Fluency revisited

Pauliina Peltonen

Key words: fluency, interaction, speaking style

Fluency is a key indicator of second language (L2) oral proficiency and, as such, it is widely used as the basis of L2 assessment. As a concept, fluency is often characterized in terms of 'smoothness and effortlessness of speech' (Chambers 1997). As fluency is a key goal for L2 learners and an important focus in language teaching (e.g., Lintunen, Mutta, and Peltonen 2020), research on L2 speech fluency can offer important insights for teachers to support their learners' speech fluency development. While there is a relatively long research tradition in studying L2 speech fluency, dating back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, we have seen significant growth in fluency research in the twenty-first century, including emerging research themes that contribute to new ways of conceptualizing fluency. Therefore, it is timely to revisit the Key Concept of fluency (discussed in *ELT Journal* 47; Hedge 1993) from the perspective of three themes that offer new ways of thinking about fluency and are particularly relevant for language teaching, learning, and assessment: fluency in interaction, the continuum between fluency and disfluency, and first language (L1) speaking style as a factor influencing L2 fluency.

In everyday language use, fluency is often understood as equivalent to general (oral) proficiency in a particular language. This has been regarded as *the broad sense of fluency* by Lennon (1990). However, in L2 fluency research, a *narrow sense* (Lennon 1990) is applied, and fluency is approached as one dimension of L2 speech, relating especially to temporal aspects, such as speed of talk and pausing. Based on this narrow sense, fluent speech is thus produced with a 'natural', relatively fast speech rate and without frequent mid-clause silent pauses. Thus, learners' speech fluency can be characterized by measuring these fluency-related aspects from speech samples. In Segalowitz's (2010) widely cited triadic conceptualization of fluency, the fluency measurements capture a speaker's *utterance fluency*, which is enabled by fast and efficient underlying cognitive processing (*cognitive fluency*) and forms the basis for listeners' impressions of a speaker's fluency (*perceived fluency*). For measuring utterance fluency, most recent studies choose fluency measures that relate to Skehan's (2009) three dimensions of

fluency: *speed* (e.g., speech rate), *breakdown* (aspects of pausing), and *repair* (e.g., corrections). It is important to note that traditionally these three dimensions (speed, breakdown, and repair) have been examined from monologic speech samples, such as picture descriptions in the L2. This reflects the idea of fluency as an *individual* speaker's characteristic, and the concept of fluency as individualistic/cognitive in nature.

However, as learners commonly use their L2 in interactional settings, one of the themes in recent fluency research has been to explore fluency in interaction. This line of research extends our understanding of fluency from a purely individual activity to a social one (e.g., Segalowitz 2016; Tavakoli 2016; Wright and Tavakoli 2016; Peltonen 2017, 2020b; Tavakoli and Wright 2020). Thus, in interaction, fluency is viewed as a collaborative activity rather than as the sum of two individual speakers' fluencies. The participants' mutual efforts to maintain fluency in interaction have been referred to as *confluence* (McCarthy 2010) or *interactional fluency* (Peltonen 2020b). Interactional fluency can be analyzed based on, for instance, the extent to which learners minimize silences between their individual turns collaboratively and create cohesive links across turns (Peltonen 2017, 2020b). Multimodal analyses based on video-recorded L2 interactions can shed further light on additional resources (e.g., gestures) for maintaining fluency collaboratively beyond the spoken output (Peltonen 2020a; Kosmala 2021). In teaching fluency, it is thus essential to raise learners' awareness of strategies for maintaining interactional flow and to highlight that interactional fluency is the responsibility of both participants. This also has important implications for L2 assessment in interactional settings: while some aspects of fluency can be evaluated from an individual learner's perspective, test takers could receive a joint score on interactional fluency to reflect its collaborative nature (Peltonen 2022; see also Roever and Kasper 2018).

Adopting an interactive perspective to fluency highlights another important theme raised in recent fluency research: while fluency measurement based on monologues tends to be based on the division to 'fluent' and 'disfluent' speech, this distinction is not as clear-cut as it may first seem. Many features traditionally considered as signs of disfluency, such as repetitions or filled pauses (*uh, um*), can be approached from a strategic perspective as means to buy time, avoid long silences, and thus even to enhance fluency (Götz 2013; Peltonen 2020b). In interactional settings, these features have additional functions, such as holding the floor (e.g., Clark 1996), which further complicates their treatment as straightforward disfluency indicators. Thus, researchers have suggested that fluency and disfluency should be approached as a continuum (Lintunen, Mutta, and and Peltonen 2020; Tavakoli and Wright 2020). In language teaching, learners could be guided to notice 'disfluencies' in L1 speech and interaction, drawing attention to their prevalence in natural language use. Ultimately, this could reduce anxiety related to L2 speaking situations: L2 speech does not have to 'perfect' or free of so-called disfluencies (Lintunen, Mutta, and and Peltonen 2020).

Viewing fluency and disfluency as a continuum is linked to the third theme highlighted in recent fluency research, namely the role of L1 speaking style influencing L2 fluency. While the point of comparison and model for learners has traditionally been a native speaker of the target language, recent fluency

Peltonen

studies have shifted the focus from comparing learners and native speakers to comparing fluency characteristics in the learners' L1 and L2 speech to reveal individual speaker profiles (e.g., De Jong *et al.* 2015; Huensch and Tracy-Ventura 2017; Peltonen 2018; Duran-Karaoz and Tavakoli 2020). Recently, the approach has been extended to multilingual learners and comparisons across three languages (L1, L2, L3) in their repertoire (Peltonen and Lintunen 2022). The accumulating evidence from these studies points to the importance of L1 speaking style in influencing at least some aspects of L2 fluency (see Gao and Sun 2023), which could inform classroom practices in various ways. Learners could be guided to reflect on their own fluency profile: not just in their L2, but L1 as well. In practice, learners could record and compare their speech in the L1 and L2 from the perspective of fluency and, with the help of the teacher, identify aspects related to their own speaking style. This self-reflection could form the basis for setting individual learning goals based on one's own fluency profile in the L1.

To conclude, the rapidly growing body of research on L2 speech fluency is a testament to a vibrant research field that has recently extended the scope of fluency research to new directions and provided the foundations for new understandings of fluency. These efforts contribute to increasing our shared understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon that is L2 speech fluency. The three themes discussed in this article highlight the importance of supporting both individual and interactional fluency development in language teaching, advocate for the reconceptualization of 'disfluencies' as potentially fluency-maintaining strategies, and underscore the benefits of raising awareness of the learners' individual speaking styles in facilitating L2 fluency development. In recent years, fluency researchers have undoubtedly shown increased efforts to connect research and practice. However, ensuring that most recent findings are available for teachers and designing research-based fluency activities remain important goals for fluency researchers now and in the future (Tavakoli and Hunter 2018; Foster 2020; Lintunen, Mutta, and and Peltonen 2020; Tavakoli 2023). Dialogue across language teaching and assessment professionals as well as L2 fluency researchers is vital in achieving these goals.

Funding

Last version received September 2023

References

Chambers, F. 1997. 'What Do We Mean by Fluency?' *System* 25(4):535–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(97)00046-8.

Clark, H. H. 1996. *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Jong, N. H., **R. Groenhout**, **R. Schoonen**, and **J. H. Hulstijn**. 2015. 'Second Language Fluency: Speaking Style or Proficiency? Correcting Measures of Second Language Fluency for First Language Behavior.' *Applied Psycholinguistics* 36(2):223–43. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716413000210.

Duran-Karaoz, Z. and **P. Tavakoli**. 2020. 'Predicting L2 Fluency from L1 Fluency Behavior: The Case of L1 Turkish and L2 English speakers.' *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 42(4):671–95. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263119000755.

Foster, P. 2020. 'Oral Fluency in a Second Language: A Research Agenda for the Next Ten Years.' *Language*

Teaching 53(4):446–61. http://doi.org/10.1017/S026144482000018X.

Gao, J. and **P. P. Sun**. 2023. 'How does Learners' L2 Utterance Fluency Relate to their L1? A Meta-Analysis'. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* (early view): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12493.

Götz, S. 2013. *Fluency in Native and Nonnative English Speech*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hedge, T. 1993. 'Key Concepts in ELT: Fluency.' *ELT Journal* 47(3):275–6. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/47.3.275.

Huensch, A. and **N. Tracy-Ventura**. 2017. 'Understanding Second Language Fluency Behavior: The Effects of Individual Differences in First Language Fluency, Cross-Linguistic Differences, and Proficiency Over Time.' *Applied Psycholinguistics* 38(2):755–85. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716416000424.

Kosmala, L. 2021. 'A Multimodal Contrastive Study of (dis)fluency across Languages and Settings: Towards a Multidimensional Scale of inter-(dis)fluency.' Unpublished PhD thesis, Sorbonne Nouvelle University, France. https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-03466135

Lennon, P. 1990. 'Investigating Fluency in EFL: A Quantitative Approach.' *Language Learning* 40(3):387–417. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1990.tb00669.x.

Lintunen, P., **M. Mutta**, and **P. Peltonen**. 2020. 'Synthesising approaches to second language fluency: Implications and future directions', In Fluency in L2 Learning and Use, edited by **P. Lintunen**, **M. Mutta**, and **P. Peltonen** (eds.). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

McCarthy, M. 2010. 'Spoken Fluency Revisited.' *English Profile Journal* 1(1):1–15. http://doi.org/10.1017/S2041536210000012.

Peltonen, P. 2022. 'Connections between Measured and Assessed Fluency in L2 Peer Interaction: A Problem-Solving Perspective.' *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 60(4):983–1011. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2020-0030.

Peltonen, P. 2017. 'Temporal Fluency and Problem-Solving in Interaction: An Exploratory Study of Fluency Resources in L2 Dialogue.' *System* 70:1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.08.009.

Peltonen, P. 2018. 'Exploring Connections Between First and Second Language Fluency: A Mixed Methods Approach.' *The Modern Language Journal* 102(4):676–92. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12516.

Peltonen, P. 2020a. 'Gestures as Fluency-Enhancing Resources in L2 Interaction: A Case Study on Multimodal Fluency', edited by **P. Lintunen**, **M. Mutta** and **P. Peltonen** (eds.).

Peltonen, P. 2020b. *Individual and Interactional Speech Fluency in L2 English from a Problem-solving Perspective: A Mixed-methods Approach*. Turku: University of Turku. https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-8137-3.

Peltonen, P. and **P. Lintunen**. 2022. 'Multilingual Speakers' L1, L2, and L3 Fluency Across Languages: A Study of Finnish, Swedish, and English.' *Nordand* 17(1):48–63. https://doi.org/10.18261/nordand.17.1.

Roever, C. and **G. Kasper**. 2018. 'Speaking in Turns and Sequences: Interactional Competence as a Target Construct in Testing Speaking.' *Language Testing* 35(3):331–55. http://doi.org/10.1177/0265532218758128.

Segalowitz, N. 2010. *The Cognitive Bases of Second Language Fluency*. New York: Routledge.

Segalowitz, N. 2016. 'Second Language Fluency and its Underlying Cognitive and Social Determinants'. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 54(2):79–95. http://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2016-9991.

Skehan, P. 2009. 'Modelling Second Language Performance: Integrating Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency, and Lexis.' *Applied Linguistics* 30(4):510–32. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/amp047.

Tavakoli, P. 2016. 'Fluency in Monologic and Dialogic Task Performance: Challenges in Defining and Measuring L2 Fluency.' *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 54(2):133–50. http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/iral-2016-9994.

Tavakoli, P. 2023. 'Making Fluency Research Accessible to Second Language Teachers: The Impact of a Training Intervention.' *Language Teaching Research* 27(2):368–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820951213.

Tavakoli, P. and **A.-M. Hunter**. 2018. 'Is Fluency Being "Neglected" in the Classroom? Teacher Understanding of Fluency and related Classroom Practices.' *Language Teaching Research* 22(2):330–49. http://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817708462.

Tavakoli, P. and **C. Wright**. 2020. *Second Language Speech Fluency: From Research to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wright, C. and **P. Tavakoli**. 2016. 'New Directions and Developments in Defining, Analyzing and Measuring L2 Speech Fluency.' *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 54(2):73–7. http://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2016-9990.

The author

Pauliina Peltonen Department of English, University of Turku, Finland
Email: paupelt@utu.fi