



Revisiting the Impact of 4/3/2 and 3/3/3 Tasks on Learners' Speaking Performance and Development: A Learner's Perspective

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Introduction

Fluency development is among the four essential strands of a language course, which involves "making the best use of what is already known" (Macalister & Nation, 2010, p. 93). With features that meet conditions for fluency development to occur, the 4/3/2 and 3/3/3 speaking tasks are believed to foster not only learners' fluency but also accuracy and complexity (Boers, 2014). With the aim to investigate the effectiveness of the two in-class speaking activities through the perspective of a language learner, the current study was conducted at a high school in Singapore where an international student at the junior high level volunteered to participate. This report seeks to address the following questions:

1. Does increasing time pressure foster fluency over and above same task repetition under constant-time conditions?
2. Does increasing time pressure compromise more improvements in accuracy and self-correction of errors than same task repetition alone?
3. What is the perception of the learner towards the 4/3/2 and 3/3/3 speaking tasks?

Literature Review

Fluency in speaking is the ultimate goal of many second language learners since it is commonly considered a trait of a proficient speaker (Guillot, 1999; Sanborn & Nation, 1997). As a result, communicative approaches, like Automatization in Communicative Contexts of Essential Speech Segments methodology (ACCESS) or communicative language teaching (CLT), that aim to promote learners' fluency development have been given much attention in many language classrooms, and teachers are believed to play an important role in providing opportunities for learners to promote fluency (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). In this regard, fluency, according to Molina and Briesmaster (2017), is described as the ability to "make the most effective use of what is already known, and is usually measured in terms of rate and lack of hesitation" (p. 3). In other words, the term "fluency" refers to the flow and smoothness of delivery and the capability to be able to express thoughts easily and emphasize meaning over form (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011). As Nation (2018) highlights, for its essential role in a well-balanced language course, fluency development tasks, therefore, should be done and integrated properly.

With regard to its importance, a wide range of research has been conducted to explore strategies and techniques to develop speaking fluency language for learners, namely “rehearsal talk”, “ask and answer”, and notably the 4/3/2 and 3/3/3 technique (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Devised by Maurice (1983) and widely advocated by many studies (Boers, 2014), the 4/3/2 technique is a classroom activity aimed to provide L2 learners with oral fluency practice. In this activity, students are asked to deliver a 4-minute talk, then switch partners and perform a 3-minute talk and 2-minute talk on the same topic sequentially. In a study on the 4/3/2 technique, Nation (1989) found that throughout the repetition of the same topic under shrinking time conditions, there is an increase in speech rate, a decrease in the number of false starts and hesitation items, and remarkably, there is an increase in grammatical complexity. With the increasing time pressure and repetition of the monologue, the task is believed to foster not only verbal fluency but also other performance aspects, such as syntactic complexity and accuracy (Thai & Boers, 2016).

Derived from the 4/3/2 activity, however, with its “time pressure” characteristic removed, the 3/3/3 speaking activity, or same task repetition is an activity in which students are asked to give a 3-minute talk to a partner, then switch and repeat it to two other partners under the same task conditions. Supported by findings on the increase in syntactic complexity through task repetition (Bygate, 2001), Van de Guchte et al. (2016) argue that through the repetition of a similar task, this approach can effectively promote learners’ acquisition of grammatical structures since the familiarity with the content through the first performance would allow them to pay more attention to its correct formulation in the second and third iteration. In studies by De Jong and Perfetti (2011) and Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011), the role of same task repetition is underscored as it was found to promote learners’ oral fluency.

Despite its roles in facilitating the development of learners’ speaking performance, there is considerable variability among these studies in terms of its effect on learners’ development of fluency, syntactic complexity and accuracy (De Jong & Tillman, 2018). Thus, the present study examines and compares the impact of increasing time pressure (4/3/2 task) and same task repetition (3/3/3 task) to a learner’s development of speaking fluency and accuracy.

Methodology

Participants

The voluntary participant in this study was a fifteen-year-old female student from China. She moved to Singapore one year ago with her family and is now pursuing the A-level programme at a junior high school in Singapore. At the time of the study, the participant had been learning English for more than seven years. On average, she receives six hours of formal English instruction per week at school. Before taking part in the 3/3/3 and 4/3/2 activities, she had no prior experience of these two tasks. According to the student’s response, this is the first time she had participated in these tasks since the most common speaking activities that she often has in class are presentations and group discussion activities.

Research design

With the goal to avoid and minimise the practice effect between the two speaking tasks, the present study was organised into two separate sessions which were one week apart. The first session was used to conduct the 3/3/3 activity and the second session was for the 4/3/2 activity. The preference for this order found its support from findings reported by De Jong (2012), which further furnished by Boers (2014) with empirical evidence, on the effect of the 4/3/2 task in facilitating practice in producing long monologues and pushing learners’ speech rate significantly more than same task repetition. Thus, the exposure of the participant to the 4/3/2 task at the outset of this study was avoided to minimise the practice effect that the 4/3/2 would transfer to the 3/3/3 task if it was organised in the first session.

Tasks

In determining the topic for each speaking activity, the topics were chosen on the basis that it would be familiar and stress-free to avoid content burden for the speaker. Thus, the topics for the 3/3/3 and 4/3/2 tasks were “*What are your dreams for the future?*” and “*How do you see the world in the future?*” respectively. For these two topics, it was believed that these topics had met the mentioned criteria. As the questions were in the simple future tense, the grammatical complexity was minimised for the sake of the participant.

At the end of each speaking activity, a stimulated recall interview session was conducted to gain insight into the participant’s experience and perception towards task repetition. A typical interview lasts approximately 10 minutes. Together with the participant’s task performances, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Description of data analysis

In analysing the changes in fluency between speech deliveries of the participant, three benchmarks were applied in this study. This first benchmark is dysfluency phenomena (or hesitations) which, according to (Boers, 2014), includes “false starts (e.g., speci...specific), repairs or self-correction, (e.g., the second...no, the third) and redundant repetitions (e.g., they didn’t want...they didn’t want to), and with the indication of conspicuous silent and filled pauses (e.g., um...) (Boers, 2014). In analysing the amount of time regarded as dysfluencies phenomena, the speech analysis software Praat (www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat; Boersma & Weenink, 2013, as cited in Thai & Boers, 2016, p. 376) was used to estimate the total seconds of dysfluencies. Besides, the trimmed speech rate, including the number of meaningful syllables per minute (spm) and words per minute (wpm) was used as the second and third benchmark to determine fluency. The Syllable Count programme (www.syllablecount.com) was used to calculate the respective data. On the other hand, accuracy was measured by the number of errors that emerged during the delivery of the two speaking tasks.

Results

Fluency

Table 1 illustrates the evaluation of speech fluency performance throughout the three iterations in the constant-time conditions in comparison with that of speech deliveries in shrinking-time conditions.

TABLE 1
The Evolution of the Learner’s Speech Fluency Performance

	Constant time 3/3/3 task			Shrinking time 4/3/2 task		
	1 st – 3	2 nd – 3	3 rd – 3	1 st – 4	2 nd – 3	3 rd – 2
Trimmed speech rate as number of syllables per minute (spm)	105 spm	127.7 spm	117.3 spm	82.5 spm	105.7 spm	133.5 spm
Trimmed speech rate as number of words per minute (wpm)	78 wpm	92 wpm	86.3 wpm	55.75 wpm	73.3 wpm	93 wpm
Dysfluencies (or hesitations) as number of dysfluencies seconds (ds)	37.25 ds	31.2 ds	34.36 ds	112.43 ds	73.61 ds	31.95 ds

The results for fluency measures show a significant increase in the number of syllabus per minute (spm) produced in the first, second and third delivery of the monologue in both constant-time and shirking-time conditions. In the constant-time condition, from 105 spm in the first delivery, the speech rate of the speaker increased roughly 21.6% (127.7 spm) in the second, yet only 11.7% (117.3 spm) in the third iteration compared to the first delivery. This trend is also parallel with the number of words per minute (wpm), which increased from 78 wpm to over 92 wpm in the second and to 86.3 wpm in the third speech. At the same time, the dysfluency time also declined from 37.25s in the first speech to only 31.2s in the second then rose slightly to 34.36s in the last delivery. Among the three iterations, the second speech was seen as the most fluent performance in this condition.

Regarding shrinking-time condition, there was a steady enhancement in the speech rate of the learner as the time decreased. Initially, her speech rate was considerably low with only 82.5 spm and 55.75 wpm in the first performance. In the second delivery, however, this speech rate rose gradually to over 105.7 spm and 73.3 wpm, and significantly, to 133.5 spm and 93 wpm in the third delivery. In line with this increase, the speaker showed a lot of hesitations in the first delivery with 112.43s dysfluency time, which declined to 73.61s in the second and then to only 31.95s in the final speech. Thus, it demonstrates that the shrinking-time condition led to an increase in speech rate in the 4/3/2 activity over and above the task repetition alone.

Accuracy

The 3/3/3 task

Table 2 illustrates the variation of errors in the constant-time condition.

TABLE 2
Variation of Errors in the Constant-Time Condition

	1 st speech	2 nd speech	3 rd speech
	...to....do better <u>academically</u> (morphological error)	...to <u>achieve well</u> in academy	... to <u>do well in academic</u> ... to <u>achieve better academically</u> (morphological error)
	My parents have <a> <u>great hope in me</u>	My parents have <a> great hope in me	My parents have <a> great hope in me
		I am the <u>proud</u> of (new error)	I am the <u>proud</u> of
		<u>My grandpa</u> ... it is not convenient to bring <u>them</u> (new error)	(avoided)
		I can feel <u>the confident</u> (new error)	I can feel very confident (self corrected)
	I <u>very like</u> dancing	... and can make me feel very good (no subject)	When dancing and stretching, it is very comfortable
	stretching...I can feel very comfortable		
No. of total errors	4	6	4
No. of new errors	0	3	0
No. of self-corrected errors	0	0	1

The findings on the accuracy aspect in this activity show that although there was a variation in the number of errors with new and self-corrected errors in each iteration, there was almost no improvement through repetition alone. From four errors in the first speech, this number sharply increased to six errors in total with three new errors occurring and one false expression avoided in the second delivery. Regarding the last iteration, there was an attempt by the speaker to diminish the number of errors as there were only four mistakes with no new mistakes made. Besides, there was also one self-corrected error and

one avoided error. All in all, the 3/3/3 task does not appear to show any enhancement through iteration of the same talk.

The 4/3/2 task

Table 3 illustrates the variation of errors in each iteration under the shrinking-time condition.

TABLE 3
Variation of Errors in the Shrinking-time Condition

	1 st speech	2 nd speech	3 rd speech
	...environment <u>will better</u>	...environment <u>will better</u>	...environment will become better <i>(self corrected)</i>
	Water and air <u>are become</u> less clean	I hope that the air will be <u>more cleaner</u>	...will become cleaner and fresher <i>(self corrected)</i>
	...should <u>react</u> with family members <i>(inappropriate word choice: react vs interact)</i>	...should <u>react</u> with others <i>(inappropriate word choice: react vs interact)</i>	... <u>react</u> more with family members <i>(inappropriate word choice: react vs interact)</i>
No. of total errors	3	3	1
No. of new errors	0	0	0
No. of self-corrected errors	0	0	2

When it comes to the shrinking-time condition, it is worth mentioning that the number of errors significantly declined in this task, especially in the last iteration (the 2-minute talk). In the first 4- and 3-minute delivery, there were no signs of self-correction, and the number of errors remained at three in total. However, during the 2-minute delivery, a great effort was made on the part of the student in self-correcting previous mistakes and thus, reducing the total number of errors to one only.

As a result, the 4/3/2 task indicated more improvements and more instances of self-correction in errors than repetition alone.

Discussion

Fluency

For the first research question, results showed positive effects of task repetition in fostering the development of the learner’ oral fluency, regardless of constant or shrinking time conditions. This finding shows remarkable consistency with previous studies by Boers (2014) which demonstrate that the repetition of monologues in constant-time and shrinking-time conditions are effective approaches to enhance learners’ speech rate. At the same time, it provides further empirical evidence for Nation (1989)’s claim about the role of task repetition in fostering the speakers’ fluency. As revealed by the learner after completing the 3/3/3 task:

I think my performance was getting better... In the first speech, I think I stopped so many times and I made a little bit messy logically but later, I organized my words better and spoke more fluently. I think I improved as I have less pauses in my second and third speech.

While the last delivery of the 4/3/2 task produced a 13.8% faster speech rate than that of the 3/3/3, it suggests the shrinking-time condition as in the 4/3/2 activity could foster oral fluency over and above the

same task repetition. Thus, the data support findings on the effectiveness of the 4/3/2 activity at stimulating faster speech (Boers, 2014; Thai & Boers, 2016). According to Nation (1989), the 4/3/2 technique gives learners the opportunity to perform at a higher level which eventually, “results in an improvement to their normal level of performance” (Nation, 1989, p. 383).

Accuracy

The findings on the accuracy showed a great decline in the total number of errors in the 4/3/2 activity compared to that of the 3/3/3 task. In other words, it implies that under the shrinking-time condition, learners could gain more oral accuracy compared to the constant-time condition. Further support for this finding is found in studies by Nation (1989) and Arevart and Nation (1991) in which it was proved that the 4/3/2 activity may result in a reduction of errors even though it was designed to bring about an increase in fluency. In justifying this result, Bygate (1999) claimed that “since learners are already familiar with the message content, they have ample time (and attentional resources) to shift their attention from content to the selection and monitoring of appropriate language which results in more fluency, complexity and accuracy” (Bygate, 1999, as cited in Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2011, p. 40). From another viewpoint, Nation and Newton (2009) state that as the ease increases with which learners make use of what they know, they would be able to give more attention to the details and quality of their speech. Interestingly, this coincides with the participant’s statement in the interview session:

... During the first stage or the 4-minute one, I spent a lot of time thinking about what ideas I have...So in the second one, I could elaborate and just speak them out ... The three- and two-minutes talks were better because I didn't stop for a very long time. And my words were more organized. After the first one, I learnt how to summarise a little bit ... When it comes to the last speech, I am more confident because I know what to say

While this small-scale exploratory study indicates an improvement in accuracy in both shrinking compared to constant time condition, there remain controversial results regarding the gain in this aspect. For instance, in a study by Thai and Boers (2016), no significant changes in terms of accuracy were found among twenty Vietnamese EFL students in both the shrinking and constant time conditions, or as reported by Skehan and Foster (1999) and Boers (2014), while the number of errors increased in the shrinking-time condition, accuracy appears to decrease in the constant-time condition under the trade-off effect. According to Van de Guchte et al. (2016), this variability in results may involve a range of factors which include task type and the time interval between iterations. As a result, this suggests the need for further wide-scale research to be conducted in the future.

Learner’s Preference

Despite the positive outcomes of the 4/3/2 task, it was remarkable that the 3/3/3 activity was preferred by the student to the 4/3/2 activity. In explaining the preference, the speaker said:

The 3/3/3 makes me feel more secure because I already practised the same speech for 2 times, and I think it will be easier if I practice the same speech many times. Maybe, if there are more activities like this, it can help a lot, I think.

Besides, she believes that the 3/3/3 did not only allow her to organise her words better but also improve the accuracy and lessen pauses in her second and third speeches. According to Ellis (2003), this preference might be explained by the fact that “when learners already know what they are going to talk about, they have more processing space for formulating the language needed to express their ideas with

the result that the quantity of the output will be enhanced and also the fluency and complexity” (Ellis, 2003, pp. 246–247).

Limitations

As a small-scale exploratory study with the participation of only one learner, the author acknowledges that there are limitations in this study and any conclusions drawn from the findings presented here are of necessity tentative. Besides, it is worth mentioning that although the activities took place in a relatively quiet classroom, there was unexpected aircraft noise that could have impacted the participant’s attention and oral performance. Last but not least, another limitation to be acknowledged is that, even though the topics for the two activities were crafted to be open and stress-free, 4/3/2 task’s topic – “How do you see the world in the future?” could have been seen as a challenge for the student since this topic would be unrelated to her. As a result, these limitations became factors that could have affected the learner’s performance.

Implications and Conclusion

Through a minor study on the roles of 4/3/2 and 3/3/3 speaking activities on a learner’s oral performance and development, the study implies an essential need for ESL teachers to create a wide range of opportunities for students to develop their oral fluency through task repetition. As from the viewpoint of the participant in the current report, she believes that:

If I can use this kind of training well, or if I can do this in every lesson I think it would be much better as I could help me a lot. Maybe at first when I cannot speak English well, then I would prefer the 3/3/3 and as I become more proficient, I would try the 4/3/2.

According to Boers (2014), teachers can make simple modifications to the 4/3/2 and 3/3/3 activities to apply in their classroom context or reduce the activity to two deliveries of the same talk to encourage improvement at the level of accuracy. With its great impact in fostering learners’ oral fluency, the author suggests the use and adaptation of different forms of task repetition to develop other skills. For instance, teachers may integrate 3/2/1 reading techniques in reading lessons to enhance learners’ reading fluency. In this activity, students are asked to read a passage in three minutes, then two minutes, and finally in only one minute. This, according to Molina and Briesmaster (2017) could help students improve their fluency in reading or their pronunciation.

In conclusion, this study has investigated the effect that repetition and time pressure have on subsequent deliveries of a talk. The findings revealed that shrinking-time conditions did not only led to the increase in oral fluency in the 4/3/2 activity over and above repetition alone but also enhanced the speaking accuracy of the learner. The results obtained through this investigation can be useful for teachers who would like to explore the same topics in their own contexts. Thus, teachers may be inspired to come up with further effective strategies to facilitate language learners’ fluency and accuracy development.

The Author

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