deemphasis on teacher-directed work
- a sequence of activities over a period of time, such as planning, fieldwork, preparation of information, and presentation
- the use of a range of skills
- activity outside the classroom on the students' own time

For those interested in pursuing project work, Harmer (2007b) suggests a step-by-step approach that includes deciding on the topic, generating ideas, gathering data, planning, drafting and editing, and unveiling the finished project. See Harmer (2007b) for a more detailed explanation of how to manage project work.

The use of projects has many benefits. Project work involves the integration of language skills and encourages creativity, collaboration, responsibility, discipline, research and information-gathering skills, and, at times, cross-curricular work. In some situations, however, there simply will not be enough time for project work. In addition to there being sufficient time, the success of any project will depend on other factors, such as access to authentic materials and the receptiveness of participants. But if project work is undertaken, it can result in a highly satisfying learning experience. At the end, the students have work they can proudly show as well as a sense of achievement.

FUTURE TRENDS

One area of future study that needs more attention is how the sequencing of fluency, complexity, and accuracy activities works within a larger language activity. What do different combinations of these activities result in? Bygate (2001) points out several possible scenarios that can be researched. One involves starting with an accuracy activity and moving on to fluency, putting learners under increased time pressure in an attempt to achieve more automacity. A second sequence might start with fluency activities and later progress to getting learners to integrate more accurate features into their fluency base. A third sequence could move from accurate and/or fluent speech into more complex language. Is there a best order and placement for these activities in a learning cycle?

Similarly, the notion of task repetition deserves further study. Task repetition provides learners with the chance to do something again, to do it better. While any task can be repeated, what types benefit the most from repetition? It remains unclear when it is the best time to repeat a task. Should a teacher repeat a task immediately, a few days later, or even a few weeks later? It may depend on the task types, the learners, and the results of the first task. This is an area that may have a profound effect on how course materials are written and how curricula are planned.

CONCLUSION

Fluency is not an absolute value that learners either have or do not have. It is, rather, a matter of degree. All learners can achieve a level or degree of fluency, and the teacher has an opportunity as well as a responsibility to help his or her students develop this important area of communication. The teacher has a wide range of activities and resources to draw from for classroom learning. Some tasks may be focused on accuracy, others on fluency, and others on both. The activities that the teacher chooses for oral work are part of the equation. Also important are the teacher's attitude and demeanor in the classroom and his or her rapport with the students. For many learners, an improvement in fluency comes about more easily when they are relaxed and in an environment that is nurturing and nonjudgmental.

SUMMARY

- Fluency involves learners communicating meaning as best they can, using whatever resources are available.
- Cognitive, affective, and performance factors all play a major role in determining the degree of fluency a speaker may be capable of.
- There are ways that the teacher can foster fluency in learners, such as by providing the necessary language, knowledge, and strategy support.
- The types of activities that a teacher chooses will affect fluency development. The criteria for choosing effective tasks types for enhancing fluency development are interactivity, productivity, challenge, safety, purposefulness, and authenticity.
- Many fluency-oriented activity types are available for the teacher, such as information-gap tasks, jigsaws, consensus-building tasks, fluency circles, games, and projects.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What foreign language have you studied that you feel you are the most proficient in? Do you consider yourself fluent? Why or why not?

2. What should the role of the teacher be while students are engaged in a fluency-oriented language activity?
3. What activity types have you experienced as a student or a teacher that were fluency-oriented? What made them so? Which of the criteria discussed by Thornbury (2005) (interactivity, productivity, challenge, safety, purposefulness, authenticity) might have been involved in choosing activity types?
4. Think of an accuracy-focused classroom activity. What could be done to the activity to make it more fluency-oriented?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Find an activity in a language textbook that you feel is fluency-oriented. Read the teaching instructions in the teacher's manual. Would you follow the teaching steps as described? How might you further enhance the learner's fluency? Rewrite the notes.
2. Choose a language activity you have recently taught or experienced as a learner. Revise it based on one of P. Nation's (2002) criteria: (a) reducing the time; (b) a new audience; (c) new but similar material; or (d) an increase in complexity. Teach it again. List the differences that you noticed in the students' performance.
3. Observe a class of language learners. After class, interview three of the most fluent speakers in the class. Ask them how fluent they feel they are or are not. Investigate what they think they need to do to improve their fluency.
4. Look at the rating systems of two or more exams that assess oral language such as the TOEFL or the International English Language Testing System. Find the similarities and differences among them. Determine what role fluency should play in assessing the speaker. Create a new rating system for assessing speaking. How could you use this as a classroom-based assessment?

FURTHER READING

Baker, J., & Westrup, H. (2003). *Essential speaking skills: A handbook for English language teachers.* London, UK: Continuum.

This handbook provides practical activities to help teachers develop their students' fluency skills and is particularly useful for teachers who teach large classes with limited resources.

Folse, K. (1996). *Discussion starters: Speaking fluency activities for advanced ESL/EFL students.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Folse, K., & Ivone, J. (2002a). *First discussion starters: Speaking fluency activities for lower-level ESL/EFL students.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Folse, K., & Ivone, J. (2002b). *More discussion starters: Activities for building fluency.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

In most of the activities of this three-textbook classroom series, students must work together to reach a conclusion about a topic or solve a problem.

Nation, I. S. P., & Newton, J. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Grounded in theory made accessible to the reader, this book offers practical suggestions for teaching listening and speaking in both ESL and EFL contexts and contains a discussion on how to develop fluency in the classroom.

Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach speaking.* Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman.

This book begins with a description of what happens when someone speaks a foreign language and continues with an extended discussion of how to approach the teaching of speaking. It is a practical, readable guide for teachers who want to improve their understanding of and develop their skills in this area.