

# Enhancing Oral Language Development of EFL Learners throughout the 15-Week Semester at Atomi University

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## Abstract

This study examines the progression of oral language skills in 28 English language learners at Atomi University. It focuses on the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of their spoken English, which was assessed through the delivery of short speeches in class. The speeches were delivered either from a script or from memory. During the 15-week semester, each student presented a one-minute speech. The assessment of oral production was conducted at the start and end of the semester, employing various measures including the average number of words per T-unit, lexical density (indicative of complexity), the average number of repairs and errors per 100 words (indicative of accuracy), speech rate, and the average duration of pauses (indicative of fluency). Based on the results of paired sample t-tests, the participants demonstrated an increase in the complexity of their presentations, a decrease in the number of errors made, and an acceleration in their speaking pace.

**Keywords:** Speaking, accuracy, fluency, complexity

## Introduction

Speaking in a foreign language is a valuable skill that is essential for adequate language use, but it is particularly important for nonnative speakers. Fluency in the target language is viewed as the ultimate objective of language learners. Accuracy and fluency are the two speaking characteristics that should receive the most attention while seeking to speak English effectively. Clarity and resonance are additional crucial factors. According to Foster and Skehan (1999), the three categories of pronunciation, vocabulary, and collocations are the most important ones to focus on while aiming to improve the fluency of EFL speakers. According to Tam (1997), one of the most important ways to improve a speaker's fluency and accuracy is to expose them to a variety of speaking situations and possibilities. Roger (2008) argued that a proficient speaker of a second language is able to use the language correctly in numerous speaking circumstances. Richards (2006) utilised three essential

categories to classify the speech-based activities proposed by Jones (1996) and Burns (1998): speaking as engagement, speaking as transaction, and speaking as performance. When the focus is on what is said or done, this is referred to as conversation as transaction. A talk as performance is a public speech that gives information to an audience in a format that more closely resembles written language than spoken language. Using this classification as a starting point, Ferris (1998) analysed ESL college students at three different American universities to determine how difficult it was for them to grasp and speak English. He found that while students had no difficulty chatting in small groups, they were highly anxious during oral presentations and classroom debates. His research revealed that the discourse is responsible for many of the problems students confront. Morita (2004) investigated how students in two graduate courses in a TESL program at a Canadian school were expected to speak and how they learned the oral academic presenting skills they needed to be successful. The focus of the study was on how students developed the oral academic presentation skills required to provide good oral academic presentations. According to Morita's research, non-native speakers and native speakers eventually outperformed one another in oral academic discourses by regularly chatting with teachers and peers.

Teachers have adopted a variety of strategies and techniques, including task-based language instruction (TBLT), to aid students in enhancing their speaking skills. This is because speaking is one of the most important skills for language learners to improve. Some studies place greater emphasis on task-based techniques than on communicative language teaching (CLT), which enables students and teachers to build their own communication strategies (Gass & Crookes, 1993; cited in Skehan, 1996). Even though task-based performance in a second language is an exciting topic in its own right and should be the subject of additional empirical research, the widespread use of tasks in language education and testing makes it possible to benefit from understanding more about how effectively they function (Tavakoli & Foster, 2008). In recent years, research on tasks, specifically how activities are utilised to teach and acquire second languages, has garnered considerable interest. The majority of task-based research has focused on the production of spoken language (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Skehan, 2003; Tavakoli & Foster, 2011).

Numerous studies have shown that the type of assignment has a substantial effect on how students approach language creation as well as the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of their final outcomes. Tavakoli and Foster conducted one of the research projects. They explored how the structure of the

job affected a person's language performance, specifically their speaking fluency and accuracy (2008). The findings revealed that closely planned tasks enabled individuals to execute them with greater skill. However, performance on structured tasks was only modestly superior to performance on unstructured tasks. In 1986, Duff did research with non-native speakers on task type; Skehan (1996) explains his findings. Her studies focused mostly on how frequently and successfully busy individuals communicate with one another. The first activity needed participants to work together to resolve a problem. In the second activity, students were obliged to explore differing perspectives on a certain topic. Using c-units, they quantified the amount of language they used. A c-unit is any word, phrase, or sentence that has pragmatic or semantic value when used within the framework of a discussion. In contrast, the grammatical complexity of the responses, the number of turns, and the types of questions were utilised to evaluate their quality. The results demonstrated that the problem-solving exercise boosted each participant's total and individual turns and c-units. The debate exercise increased the number of words spoken at each turn, the number of words spoken inside each c-unit, and the syntactic complexity. Khaghaninejad (2008) investigated additional evidence that task-based strategies benefit EFL students in developing their speaking skills. The study indicated that task-based techniques work better than conventional ones. Students who received task-based speaking instruction performed better than those who did not. In addition, Wang and Han (2021) evaluated the impact of utilising a mobile language-learning software with a digital game-based curriculum to increase the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of English-language oral production. The outcomes showed that participants increased speech rate, produced more sophisticated monologic speech, and made much less errors. However, while learning a language, students should keep in mind that they are responsible for their own progress. Students should therefore actively participate in speaking class activities in an effort to improve their speaking skills.

This study aims to tackle the field of task-based language acquisition to determine the effects of different types of tasks on students' speaking ability. Furthermore, the study investigates the effectiveness of the task-based technique in addressing challenges with regard to oral language production.

### **Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity**

Since creating something in a foreign language involves numerous distinct components, it is infamously difficult to evaluate the output using a single criterion (Housen et al., 2009; Norris & Ortega, 2009; Pallotti, 2009). In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the

communicative competence concept is used to illustrate the continuum of a person's use of a foreign language (Council of Europe, 2001). This represents a variety of categories and subcategories. Complexity, accuracy, and fluency triangle is a method for evaluating production in a foreign language based on a componential perspective using numerous indicators for each of the three components (Housen et al., 2009; Skehan 2009; Vasylets et al., 2017). The utilisation of several indicators for each component of the complexity, accuracy, and fluency triangle as a benchmark and evaluation tool for foreign language output is an advantage over the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Rosmawati. 2014). This is one of the primary advantages of this triad. Typically, these indicators take the form of numbers or measures. This makes it easier to compare the output of students and to observe how it has evolved over time. Because of this, the complexity, accuracy, and fluency triangle are frequently used in longitudinal research (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Skehan, 2009; Ellis, 2005; Housen et al., 2012) to describe and evaluate the written and spoken production of language learners. Since the purpose of this study was to determine how learners' oral production evolved between the pre- and post-tests, the complexity, accuracy, and fluency triad is a more appropriate measurement tool. Because each component in the triad of complexity, accuracy, and fluency is a quantitative metric, it is more effective to compare the work of students and to monitor how their work evolves over time. The first component of the "trinity" of complexity, accuracy, and fluency is "complexity" (Ellis, 2003), which refers to the breadth and depth of language development. Complexity consists of phonological and morphological complexity beneath the word level, lexical complexity at the word level, and syntactic complexity beyond the word level (Revesz, 2017). Sub-lexical level complexity encompasses aspects such as how words and sound are constructed. The output of a foreign language is frequently judged by the complexity of its lexicon and syntax (Neary-Sundquist, 2017; Treffers-Daller 2013). This paper, therefore, utilised the difficulty of the lexicon and the difficulty of the syntax as metrics of a language's learning difficulties. The researcher measured syntactic complexity using the average number of words per T-unit and lexical complexity using lexical density. The second component of the triangle of complexity, accuracy, and fluency is accuracy which measures the degree to which a language production adheres to particular rules (Pallotti, 2009). The final and third component of the trinity is fluency. This dimension indicates the degree to which the target language closely resembles the target language (Vercellotti, 2017). There are two ways to demonstrate the accuracy of something. One of them examines if a student uses a natural linguistic form. This method is useful for determining the precision of a particular kind of language. The second approach demonstrates its accuracy by comparing its results to those of the first method. The second method examines the overall accuracy of the text and the frequency of errors across a

variety of linguistic criteria (Vercellotti, 2017). The researcher used “accuracy” in its most general sense through utilising the average number of corrections and errors per 100 words as a measure of precision. The third and last component of the trinity of complexity, accuracy, and fluency is fluency, which demonstrates how much automated language development occurs (Wolfe-Quintero, 1998). The time technique to measuring oral production is utilised more frequently than the length approach (Godfrey et al. 2014; Wu, 2013). This is because the length technique to measuring written production is more prevalent. Accordingly, the researcher utilised time-based measures, which covered both speech pace and pause rate.

### **Research questions**

This study aimed to determine the impact of a weekly one-minute speech assignment delivery on the development of English oral output, as measured by the triad of complexity, accuracy, and fluency on pre- and post-tests administered to English language learners at Atomi University who participated in the course for 15 weeks. The paper investigated the following three research questions:

1. How did the level of complexity in the output change between the pre- and post-test?
2. How did the English oral production accuracy change between the pre- and post-test?
3. How did the English oral production’s fluency change between the pre- and post-tests?

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants*

The participants were 28 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in a four-year bachelor’s degree at Atomi University in Japan. All the female participants were lower intermediate learners of English. The education offered at the institution helps to develop women who are independent, capable, and self-reliant, and it also equips them with practical skills.

#### *Research design*

The study was designed to evaluate the same individuals throughout 15-week time. The English oral production of the same participant was measured twice: once at the beginning of the academic semester and once at the end of the same academic semester, using a pre-test and a post-test, respectively.

### *One-minute speech task*

In 1890, William James conducted research on people's perceptions of time. His study revealed that there are sixty seconds in a minute that can define our attention duration. He claimed that anyone can stay conscious for any amount of time between a few seconds and one minute. The idea that one minute is the typical unit of time for measuring mental operations is supported by contemporary functionalist theories of mental capacities and higher-order theories of consciousness.

The vast majority of Japanese students experience social anxiety, which makes it challenging for them to take chances and speak in front of their peers. Japanese students' behavior in the classroom is commonly characterized as unresponsive, passive, shy, unmotivated, and inactive. Japanese students are known for being too critical of themselves. They tend to be hard on themselves for the mistakes they make more than admiring themselves for their success (Kurman et al. (2003). The one-minute speech assignment inspired from a combination of Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP), and Self-disclosure (SD) methods had been designed by the researcher who found that it highly motivates Japanese learners to produce much better-spoken and written output because of the challenging environment, and timed self-generated speeches. Each class began with peer-to-peer evaluation for student written scripts using a rubric included speech writing format, topic sentence, supporting sentences, supporting details, concluding sentences, unity, and accuracy.

### *Graded exposure*

Japanese Karaoke is a form of popular entertainment, originally from Japan, in which recordings of the music but not the words of popular songs are played, so that people can sing the words themselves using a microphone and public address system. At the start of the semester, students were asked to use microphones to amplify all speeches. Graded exposure was carried out in 5 stages, each took 2-3 weeks, depending on the level of classroom anxiety level as follows:

### *Stage 1*

After the peer-to-peer evaluation for student written scripts using the scoring rubric, in classes range from 20-30 students in each class, students delivered their individual speeches by reading aloud their pre-prepared written scripts while sitting in their seats in the classroom. Students delivered different speech each week on a class discussion prompts, demonstrating their ongoing language improvement.

*Stage 2*

Students were asked to read aloud their pre-prepared written speeches while standing next to their seats in the classroom. Standing up for one minute made the student more visible to her classmates and the teacher and gradually provided more confidence to the student.

*Stage 3*

Students were asked to read aloud their pre-prepared written speeches while standing in the teacher position in front of all students in the classroom. Standing up in the teacher position provided signals of leadership to the student subconscious mind. This gradually led to a feeling of excitement and taking control, which in turn triggered the desire to impress her listeners.

*Stage 4*

Students were asked to generate their speeches without reading their scripts and deliver them while standing in the teacher position in front of all students in the classroom using eye contact and body language. However, students could use notes if needed.

*Stage 5*

The microphones provided a feedback loop through Q&A with the teacher and other students in two minutes time after each speech that helped students to monitor themselves and others as speakers and listeners and behave individually and together in ways, they feel focused and productive discussions possible.

The graded exposure phases of the lesson plan boosted the students' levels of self-confidence. The smallest details must be carefully attended to, and students must learn to work independently. When speaking about themselves in front of their students, they want to come across as knowledgeable, capable, and competent. They are motivated to take the desired action as a result. The exercises make use of the idea of task diversity and create links between classroom-based instruction and learning that students begin on their own. The objective is to persuade the student that she should tell herself, "I'm delighted that my teacher and classmates listen to me, read my comments and postings, and appreciate them. They enable me to express who I am. Therefore, I'll show them the best of my ability."

**Data collection**

Using a longitudinal within-subject design, each participant took a test both before and after the study. After outlining the aims of the study to the students at the beginning of the academic year, the researchers asked the students whether they would be interested in participating in their own time. The level of oral production at the start of the semester could be evaluated by conducting the pre-test individually to each student during the first week of class. Throughout the fifteenth week, the researcher recorded their speeches so he could review them later.

**Data analysis**

After listening to the audio recordings, a transcript was created. Both the audio files and the transcripts were coded according to how challenging the language was to comprehend, how well it was spoken, and how well it flowed. The researcher analysed both syntactic and lexical difficulties, as described previously. The researcher chose the mean number of words per T-unit to evaluate the syntactic complexity of the scripts as opposed to more technical measures, such as the number of independent, coordinate, or subordinate sentences (Norris & Ortega, 2009; De Clerc & Housen, 2017), which are most commonly used to evaluate written scripts. Previous research represented the proportion of independent, coordinate, and subordinate clauses (Norris & Ortega, 2009; De Clerc & Housen, 2017). The researcher utilized Sentence Extractor to calculate the average number of words per T-unit. A T-unit consists of an independent clause and any dependent (subordinate) clauses or non-clausal structures that are attached or included. The complexity of the syntax increases when there are more disparaging terms per T-unit. To measure the difficulty of word interpretation, the researcher examined lexical density. Lexical density refers to the ratio of lexical terms to the total number of words produced by learners (Jarvis, 2013). If the lexical density value is high, the speaker's vocabulary is likely to be extremely complex. To evaluate accuracy, both the average number of corrections per 100 words and the average number of errors per 100 words were utilised. The average number of repairs per 100 words was determined by tallying the total number of corrections, dividing by the total number of words in the oral production, and multiplying by 100. According to the reference, there are five primary forms of repairs: reformulation, replacement, repetition, false start, and hesitation (Foster & Skehan, 1996). Reformulating something entails utilising the same phrase or clause but rearranging its components. The process of exchanging one phrase or clause with another is referred to as "replacement." Repetition is the repeated use of the same word or phrase without alteration. When a phrase or clause is absent from the beginning of a sentence and is substituted by another phrase or clause, the sentence is said to have a "false start." Hesitating is the practice of



repeating the same phoneme or syllable within a single word when speaking slowly.

The researcher determined the average number of errors per 100 words by dividing the overall number of errors by the total number of words in the speech and then multiplying the result by 100. The phrase structure and word selection were both improper. The typical number of corrections and errors per one hundred words could be used to evaluate the oral production’s accuracy. Using the audio files and the application Cool Edit Professional 2.0, the researcher was able to conduct a fluency study by encoding the speech rate and the average duration of pauses. As a measure of speaking rate, the number of words per minute was utilised. This number was obtained by dividing the total number of words by the length of the speech in a minute. The speaker speaks with greater fluency if the speech rate score is greater. Calculating the average duration of each pause in the discourse would yield the mean duration of pauses in a discourse. The duration was then stated in seconds. When the average pause time increased, the speaker’s voice sounded less genuine. A pause is defined as any pause that occurs in the middle of a sentence or between sentences and lasts for at least one second. Considering how proficiently the participants spoke English, it was concluded that one second was a suitable amount of time. The researcher entered the coded data into SPSS 22 and ran paired sample t-tests on it to evaluate whether there were any differences between the pre-test and post-test.

Table 1. Results including paired sample t-tests.

		pre-test		post-test		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
		M	SD	M	SD		
complexity	mean words per T-unit	11.88	2.93	15.57	4.13	-4.87	.00
	lexical density	0.47	0.07	0.50	0.07	-2.25	.03
accuracy	repairs per 100 words	6.17	3.78	5.51	2.34	1.00	.32
	errors per 100 words	8.24	2.75	5.97	2.74	4.37	.00
fluency	speech rate (per minute)	45.98	14.38	60.83	15.45	-5.12	.00
	mean length of pauses (second)	3.74	2.08	3.08	2.15	1.22	.25

**Results**

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and the outcomes of the paired sample t-tests. According to the results of the paired sample t-tests, the average number of words on the post-test (M = 15.57, SD = 4.13) was significantly higher than on the pre-test (M = 11.88, SD = 2.93);  $t(1, 29) = -4.87, p < .01$ . This was revealed by comparing the pre-test and post-test. This shows that after 15 weeks of practicing

one-minute presentations, students were able to construct sentences with more English words in the same amount of time. Similarly, the researcher found that the lexical density was significantly higher in the post-test ( $M = 0.50$ ,  $SD = 0.07$ ) than in the pre-test ( $M = 0.47$ ,  $SD = 0.07$ ),  $t(1, 29) = -2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ . This was proved by the fact that the density of the pre-lexical test was lower than that of the post-test. Concerning the two accuracy indices, the researcher found that the participants produced less mistakes in the post-production ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = 2.74$ ) than in the pre-production ( $M = 6.17$ ,  $SD = 3.78$ ). However, the number of repairs per 100 words did not differ between the pre- and post-tests,  $t(1, 29) = 1.00$ ,  $p < .33$ .

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine what would occur if each English class at Atomi University obliged students to present a one-minute speech. This was accomplished by comparing the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of English language learners' speech before and after fifteen weeks course. After 15 weeks of speech delivery practice, the researcher noticed that not only was Atomi students' spoken language more complex, but it also contained more content words than at the beginning of the semester. Speaking is a difficult skill that requires a great deal of practice to acquire if it is not innate. As a short-term goal and as a long-term approach for enhancing all aspects of their speech and language, students can benefit from practicing short speech delivery in the classroom. It should be noticed that the participants' frequency of grammatical errors was substantially lower than average, which is a signal of accuracy. The researcher found that participants were more adept at using correct sentence structures and propositions that followed verbs, matching subjects, and verbs, and consistently employing various tenses. They were also able to explain their views more effectively since they picked suitable vocabulary. The participants did not, however, repair less frequently while speaking in one minute. This may be due to the fact that people have not yet established a series of steps from their declarative knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, it is difficult to multitask when speaking, as this requires rapid retrieval of relevant information and maintenance of working memory for vocabulary, grammar, and/or other abilities (Kormos, 2014). This study hypothesized that some of our participants at Atomi University could still struggle to retrieve relevant linguistic sources from long-term memory. It is also likely that they made some mistakes when they first attempted to use their language skills to form a phrase in speech, which they later fixed when they tried again and again. Due to the fact that the majority of participants learned English in formal classroom settings with the assistance of direct instruction. In this type of learning environment, the process of proceduralization of declarative linguistic information and decreasing repair rates typically

takes longer. Extending the length of treatment could be sufficient to lend support to this notion (e.g., one year). Only the speaking rate changed significantly between the pre-test and post-test, according to the classroom observations. After 15 weeks of delivering a one-minute speech in every class, this revealed that students were able to express the same tale in English more quickly. However, the average duration of a pause remained unchanged. Participants exerted great mental effort when speaking English aloud. Consequently, the amount of time required to transform concepts into English grammatical rules remained consistent.

Due to the lack of opportunities to speak English outside class, the participants often began their statements in Japanese before translating them into English. This occasionally resulted in extended pauses. Using a one-minute speech task in each class improved Japanese English language learners' oral production in English in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency, although the degree of progress in each of these areas varied. Japanese students need additional opportunities to practice speaking English because they normally study the language in classrooms with insufficient input and output opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

This research does not qualify as an experimental study, as its main purpose was to assist students in enhancing their oral proficiency in English. The study found that gradually and consistently confronting anxieties using two strategies from behavioural psychology was an effective method to conquer phobias and overcome language anxiety. The two techniques used to enhance the speaking fluency, accuracy, and complexity of EFL students at Atomi University in one semester are Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) and Self-Disclosure (SD) Graded Exposure phases. The one-minute speech task, assigned to students in every class, offers them the chance to practice English speaking skills at their convenience outside of class, with the aim of preparing them for delivering speeches in class. Therefore, it can serve as a supplementary tool to enhance students' learning beyond the classroom. By including the one-minute speaking assignment into each lesson, language students develop the ability to communicate with greater accuracy and fluency.

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