

Intentionality and Awareness in Language Learning

Josh Kurzweil discusses ways to help students become self-directed learners

Classroom Observations

In my work teaching English, I have often been struck by students that are very motivated to learn, expend a great deal of energy, and yet are often frustrated by their lack of progress. There are many explanations for this phenomenon, but in the last couple years I've begun to form some theories about the role of student focus in language learning and how it can affect the results of their efforts. In this article, I will first profile two students that typify for me this dilemma and then discuss ways of helping students become self-directed learners.

Defining Fluency and Accuracy

Yan was one of my students from China. She spoke very quickly, but was often difficult to understand because of poor pronunciation and the density of basic grammar mistakes.

Sue, a young woman from Korea, was in many ways the opposite. She had natural intonation and spoke carefully, but was very slow and hesitant, making it hard to have a sustained conversation with her.

As I looked at these two language learners, the concepts of accuracy and fluency jumped out at me. Yan's focus on fluency came at the expense of her accuracy, while the opposite was true for Sue. Scott Thornbury, in his book *How to Teach Speaking*, discusses this distinction (6-7). He looks at fluency in terms of the frequency and placement of pauses, noting that all speakers pause, but that the issue is when and how often. More fluent speakers pause less frequently and at places that allow ideas to be meaningfully chunked. Thornbury also explains that part of this speed has to do with the automaticity that the speaker has gained with chunks of language, meaning that they do not have to think hard about how to express an idea.

Accuracy, on the other hand, refers to the use of error-free and appropriate language by formulating utterances with correct grammar and vocabulary through writing or speaking. Depending on how the language is expressed, issues of spelling, legibility and pronunciation also come into play.

The attention students pay to accuracy or fluency is also often apparent during classroom activities. For example, when there was a more fluency-based discussion, Yan happily would talk to her partners and often dominate the conversation, as she was eager to express her ideas. On the other hand, she would speed through the more accuracy-focused activities, continuing to make the same mistakes. Interestingly, she often took the opportunity to ask questions and talk about the grammar rules or vocabulary, but didn't really practice in a meaningful way that improved her performance. In contrast, Sue was very deliberate in her accuracy practice, but 'finished' very quickly when it came to the discussions more focused on fluency.

As I observed these students following their natural preferences, I realized that they weren't thinking about these activities in the same way that I was. My big 'ah-hah' in the classroom was that students need to be aware of concepts like fluency and accuracy, so that they can develop intentionality in their practice. Because Sue didn't understand the meaning or value of fluency, she didn't see the purpose or goal of the classroom activity. Likewise, Yan operated under the notion that talking about grammar would be enough and that she really just needed to persist in her drive toward fluency.

So, by way of summary, my puzzle and guiding question became: How can I raise my students' awareness of accuracy and fluency in a way that allows them to (a) recognize the purpose of activities and (b) be engaged in a way that will help them improve?

Raising Student Awareness

As a teacher trainer, I have done many sessions on accuracy and fluency for participants in my TESOL certificate courses and wanted to create a simplified version for my students. So I developed a short lesson in which I do just that. I give them an opportunity to think about the terms, elicit definitions, demonstrate what an extreme focus on fluency and accuracy might look like (often to much laughter), and then have them discuss what type of language learner they are. Do they tend to focus more on fluency or accuracy? Surprisingly, even my lower level students can usually identify their own tendencies with relative ease. The chart below is what ends up on my board.

Fluency	Accuracy
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speaking quickly• Fewer pauses• Focus on communicating ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Slowing down• Thinking carefully• Choosing the correct vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and spelling

Once these definitions are in place, a number of things can happen. First of all, I can ask students what the main purpose of an activity is, and they can think of it in terms of fluency and accuracy. Secondly, and more importantly, students can also begin to develop and share strategies to improve in each area.

Self-directed learners

In the book *How Learning Works*, the authors discuss this idea of being a self-directed learner with the following principle: "To become self-directed learners, students must learn to assess the demands of the task, evaluate their own knowledge and skills, plan their approach, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies as needed (191)."

By helping students become aware of whether activities were focused on fluency or accuracy, I believe that they were able to take a first and important step in becoming self-directed learners. However, awareness of the concepts and ability to 'assess the demands of the task' are just the first steps. In the second part of this article, I'd like to offer some practical ways in which I've tried to support students so that they could have focused practice to help them improve.

Supporting Self-directed Learning

To illustrate some practical ways of putting this idea of the self-directed learner into practice, I would like to describe how I have been using a speaking activity that has become a core part of my classes and is designed especially to help students develop their fluency. This speaking activity provides students with sustained speaking opportunities in much the same way as part 2 of the IELTS speaking test. The adjustments I have made mostly focus on making it a regular classroom practice that supports students in the final four components of the above definition of being a self-directed learner: evaluate their own knowledge and skills, plan their approach, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies as needed.

The Keep Talking Activity

Paul Nation describes a wonderful activity called "4-3-2 speaking" that can help students develop fluency (153). In this activity, the students speak to a partner about a given topic first for 4 minutes, then for 3, and finally 2, each time changing partners. In this way, they try to express the same ideas more fluently. I have modified Nation's activity with a few more guidelines for the speaker and listener. The roles and steps are listed in the table below:

Speaker	Listener
Speak for two minutes about the topic	Listen actively (Ex. "Uh huh, really") but do not ask questions. -> If the speaker stops, you can say, "Tell me more about _____."
Check and correct the report. Did your partner make a mistake or forget something you said?	Report what you heard. Ex. "You said that you ..."
Ask at least 3 follow up questions	

By having the listener report, the activity can provide that student with a reason to listen and help the speaker feel heard. In addition, the listener actually gets a big burst of fluency without the burden of trying to think of what to say. Although the time can be shortened as in Nation's activity, I also find that by keeping it the same and switching partners, I can encourage the students to try and include more details, especially because the previous listener asked follow-up questions that can prompt more ideas. As with the IELTS speaking test, I provide students with a minute or two to brainstorm ideas and jot down key word notes before speaking. This time can help them prepare their ideas, which can aid in fluency. Once the students are familiar with this activity, it can be done quickly and easily throughout the course with different topics. The following are two tasks that I have used, which again borrow heavily from the IELTS test format:

Lower Level

Talk about a gift you have gotten. Be sure to talk about the following:

- Who gave it to you?
- What's it like?
- How often do you use it? When? Where? How?
- What do you like about it?

Upper Level

Describe different ways that people show their status.

- What status symbols are popular in your country?
- What do think are the best ways to spend extra money?
- Do you think that people have become too materialistic?

Student Recordings

Two or three times a session, I have students record their speaking tasks so that they and I can better assess their skills. With the popularity of smart phones, I have found that most of my students have the ability to record their conversations right in class. I then have them transcribe their recordings (just the parts when they are the speaker), correct the transcription, and comment on their strengths and challenges. They then email the recording and written work to me, so that I can give them feedback.

The transcription serves several functions. First of all, it makes the students really listen to what they have said and can raise their awareness of and evaluate both their fluency and accuracy. Another advantage of the student transcription is that it allows me to easily do a word count by copying and pasting the text into a word processing program, such as Microsoft Word. Once I have figured out their total number of words, I can divide that by the number of minutes the students spoke and arrive at their WPM (Words Per Minute). This data is invaluable in being able to quantify student fluency. Having the transcription also makes it easy to go over the content of the student's talk so that I can give qualitative feedback. For example, I might comment on their ability to develop an idea, provide relevant details, or offer opinions and support. By using WPM and comments on content, I can provide students with feedback on two critical areas to improve their fluency.

Students often have the impulse to correct their spoken mistakes when doing the transcription, so I encourage them to catch as many mistakes as they can in their correction. This activity can be illuminating as I can see what they can and can't correct (i.e., gaps in knowledge). Likewise, students are able to slow down and self-correct, which can help them internalize the corrected grammar or vocabulary point that they notice.

My final comments about their performance provide students an opportunity to begin thinking about what they most need to work on. This discussion usually continues in class and during individual conferences with students. After students have received my feedback by email, I have them discuss their results with classmates in addition to reviewing the concepts of fluency and accuracy. This discussion can often help clarify students' strengths and challenges, while also providing an opportunity for them to brainstorm and

share strategies so that they can improve their fluency. Below are some of the strategies that my students and I recently came up with through such a discussion.

To improve fluency	To improve accuracy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write key words to get ideas • Do the "Keep talking" activity often with friends or even alone • Push yourself to go faster • Do the same topic/task several times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow down • Repeat corrected sentences over and over • Try to use corrected sentences in conversation • Write personalized sentences with new grammar points from class and memorize those

One of the benefits of such a discussion is that individual students can get a better sense of what they need to do to improve their speaking. For example, I can tell a student like Yan that since she is speaking at 140 WPM, she can afford to slow down to focus on accuracy. In similar fashion, with a student like Sue who initially got 35 WPM, I can encourage her to focus more on her fluency.

Once students have a clearer sense of what they are working on, they can practice with intentionality that can lead to measurable improvement. In the case of Sue, she was actually able to raise her WPM to 70 after 7 weeks of practice. Although her jump was higher than most, I have generally found that students have been able to make quantitative and qualitative improvements in their fluency through this practice. In short, when students know what the aim of the activity is, they can more effectively focus and strategize so that they can improve their performance.

Summing It Up

In his book *Why Students Don't Like School*, Dan Willingham discusses the importance of focus in practice (149). He offers the example of driving, noting that he has thirty years of experience driving, but that he does not have thirty years of practice. Because of our ability to become automatic as we develop skills, we are able to drive to work and not think about driving. We might be listening to music, talking with a friend, or just thinking. Then, suddenly, we find ourselves at work. This automaticity allows us to function in the world, but it can also prevent us from paying attention and practicing in a meaningful way. When students do classroom activities without sufficient awareness or intentionality, they may find that they are expending a great deal of time and energy, but not progressing in the way that they had hoped.

The same principle of intentionality and awareness in practice can easily be seen in the language learning classroom. Students can develop a certain degree of confidence by talking with their classmates and can internalize new language through the experience of using it. In addition, there can be a great deal of incidental learning that can occur during conversations as students pick up new expressions, vocabulary and strategies. However, I also wonder if students can stagnate when they have no focused practice in their speaking. I am not suggesting that students always have conversations with strict objectives and focus, but it is worth considering how to add focused practice into

the range of classroom activities we do. Moreover, I believe that by increasing student awareness of concepts, such as fluency and accuracy, we can lay a more solid foundation upon which they can develop as self-directed learners.

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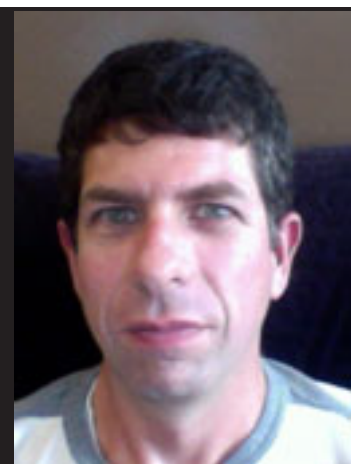
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