Improving English Speaking Fluency in Second Language Learners: A Literature Review

Mejorando la Fluidez Verbal en Estudiantes del Inglés como Segundo Idioma: Una Revisión de la Literatura

Mónica I. Lasso M.
Universidad de Panamá, Centro Regional Universitario de Panamá Oeste. Panamá
teachermonica1982@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7299-1833

Aleojin Ríos Vergara
Universidad de Panamá, Centro Regional Universitario de Panamá Oeste. Panamá
aleojin.rios@up.ac.pa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2247-0313

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study presents a review of how the acquisition of oral fluency is developed through selected and specific activities. Also, there is an analysis of possible aspects and difficulties that may affect second language learners in mastering speaking fluency in EFL. The study of twenty-one related articles proves that second learners require a proper environment with practicing opportunities to develop and express their ideas correctly. Besides that, second learners need selected activities and techniques that help them improve this specific language skill. Results show how English second learners improve their speaking fluency with the correct technique application and activities.

Keywords: ESL, EFL, speaking fluency, techniques, activities, cognitive factors/ external factors that affect ESL Oral Fluency.

RESUMEN

Este estudio cualitativo presenta una revisión de cómo se desarrolla la adquisición de la fluidez oral a través de actividades seleccionadas y específicas. Además, se analizan los posibles aspectos y dificultades que pueden afectar a los segundos estudiantes en el dominio de la fluidez oral en inglés como lengua extranjera. El análisis de veintiún artículos relacionados demuestra que los segundos estudiantes necesitan un entorno adecuado con oportunidades de práctica para desarrollar y expresar sus ideas correctamente. Además de eso, los segundos estudiantes necesitan actividades y técnicas seleccionadas que les ayuden a mejorar esta habilidad lingüística específica. Los resultados muestran cómo los segundos estudiantes de inglés mejoran su capacidad de hablar con fluidez con la aplicación de técnicas y actividades correctas.

Palabras clave: ESL, EFL, fluidez del habla, técnicas, actividades, factores cognitivos/factores externos que afectan la fluidez oral de ESL.

Introduction

Fluency has been the object of much linguistic research due to its complexity to be obtained. We commonly believe Fluency is acquired by practicing as much as possible a second language, but it encompasses free practicing and directed tasks to develop specific language abilities and skills (Chang & Hsueh-chao Ho, 2018). Otherwise, oral fluency in a second language is affected by some cognitive (Feng, 2022; Zarei & Moussavou, 2022) and external factors that directly mold our learning progress.

A native and a nonnative speaker's oral fluency varies with each individual, and the terminology refers to how easily a speaker talks or how fast a second speaker perceives a speech (De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012). There are also many ways to improve fluency in English as a second language such as practicing a lot, having constant conversations with English native speakers, and extensive reading (Wee Ong, 2017). All those continuous activities will help increase vocabulary and improve oral fluency.

On the other hand, adult second learners could acquire a natural English pronunciation through diverse techniques, but for most of them, it is not easy to get. An accurate and fluent conversation requires much effort, correct pronunciation, listening, and practicing with native resources available to level their general knowledge, incrementing not only speaking skills (Bilge & Kalenderoglu, 2022) but also other skills, so second language learners will have the capacity to keep a natural conversation as a native speaker.

Method

Database and search strategy

Even though there is a world of publications in the field (Speaking Fluency in English as a Second Language Learning), some of them are closely related to the improvement of speaking fluency in a second language. The publications selected vary in methodology and format but keep the essential components of professional and educational articles. To bring out this study, specific terms searched in educational English journals were selected and discarded following criteria to get better results, highlighting twenty-one linked articles on the topic.

Figure 1

Flowchart of selected publications
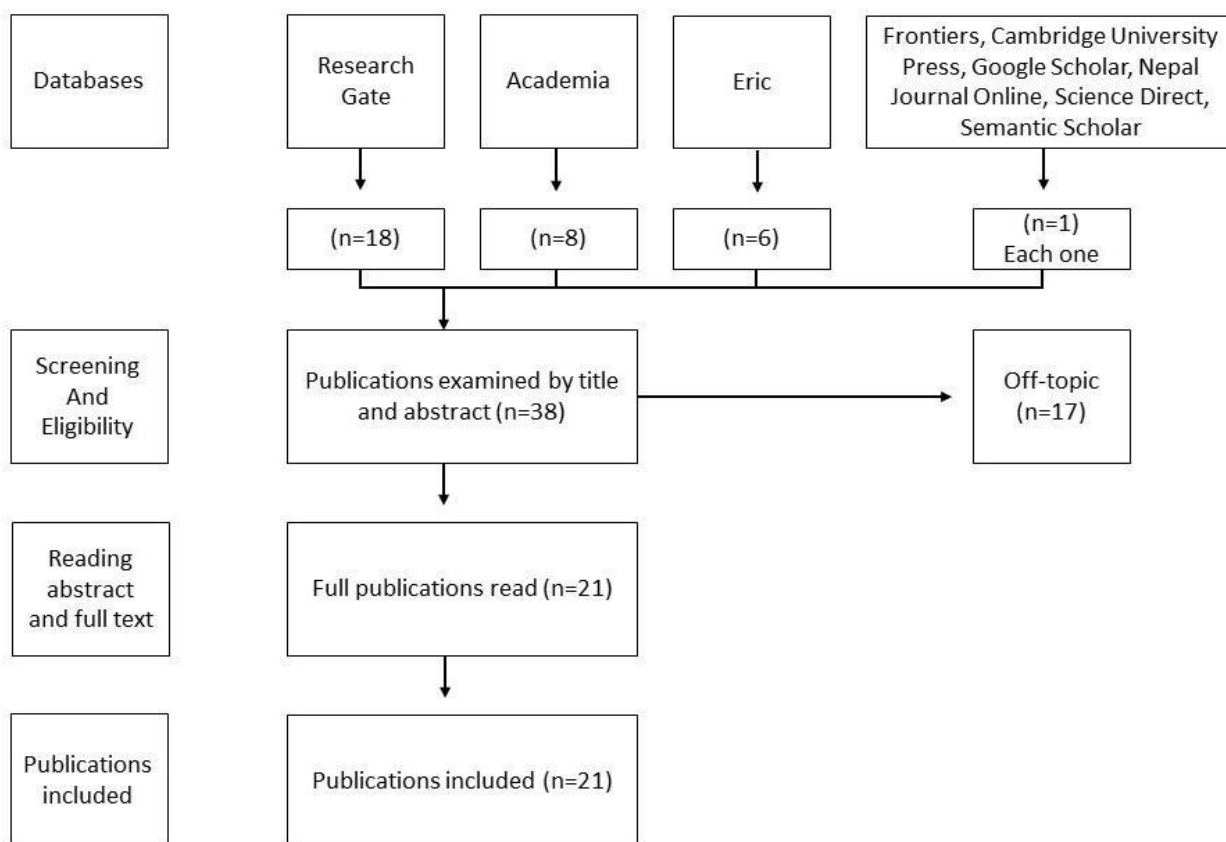
Note: The concepts used for this flowchart come from: Dehghanzadeh, H., Fardanesh, H., Hatami, J., Talaee, E., & Omid, N., p. 5, (2019). Using gamification to support learning English as a second language: a systematic review. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *34*(7), 934–957. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2019.1648298 and the information was based on the selection process to conduct this paper.

In Figure 1, to recognize relevant scientific journal articles, the search was conducted through relevant and reliable databases such as Academia, Research Gate, Eric, Frontiers, Cambridge University Press, Google Scholar, Nepal Journals Online, Science Direct, and Semantic Scholar.

The search terms used to bring out this study were "Speaking Fluency", "Fluency in English as a Second Language", "Improve Oral Fluency in Nonnative Speakers" and "Cognitive Fluency." These terms are directly related to improving speaking fluency in English as a second language, taking into account scientific articles published in English journals with educational purposes from 2012 to 2024 to bring updated research.

All selected journal articles focus on the study and development of one of the essential skills to acquire English as a second language speaking fluency. The selected scientific articles allow the

comprehension of potential aspects which may affect speaking fluency and the techniques that could be implemented to improve it.

Criteria for inclusion

The earliest search included thirty-eight journal articles about the topic, including twenty-three for the actual study, but discarded seventeen. Even though they were about fluency, they were not directly related to this search, using relevant publications.

The scientific journal articles were initially about fluency in second language learners, but for the purpose of this study, the information found had to focus on improving English speaking fluency, resulting in an accurate search to find correlated publications. Five journal articles were taken from Academia, seven from Research Gate, five from Eric, and only one from Frontiers, Cambridge University Press, Google Scholar, Nepal Journals Online, Science Direct, and Semantic Scholar.

Specific criteria were used to ensure the quality and reliability of the research used in this study. First, the articles about "Speaking Fluency" were included to work on this study because there is a difference between Speaking Fluency and Fluency (De Jong, Groenhout, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2014). The publications are focused on Journal articles digging about improving fluency in English as a second language, and the publications included in this study vary in methodology; they can be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. Recent publications from the last ten years were used to ensure updated information, and professionals' publications were selected based on accurate and reliable information impacting the research. The study analyzes speaking fluency, and scientific elements in professional research. Moreover, just scientific journal articles with educational purposes were selected for this research.

Results

Why is fluency essential?

The main objective of learning a second language is to use it and communicate our ideas in the target language, considered one of the most necessary skills to develop when learning a second language (Suzuki & Kormos, 2021). Nevertheless, for many speakers, fluent communication results are complex, maybe due to a lack of vocabulary and grammatical structure, lack of practice, or maybe because they do not feel comfortable using a nonnative language. So, learning a second language requires developing all four skills. Speaking fluency is crucial, and it can be developed through various techniques (Hernandez, 2021) and methodologies (Yingjie, 2014) with constant practice and directed activities. Thus, a natural conversation must be fluent, mastering oral expression at a high level. So, there is a difference between fluency, speaking fluency, and speaking fast (De jong, Groenhout, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2014). Consequently, a speaker can express himself fast, but it does not mean he is fluent.

Factors that affect second language speaking fluency

Speaking a second language requires interpreting words, preparing our thoughts, and producing accurate speech. Nevertheless, second language acquisition can be affected by external factors such as personality, race and origin, age, exposition to language, and cognitive aspects that are not too obvious (De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012). In addition, analyzing what could be other external factors affecting second language learning, it is quickly observed the student's fear of speaking and being wrong (Thakre et al, 2023). It generates anxiety due to the risk of being in an embarrassing situation or sounding incomprehensible (Feng, 2022). As stated by Li (2024) "cognitive factors are significant for understanding the differences and performances of different individuals in the language learning process" p.215. However, with a proper classroom atmosphere, students will feel encouraged to participate in conversations. As a result, second language learners will be more open to work on their speaking abilities. Besides, the lack of vocabulary directly affects oral production because students do not have a base or many words to produce oral sentences correctly.

Secondly, we have the cognitive factors that influence a second language's fluency (Feng, 2022), and most of the time, second learners are not conscious of the process of developing proper and fluent speech. Cognitive fluency refers to how our mind processes a piece of information to produce a speech (Suzuki & Kormos, 2021), so fluency is seen as a procedure where the speaker needs to understand the concepts, process and organize the information, and articulate the speech. In addition, our minds are processing our speech to correct ourselves.

Lastly, we can consider the instructor's role and behavior in class with students and partners (Shahini & Shahamiriam, 2017). Instructors must stimulate second learners to speak, generating a proper environment for students to feel comfortable and encouraged to speak. That is the first step to managing oral fluency because a second language speaker will not be afraid of possible conversation errors.

Improving our speaking fluency

Developing oral fluency also involves growing a complex and accurate vocabulary (Wee Ong, 2017). Speaking fluency is the facility to process and reproduce a second language with a specific proficiency level. This term has been described and studied since 1990 and is still used today as a set of elements that are necessarily learned simultaneously (Tannistha, 2020). Also, it is clearly stated that to get fluency, the second language learner needs to identify, learn, and increase an extensive vocabulary, then fluency flourishes (Chang & Hsueh-chao Ho, 2018). Many fluent speakers have a depth lexicon in a second language, and one of the main ways to acquire that knowledge is through extensive reading, from simple short paragraphs to diverse text with various levels of complexity.

Some studies point out that oral production is a process (Feng, 2022), but it closely relates to the amount of information we have about specific topics, our cognitive process of information, pressure and

time to develop and organize our ideas, and the lexical and grammatical knowledge we have (Wee Ong, 2017). So, word formation is very beneficial for guessing the meaning of complex and new words in conversations.

Lastly, some researchers recommend some activities to improve our lexicon and fluency as learning new vocabulary, listening to various conversations and music, singing, repeating dialogues, and specific activities available to develop our speaking fluency (Yingjie, 2014). Also, second language speakers need to be exposed to natural conversations and real situations to help them develop their original oral production (Paredes Becerra, Lopez, & Ramirez-Avila, 2021). All those tasks will help second language learners increase their speaking fluency to feel confident to participate in natural conversations, organize and express their ideas and lose the fear of speaking in public.

Discussions

This qualitative research aims to inform readers about the importance of speaking fluency (Suzuki & Kormos, 2021) to give readers an overview of what activities may be done to improve speaking fluency when learning English as a second language (Safitri, 2022). Also, how the process is developed and how multiple factors (Shahini & Shahamiriam, 2017) and individual differences (De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012) may affect oral fluency. According to Sapkota (2016), producing an accurate and fluent conversation is crucial to communicating in any language. Therefore, it is imperative to work on this language skill to persuade a proper, clear, and satisfactory exchange of information.

A general overview of those articles displays a complex topic to understand the importance of conversations when learning a new language and the factors that directly mold the fluency learning process for ESL (De jong, Groenhout, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2014; Shahini & Shahamiriam, 2017), and how second language learners improve their speaking fluency (Sapkota, 2016). Consequently, fluency has gained significant importance in conversations since the first studies approached linguistics and how it was developed. Many investigations have demonstrated the importance of all components to reach a non-native language and how to do it (Muhsin Alaraj, 2017). Several methodologies (Yingjie, 2014), techniques (Sapkota, 2016; Zhang, 2009), and strategies (Chang & Hsueh-chao Ho, 2018; Hernandez, 2021; Kashmiri, 2020; Muhsin Alaraj, 2017) are investigated to continuously help to understand how mastering a second language as a native speaker can do. As Bilgie & Kalenderoglu (2022) explained, mastering a language includes developing all four skills. Nevertheless, speaking fluency is one of the most complicated abilities to acquire and develop because it involves many components such as individual cognitive factors, individual differences, and self-confidence (De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012; Feng, 2022; Suzuki & Kormos, 2021; Li, 2024).

On the other hand, the ability to speak fluently also depends on the motivation our second language learners receive from instructors and the early age they are in contact with the new language, besides the opportunities ESL have to be exposed to the language (Shahini & Shahamiriam, 2017). Moreover, Chang

& Hsueh-chao Ho (2018); Wee Ong (2017); and Zhang (2009) agree that developing oral fluency requires increasing vocabulary through much reading, while Thomson (2017) argued that the use of complex expressions helps second language learners improve speaking fluency significantly. On the other hand, some techniques and methods highlight the effectiveness of improving oral fluency in ESL as 4/3/2 Technique, which consists of speech repetition under time pressure (De Jong, 2011; Permata, Rozimela, & Refnaldi, 2020; Yingjie, 2014). This activity has been proved in classrooms with ESL students, resulting in improved oral fluency.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

This qualitative study presents a literature review of how speaking fluency is acquired when learning English as a second language. All journal articles included in this research were useful to properly understand the research topic and develop language speaking fluency (Zhang, 2009). Also, this paper can provide insights to anyone interested in mastering English as a second language because speaking fluency is essential in keeping a conversation.

The actual paper includes relevant and reliable information on the field, selected through various trustworthy websites with educational purposes, searching through key terms resulting in selecting twenty-three related articles. Nevertheless, the time dedicated to searching, selecting, and studying scientific articles was restricted to five weeks. On the other hand, this documentary research demonstrates that more studies with open access are necessary to enrich and continue developing this specific language field since the range of related articles on the subject is limited.

On the other hand, it would be engaging to analyze how the actual program in the educational system provides the ESL population with the necessary tools to master fluency in English as a second language. Also, analyzing how qualified English instructors are and what are the differences and results between private and public education that hinder our students from acquiring English speaking fluency properly. Additionally, it is recommended and necessary to work on accessible competitive programs to work on this specific sub-skill.

In conclusion, after studying all selected articles, the learning process and second language acquisition will vary through decades according to processes, tools, methodologies, and activities developed, studied, and selected to teach fluency in ESL. Combining techniques, methodologies, and all available tools is necessary to engage our ESL learners, focusing on developing this specific language sub-skill and other language skills to guarantee long-lasting knowledge.

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Conflicto de interés

Los autores de este trabajo declaran no tener conflicto de interés.

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The authors of this paper state that they have no conflict of interest.

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