Fluency versus Accuracy within the Libyan Context of English Language Teaching

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Abstract

All through my long experience of teaching English as a foreign language, there is a problem that I always have to deal with in interacting with my students. That problem is the misconception that so many of my students have. It is the understanding that being fluent means being a good user of English. This type of students are faced with another type of students who believe that being accurate is the name of the game in English language learning. Needless to say that both types of students are equally wrong in their assumptions.

This article tries to correct the said assumptions by clarifying the complementary nature of the two elements of fluency and accuracy. After a brief introduction, the article comes in three sections:

Section One: This section is merely an attempt to review the versatile definitions of the two elements of fluency and accuracy as presented by different leading authorities in the field of English language teaching.

Section Two: This section discusses the importance of fluency and accuracy in any language/ learning process as well as showing the complementary nature of the two elements.

Section Three: As the discussion developed in sections one and two, it became obvious that the two elements of fluency and accuracy must be treated in a tandem manner which means that you cannot have one without the other. This brought me face-to-face with the need for striking a balance between the two elements. Up until this stage, the third section was intended to be allocated to the issue of carrying out the needed change so that striking the balance becomes feasible. The required change proved to be of a great magnitude. The result was a complete change of the structure of this article. The initial plan was to conclude the article with a suggestion on how to strike the balance. This proved to be not proper due to the said magnitude of the change; therefore I sufficed with discussing and proving the importance of striking the required balance between fluency and accuracy without touching on planning and implementing the said change. Consequently, a package of three articles needs to be finished before touching on the issue of striking the said balance. The hoped articles would be on 'What' needs to be changed, 'Who' is going to be the agent of the change, and "How' is the change going to be implemented.

الطلاقة والدقة: ما المفقود؟

ملخص المقالة باللغة العربية

خلال تجربتي الطويلة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية بصفتها لغة أجنبية كان على دائماً التعامل مع مشكلة كنت أواجهها أثناء تعاملي مع طلابي. لقد كانت تلك المشكلة الاعتقاد الخاطئ لدى العديد من الطلبة بأنك إذا كنت طليقاً أثناء تحدثك فذلك يعنى بأنك مستعملاً جيداً لتلك اللغة، يقابل هذا النوع من الطلبة نوع آخر يعتقد من جانبه بأنه إذا كنت دقيقاً في استعمال قواعد تلك اللغة، فذلك يعنى بأنك مستعمل جيد للغة، وبالطبع ليس هناك حاجة للقول بأنّ كلا الفئتين مخطئة في اعتقادها.

يحاول هذا المقال تصحيح الاعتقادات المذكورة عن طريق توضيح الطبيعة التكاملية بين عنصري الطلاقة والدقة.

وبعد مقدمة بسيطة ينقسم المقال إلى ثلاثة أبواب:

الباب الأول: هذا الباب هو مجرد محاولة للنظر في التعريفات المتنوعة لعنصري الدقة والطلاقة لدى العديد من الخبراء في مجال تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية.

الباب الثاني: يناقش هذا الباب أهمية عنصري الدقة والطلاقة في أي عملية تتعلق بتدريس اللغة وتعلمها، إضافة لشرح الطبيعة التكاملية بين العنصرين المذكورين.

الباب الثالث: أثناء النقاش في البابين الأول والثاني أصبح واضحاً بأن عنصري الطلاقة والدقة يجب معاملتهما بصفتهما عنصرين متلازمين، إذ ليس من الممكن أخذ أحدهما وإغفال الآخر؛ مما جعلني أواجه مشكلة مفادها أنه لابد من إيجاد توازن بين الاثنين.

إلى غاية هذه المرحلة من المقا ل كان الباب الثالث مخصصاً لمسالة القيام بالتغيير اللازم ليصبح إحداث التوازن اللازم بين عنصري الدقة والطلاقة أمراً ممكناً. لقد ثبت بأنّ التغيير المطلوب أكبر حجماً مما كان متصوّراً وكانت النتيجة هي إحداث تغيير كامل في بنية هذا المقال. لقد كانت الخطة المبدئية إنهاء المقال باقتراح كيفية الوصول إلى التوازن المطلوب، ولكن تبيّن بأنّ ذلك لن يكون أمراً صحيحاً بالنظر لحجم التغيير اللازم، ولقد اكتفيت بمناقشة وإثبات أهمية ذلك التغيير دون الخوض في كيفية إحداثه، وكانت النتيجة ضرورة إعداد حزمة بحثية تتكون من مقالات ثلاثة قبل الخوض في مسألة إحداث التغيير، ومن المأمول أن تكون المقالات الثلاثة كالآتي: "ما الذى يجب أن يتغير؟"، "من يقوم بالتغيير؟"، و"كيف ينفذ التغيير؟"

The Article

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Introduction

During my long years of teaching English as a foreign language, I always had to deal with a misconception that so many of my students had. It is the belief that fluency means success in language learning. I always questioned this belief and tried to find a means to convince my students that, while being a very positive quality to have, fluency is not the name of the game in language learning. On the other hand, I always find students who suffice with accuracy as it is what they need most when dealing with their mostly grammar-based written examinations. As a result of their success with their examinations , those learners believe that mastery of grammar means mastery of language use in general. Consequently, this type of students tend to remain silent within the classroom fearing not making mistakes but being so mechanical, so slow, so artificial, and hesitant in their production of the spoken language. Naturally, both types of learners have an obvious handicap in language use. The fact remains that both fluency and accuracy are vital components of any foreign language teaching/learning process. The prominence of accuracy and fluency does not stem from their scientific status within the language syllabus but rather from the real use of the target language due to the fact that perhaps the most striking characteristics of language use are fluency and accuracy. The first judgment a listener usually makes about a given speaker is whether the language of such a speaker is fluent and accurate or not.

To relate what is said above to the field of language teaching and learning, we, experienced teachers, cannot overlook the fact that foreign language users are mostly the out-product of language teaching institutions. Consequently, the controversial issues of accuracy and fluency should be put in the proper context of language teaching and
learning.

We have to find the proper and realistic answer to the following question ‘Should our out-product (graduates) be fluent or accurate users of language or both?’ Certainly, the ideal situation is producing, through the language teaching/learning process, users who are both fluent and accurate. This ideal situation is a direct contrast with what takes place in the day-to-day teaching as most teachers, driven by the fact that the centralized examinations are mostly grammar based, find it easier and more fruitful to teach grammatical rules in isolation of proper and real language use especially the spoken form.

Those two contrasting images in language teaching and learning brought me face-to-face with a problem of a balance that teachers have to strike in their day-to-day teaching; that is the balance between fluency and accuracy. That is not an easy task to carry out as most teachers face the dilemma of choosing between the two elements instead of searching for a way to strike a balance between them.

This, of course, means a balanced input must be provided to our students, that is dealing with the problem of concentrating either on grammarful teaching or fluency oriented teaching. However, before going any further, let us define the two conflicting terms of fluency and accuracy.

Section One: Definition of terms

1.1 Fluency

Raine (2011, p.1) says that "fluency is the area of language ability which relates to the speed and ease with which a language learner performs in one of the four core language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing." He continues to emphasize that "although the concept of fluency relates to all four language skills, it tends to be most closely associated with speaking."

According to Brumfit (1984, p. 56) fluency should be regarded as "natural language use." A view echoed by Richards, et al (1985, p. 108) who view fluency as one of the features which "give speech the qualities of being natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing ,rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions." Lennon (1992, p. 388) gives two contrasting views of what fluency is, a broad one and a narrow one. The broad one is "a cover term for oral proficiency". The narrow definition of fluency is that fluency is "one, presumably isolatable, component of oral proficiency." Richards et al (1985, p.109) view fluency in contrast to accuracy. A view that refers to "the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently." They go on to define fluency as the ability to:

- Produce written and/or spoken language with ease.

- speak with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary, and grammar.

- communicate ideas effectively.

- produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication.

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p.12) define fluency as the "production of language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation."

Summing up the above-stated definitions of fluency, one can conclude that fluency is all about producing language with ease, smoothness, and natural flow.

1.2 Accuracy

Generally speaking, fluency is usually associated with grammaticality, that means the user's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences in a natural use of language. Taken from this side, accuracy is whether or not the language users make mistakes, a view that can be subjected to criticism for overlooking accuracy in other uses of the language being used.

As stated in the British Council's website 'teachingenglish.org.uk' accuracy is used as a reference to how correct is the learner's use of the system of the language. The British Council's definition of accuracy is broader than many other definitions as it includes the correct use of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Another definition is found in the Oxford Dictionary which sees accuracy as " the quality or state of being correct or precise". This definition does not specify or state whether the notion of accuracy includes language uses other than the spoken one. However, taking the quality of the said dictionary in mind, one would better take such a definition with its totality which means including all possible aspects of the uses of language. Taking this line of totality, Cotter (2013:1) states that accuracy refers to the following mechanics of language use:

- Clear and articulate speaking or writing.

- Language free from grammar mistakes.

- Words spelled and/or pronounced correctly.

- Language appropriate to the situation and/or context.

Canale and Swain (1980, p.30) put accuracy within a frame which they call grammatical competence which "refers to the ability to use the language correctly, how well a person has learned features and rules of the language. This includes vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence formation. How well does the learner understand the grammar of English? Teachers call this accuracy in language use." As cited by Widdowson (2007, p.20) Hymes, on his side, refers to accuracy as "What is formally possible."

The above definitions of fluency and accuracy give us a clear understanding of what is meant by each term within the framework of this article. Since the main target of is article is to shed some light on finding a balance between fluency and accuracy in our day-to-day teaching, one would suffice

with the above-stated definitions and turn the attention to highlighting the importance of the said two elements.

2.1 Importance of Fluency and Accuracy

As stated earlier, both fluency and accuracy are essential components of any language teaching/learning process. They are seen by many language teachers and syllabus designers as inseparable as none of them can function without the other. By this, it is meant that anyone of them functioning without the other would be defective. Regardless of this fact, history of language teaching tells us that some early language teaching methods tended to emphasize one of the two at the expense of the other and rarely emphasized both of them. As an example of this, as stated by Cook (2001), the Grammar Translation Method focused on the language form and translation, so accuracy was paramount.

For the sake of laying the ground for viewing the two elements of fluency and accuracy as inseparable and vital components of any language teaching/learning program, let us, very briefly, shed some light on the importance of each of
them.

2.2 Importance of Grammar

Before starting to demonstrate the importance of grammar, we have to make it clear that accuracy as an element in language teaching and learning is usually closely associated with grammar and that is why the above subtitle 'the importance of grammar' was chosen for this section of the article. Swan (2006) states that despite the immense amount of academic work done in the field of first and second language acquisition, there is little that we know on how languages are learned and can best be taught. Swan (2006, p.1) goes on to say "this is nowhere more true than in the area of grammar. The trouble with teaching grammar is that we are never quite sure whether it works or not: its effects are uncertain and hard to assess." However; regardless of the touch of doubt the reader may feel on the importance of teaching grammar as a result of Swan's words, Swan (2006, p.1) himself continues to conclude by stating that "without further argument, … we need to teach grammar." Having asserted the need for teaching grammar, Swan (ibid.) goes on to touch the issue from a different angle when he says (If this so, what exactly should we teach, how much priority should we give it, and how should we teach it Swan (2006, p.1). This point will be addressed under the subtitle 'Striking the Balance' later on.

Another authority in the field, Cook (1994) follows the same route of argument as Swan (2006). Cook (1994:10) states that for many language learners and teachers, grammar (has had a bad press for many years." They view it as a boring component of any given target language taught as a school subject. For language learners in particular "It is associated with the despised use of 'formal' grammar and the learning by heart of paradigms and rules with innumerable exceptions." Cook (1994:10). However; having stated the unpopularity of grammar, Cook (Ibid.1) emphasizes how crucial grammar is when he says that for many people who work in the field of linguistics, grammar

is "the most exciting area of language." Swan (2006) on his part, following shedding some doubt on whether we need grammar or not, concludes as stated above when he confirms that we need to teach grammar.

Another assertion of the importance of grammar comes from Greenbaum and Nelson (2002. P.3) who say "linguistic communications are channeled mainly through our senses of sound and sight. Grammar is the central component of language. It mediates between the system of sounds or of written symbol, on the one hand, and the system of meaning, on the other."

Of course, the issue regarding the importance of grammar can be elaborated further and further. However; due to constraints of time and space, one can suffice with the above-stated views and safely concludes that the issue of the importance of grammar can, very rarely, be questioned.

2.3 Importance of Fluency

As stated in the early part of this article, fluent users of language are usually viewed as successful users, and we all know that fluency-oriented teaching aims at the automization of use any given language knowledge. When we use language, it is preferable that our use flows naturally and with maximum ease. Hesitant speakers, for instance, are usually criticized and viewed as improficient users of language. Shmidt (1992, p.16) supports such an idea when he says "luent speech is automatic, not requiring much attention, and is characterized by the fact that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently." It is clear that it would be difficult to argue against views of such a nature. Consequently, language teaching cannot but be impacted by such an idea. Students should be given the opportunity to use their linguistic competence to communicate as much as possible. The importance of this is doubled by the fact that our students' only chance to use language communicatively is within the classroom. The students' chances to communicate with foreigners, whether native speakers of English or those who use English as inter-language, are very few and far between. This, of course, puts more burden on the shoulders of the teachers as they have to create chances more than what the textbooks provide. However, this is the grim reality that we, as teachers, have to live with day-in-day out.

Now, let us turn attention to what I described in the title of this article as 'the missing balance' which means the balance between fluency and accuracy, as the two important features of language teaching/learning. From the above-stated importance of both fluency and accuracy, it is obvious that striking such a balance is vital. Consequently, there is a need for allocating enough space and time within the Libyan syllabi of English for promoting those two elements at the different levels of English language teaching. All those who are involved in the teaching/learning process, as far as

English language teaching is concerned, should acknowledge the need for producing fluent and accurate users of English. We all acknowledge that English occupies a sizeable space within the Libyan educational system as an investment for supplying the market with English language users who are both fluent in their communicative use of language as well as being meticulous in their grammatical choices.

3. Striking the Balance

To start with, let us embrace the notion that says ' accuracy and fluency are complementary to each other' regardless of the fact that in the daily usage of the term, fluency is usually associated with speaking. Fluent speakers of any given language are mostly viewed as good and proficient users of that language. We, as experienced teachers, do not view it that way. We view the term 'fluency' as a purely technical term which is, of course, one of the many elements that play an essential role in the development of language users' proficiency. The reason for professionals to view fluency in such a manner is that the element of accuracy amongst other elements constitute the package that language users need to master to be viewed as real proficient users of language and not users whose use of language is riddled with numerous errors some of which may hinder communication. For professional teachers and educators, to be viewed as proficient user of any target language, your language needs to be both fluent and accurate. Consequently, the promotion of accuracy and fluency must be viewed and treated in a tandem manner which means you can't have one without the other. Here, we need to come to a conclusion that would lead us to know what needs to be done.

Conclusion

If we have a close look at what has been said so far, we find that the discussion provided us with generally accepted definitions of both accuracy and fluency as well as highlighting their importance within any educational program for teaching English as a foreign language. Also, the discussion cemented the complementary nature of fluency and accuracy. This means that the out-product 'graduates' of the English language teaching institutions like English Departments and other similar institutions, must be both fluent and accurate. Unfortunately, it is a clear-cut fact, except for those are willing to see the shade but not the sun, that the educational out-product, as far as English is concerned, is neither ideal nor encouraging at all. From an economic point of view, millions and millions of Libyan Dinars are paid every year on the teaching of English. This is done because English as a school subject is viewed by educational planners and decision makers as a long term investment the goal of which is to provide efficient users of English for educational reasons like using English as a medium of instruction, occupational reasons, and other different uses. It is for this, that English occupies a sizable space within the Libyan educational system. The goal, if I may repeat myself, is to provide ideal users of English, users who are fluent in their communicative use as well as meticulous in their grammatical choices. At this point, I have to state that the theoretical nature of this article forces me not touch on the practical issue of how to bring about the needed change. It is

my plan to touch on this issue in a package of three articles. The hoped articles would be on 'What' needs to be changed, 'Who' is going to be the agent of the change, and 'How' is the change going to be implemented.

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