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Cover Page Footnote

Mireya Molina Barriga holds a teaching in EFL and English-Spanish translation degree and currently pursuing her MA in TEFL. She has been teaching within the EFL context for the past eight years in a technical university in southern Chile. Mark Briesmaster has been an educator for over 32 years primarily in the US and Chile. He holds a PhD in Intercultural Education and is currently the director of a MA TEFL program in southern Chile. His research interests include speaking skills and teaching styles.

The Use of the 3/2/1 Technique to Foster Students' Speaking Fluency

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Abstract

For learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), fluency is one of the most difficult aspects to develop within the speaking skills. The Chilean teaching context has witnessed a gradual shift from the traditional grammar-translation approach to a more communicative one, thereby making it necessary to discover new strategies to develop students' speaking skills. This action research was conducted in a technical university in Chile, and it investigated how the use of the 3/2/1 technique influenced students' speaking fluency. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected for analysis.

The results of the study indicate that after the implementation of the 3/2/1 technique, there was a small improvement in the students' speech in terms of words per minute (WPM) and pauses made. The majority of the participants found this technique useful for their development of fluency.

Key words: EFL, action research, speaking fluency, 3/2/1 technique

Introduction

Of the speaking skills, fluency can be one of the most difficult to improve. However, it is often the main goal of almost every second language learner due to the fact that the communicative approach is the primary focus of language learning. The purpose of conducting this research comes from the need to improve students' speaking fluency. Most students are unable to produce fluent speech, even though they often have enough knowledge to do so. This may be due to the fact that most teachers tend to talk excessively in class, leaving few opportunities for students to actually speak in the target language (Wang, 2014).

In the past, teaching EFL was mainly grammar based; however, this has changed to one based on the communicative competence, where the emphasis is on enabling students to communicate their ideas and thoughts. Unfortunately, students who reach higher education have been conditioned to focus on grammatical rules and structure instead of developing oral discourse;

herein lies the importance of this study, whose main objective is to examine how the use of the 4/3/2 technique—in its variant form of 3/2/1—influences students' speaking fluency. The technique consists of the presentation of a three-minute speech. Then, the same exact same speech is compressed into two minutes, and finally into one minute. To achieve this objective, students used the strategy once a week.

The study was conducted at a technical university in Chile. The participants were made up of 40 second-year EFL students. The main objective of the students was being able to communicate and speak fluently. Although having had many years of exposure to English, they were still unable to carry on an authentic and fluid conversation with a native speaker. It is important to note that English is not one of the students' main concerns, academically speaking. Moreover, they are only required to receive a passing mark. The number of contact hours per week is also a major issue, since it makes it difficult to advance in terms of fluency. Many are self-conscious about making mistakes in front of their peers. As a result, students suffer from anxiety and embarrassment and become unwilling to participate in class. Hence, the implementation of this strategy was essentially to improve fluency by helping students overcome their fears of speaking. This was achieved by limiting their interactions to one-on-one situations with their classmate rather than in front of the entire class.

The research question that guided this study was: How does the use of the 3/2/1 technique influence speaking fluency among students in an undergraduate degree program?

Literature Review

Speaking Fluency in EFL Learners

One of the main objectives in second language learning is to be fluent in the target language; this means being able to express thoughts easily and emphasizing meaning over form (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011).

Schloff and Yudkin (1991) argue that many nonfluent speakers are unable to develop fluency because it is thought that perfection is the main goal. In spite of the fact that speakers ought to be mindful of what they say, it is not necessary to be overly concerned about everything said. It is recommended to commit a few mistakes rather than speak too slowly, because the speaker can be perceived as boring. Therefore, part of the process of becoming fluent is committing errors. Paying more attention to fluency implies that errors will occur as a natural result (Sato, 2003). Furthermore, when students make errors, they will be able to self-correct, and eventually will take risks and feel more confident speaking in the target language (Brown, 1996).

Focusing on accuracy in speech has historically been the main concern of traditional EFL teaching, which prioritizes structure over real communication and the development of the communicative competence (Sato, 2003). According to Sakura (2001), the main objective of communicative language teaching is “the ability not only to communicate using rules of grammar, but also to use language appropriately in social contexts and to employ verbal and nonverbal strategies to overcome breakdowns in communication” (p.117).

Fluency can be defined in different terms by different authors. The author of this study defines fluency as the ability to produce an oral discourse without being necessarily accurate but intelligible, because in the production of English discourse, it is not enough to be grammatically correct in order to be fluent (Widhiatama, 2011). Nation (1989) describes fluency 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. Fillmore (as cited in Nation, 1989) describes fluency according to four characteristics: (a) the ability to fill time with talk (the speaker has to think quickly in order to give a message); (b) sentences that are coherent; (c) context and content appropriate to the speech; and (d) creative speech. Koizumi (2005) defines fluency as how fast and how much a learner speaks without disfluency markers like repetitions, self-corrections, and false starts.

In order to develop fluency, it is necessary to follow certain conditions: (a) the activity should be focused on the interests of the students; (b) the activity should include students' prior experience; and (c) the activity should be performed at a higher level often using time constraints.

It is necessary to make a distinction between fluency and accuracy, because, for the purpose of this study, we expect the students to be fluent rather than accurate. In this sense, accuracy can be defined as “speaking with correct grammar, sentence structure and fluency” (Ryczek, 2012, p. 34). Another definition of accuracy, provided by Yuan and Ellis (2003), is “the extent to which the language produced conforms to target language norms” (p. 2). On the other hand, when students have a purpose for communication, their focus will be on communicating their ideas rather than how grammatically or phonetically accurate their speech is (Sato, 2003).

In order to develop fluency, teachers can combine different activities including the features of fluency, most of them having the same characteristic of “free talking” (Gorkaltseva, Gozhin, & Nagel, 2015). According to Nation and Newton (2009), in order to develop fluency, it is necessary to follow certain conditions: (a) the activity should be focused on the interests of the students; (b) the activity should include students' prior experience; and (c) the activity should be performed at a higher level often using time constraints.

Fluency can be measured under several conditions, however, for the purposes of this study, WPM and length of pauses (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011) were considered. De Jong and Perfetti (2011) considered these two conditions because through their development the participants could achieve proceduralization—the ability to increase a skill through repetition of a task.

3/2/1 Technique

As was previously mentioned, the teacher can carry out different activities in order to develop speaking fluency in students. When designing a speaking activity whose goal is to develop fluency, teachers need to consider seven principles developed by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988), which motivate students to develop *automaticity*, a process that helps students in the

selection and production of utterances. However, for the purpose of this study, we will focus on four.

The first principle is *incorporating repetition*. Repetition is the best way to develop fluency because repeating the same words and phrases can help students feel more confident, which will make each delivery more grammatically correct (Movahed & Karkia, 2014). The second principle is *preparing before speaking*, which can help students feel more engaged in the conversation. It also allows students to pay more attention to communication. The third principle is *using familiar and motivating topics*. When topics are familiar to the students, it makes them feel more motivated because they can speak from their own experience. The fourth principle is *imposing time limits*. As a result, students will be obliged to speak faster and make fewer pauses (Kellem, 2009).

Many studies have been carried out in order to discover the reasons why students do not achieve the expected fluency, and which suitable activities can be implemented to reach that goal. This study will focus on the 4/3/2 technique and the research conducted mainly by De Jong and Perfetti in 2011. The 4/3/2 technique includes the four principles mentioned above. In this technique, learners deliver a four-minute talk. Then they deliver the same talk in three minutes. Finally, they present the exact same talk in two minutes (Arevat & Nation, 1991). The use of the technique allows students to reach a higher level of performance in relation to fluency than they otherwise would have (Arevat & Nation, 1991). In this study, the technique will have a variant form, called the 3/2/1 technique, to ensure that students repeat the same speech in the three delivery modes (Thai & Boers, 2015). The variation was considered due to time constraints and classroom management issues. Students had only 90 minutes per week to practice the technique, and doing it longer would mean that students could not practice the technique as often as necessary.

The first presentation lasts three minutes, and then the learner repeats the same exact talk in two minutes, and finally the same talk in one minute. The talks delivered by the students are improvised; they only have a few minutes to take some notes about the main ideas of the topic they are going to talk about, only writing down key words (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011). The original 4/3/2 technique suggests that students change their listening partners in every delivery, because if they do not do this, they will feel the need to change the speech and add more information in order to maintain the listener's attention (Arevat & Nation, 1991).

Both features, repetition and decreasing time, make an important contribution to the development of fluency. Repetition can increase fluency as learners have the opportunity to deliver the same talk three times (Asri and Muhtar, 2013). Furthermore, they can feel more secure about their speech, because in the third delivery, they are allowed to make corrections. On the other hand, time pressure forces learners to express their ideas faster and more efficiently (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011).

Studies like the ones by De Jong and Perfetti (2011), Nation (1989), Al-Sibai (2004), and others suggest that the use of the technique improves students' speaking fluency by increasing the amount of WPM and reducing the number and length of pauses. However, the study by Asri and

Muhtar (2013) suggests that the use of the technique in classes does not provide any significant change on students' speaking fluency. One of the reasons provided to explain why the results do not show any significant effect is boredom, as they have to talk without a break for six minutes. Additionally, students talk without any interaction from the listener, which is an important component of this speaking skill (Asri & Muhtar, 2013).

3/2/1: Action Research

This study represents action research that employs quantitative and qualitative types of data. Action research was chosen because it helps to identify and reflect on the teachers' practices and eventually to solve the identified problems. According to Koshy (2010), action research helps to improve practices if the solution relies on changing practices. It is necessary to mention that the process of doing action research also requires a critical reflection of the process (Koshy, 2010). In order to change the practice that had been done, the 3/2/1 technique was implemented. This technique provided several opportunities for students to talk, as the students had to improvise a speech for six minutes without being interrupted. This helped them to develop fluency. The speeches were on certain topics which were familiar to the students, so it would be easier for them to develop the discourse as they knew enough vocabulary related to the topic. On the other hand, the focus of this study was less on accuracy because a few grammar errors are acceptable when students are developing their speaking skills (Widhiatama, 2011).

As previously mentioned, quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Specially, I used pre- and posttests and interviews to determine whether the students developed fluency in their speaking skill.

Participants

The participants of the study were 40 students from a technical university in central-southern Chile. Their ages ranged from 18 to 27, and their English speaking skill levels varied based on previous educational experiences. They came from different cities and towns within Chile, and they also had different social backgrounds. The participants were placed in two different groups, control and experimental, each with 20 students. These groups were chosen at random due to the students having the same major.

The participants were informed about the procedure of the study. They learnt about the technique, its use, and why it was chosen. They were also informed that their participation was voluntarily. Then they signed a consent letter which allowed us to implement the technique for intervention.

Instruments

Tests. The tests were divided into a pretest and posttest. In both tests, the participants had to improvise a monologue on a given topic. The topics chosen were familiar to the participants, so that they would likely feel more confident talking (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011). They had 10 minutes to prepare their monologues, and they could write down some key words for guidance if necessary. The tests were applied in order to measure improvements made by the students. As their monologues were recorded, it was easier to make the analysis of pauses and WPM.

Interviews. After the implementation of the technique and the administration of the posttest, semistructured interviews were conducted in order to determine students' perceptions of the use of the technique. Six participants were chosen for the interviews based on their results in the pre- and posttest. The six participants selected for the interview represented a range of improvement as a result of the 3/2/1 activity: two interviewees demonstrated significant improvement, two demonstrated moderate improvement, and two demonstrated modest improvement.

Procedure

The research was conducted over 10 weeks, with two 90-minute classes per week. Prior to the first week, participants from both groups signed a consent letter. The first week they took the pretest based on the 3/2/1 technique; the participants were given a topic and/or a question related to their own personal experience. They had 10 minutes to prepare the speech and write some notes if needed. Both tests were recorded, and the students' speeches were analyzed in terms of pauses and WPM. In order to analyze pauses, PRAAT software was used, which helped to calculate the length of pauses made by the participants. For the purpose of this study, pauses longer than three seconds were considered significant (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011). On the other hand, the number of WPM was calculated manually. In order to do this, the recordings were transcribed into a word software, SPSS, to measure the difference between speeches. Both tests were used to achieve two specific objectives: (a) to analyze students' speech in terms of pauses and WPM, and (b) to determine the influence of using the 3/2/1 technique in students' speaking fluency. From Week 2 to 8, participants from the experimental group practiced the technique once a week. On the other hand, participants from the control group did not practice the technique during classes. Conversely, the control group had regular classes where the teacher introduced content and the students practiced it. In Week 9, both groups took the posttest under the same conditions. They had 10 minutes to write down some key words about the given topic, and then they had to perform three deliveries of that monologue—the first delivery lasting three minutes, the second lasting two minutes, and the third lasting one minute.

The teacher was the same for both the control and the experimental groups, therefore they studied the same curriculum using the same book. The only significant difference between both groups was that the experimental group practiced the 3/2/1 technique once a week for 70 minutes, being able to practice it 11 times per class.

After taking the posttest, six interviews were conducted with the students from the experimental group in order to identify their perceptions of the use of the 3/2/1 technique. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The information gathered was supported by quotations rather than statistical measurement (Weiss, 1995). The information was coded into two categories: fluency and students' perceptions of the 3/2/1 technique.

Discussion of the Findings

According to the information presented in Table 1, the students participating in the experimental group increased their number of WPM in each delivery of the pretest and posttest. The increase

of WPM from Delivery 1 to Delivery 3 of the experimental group in the pretest was 95.7%, whereas the increase of WPM in the same deliveries of the control group was 70%.

As was mentioned in the literature review, after the implementation of the 3/2/1 technique, students would increase the number of WPM in each delivery due to the pressure of time constraints and the repetition of the monologue. Students from the experimental group increased their WPM in the posttest. In Delivery 1, their WPM increased by 1.34%, in Delivery 2 by 5.02%, and in Delivery 3 by 7.17%.

On the other hand, the number of WPM for the participants of the control group in the posttest decreased in the three deliveries. In the Delivery 1, WPM decreased by 26.52%, and in Delivery 3, it decreased by 2.33%.

Table 1

Results of WPM From Pretest and Posttest, Control and Experimental Groups

Experimental Group	Pretest WPM	Posttest WPM	Percentage Change
Delivery 1	44.5	45.1	1.34%
Delivery 2	58.75	61.7	5.02%
Delivery 3	87.1	93.35	7.17%
Control Group			
Delivery 1	49.20	36.15	-26.52%
Delivery 2	68.40	53.60	-21.63%
Delivery 3	83.65	81.70	-2.33%

Table 2

Results of Length of Pauses, Calculated in Seconds, From Pretest and Posttest, Control and Experimental Groups

Experimental Group	Pretest Pauses (Seconds)	Posttest Pauses (Seconds)	Percentage Change
Delivery 1	68.90	76.64	11.23%
Delivery 2	35.99	32.81	-8.83%
Delivery 3	7.84	5.56	-29.08%
Control Group			
Delivery 1	87.53	81.69	-6.67%
Delivery 2	42.48	40.79	-3.97%
Delivery 3	10.23	10.58	3.42%

According to the data above, the length of the pauses in each delivery of either the pretest or posttest decreased for both the experimental group and the control group. In the pretest, the experimental group managed to reduce pauses by 88.62%, and the control group decreased pauses by 88.31%. In the posttest, the experimental group decreased pauses from the first delivery to the third by 92.74%, and the control group by 87.04%. However, in comparing the pauses of each delivery in the pretest and the posttest, it was clear that no significant difference between the pauses of each test were found. According to Delivery 1, pauses increased by 11.23%, but decreased in Delivery 2 and 3 by 8.83% and 29.08%, respectively.

After taking the posttest, the six students from the experimental group participated in interviews to identify their perceptions of the use of the 3/2/1 technique during classes. In order to analyze the interviews, two main aspects were considered in students' answers: fluency and perception. According to the students, being a fluent English speaker is useful for them for reasons such as receiving better job offers. This is why they considered the technique useful, and why they would recommend its use in English classes.

Examples of advantages they mentioned were practicing the content studied in class, and being given clear topics to discuss and a specified amount of time in which to discuss them.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish in order to make the students feel comfortable and free to discuss their perceptions. Six students were chosen according to their results in the pretest and posttest. They were asked eleven questions (see Appendix). Sixty-seven percent of the students expressed that the technique was useful because it provided them the opportunity to practice and analyze their speech. On the other hand, 33% of the students expressed that the technique was not useful for them; because of the time constraints, they felt nervous and could not perform well.

The students were also asked to share advantages and disadvantages of the technique. Examples of advantages they mentioned were practicing the content studied in class, and being given clear topics to discuss and a specified amount of time in which to discuss them. Disadvantages the students mentioned were that the technique required a lot of practice in order to serve its purpose, and also that they felt a lot of pressure. In spite of these disadvantages, 67% of the students interviewed would recommend the use of the technique in the future because it provided good opportunities to speak during classes. One hundred percent of the students interviewed agreed that speaking English fluently would give them better job opportunities.

Finally, most of the students reported that using the technique during classes allowed them to feel more confident to converse in English in front of their classmates. The following quotes demonstrate this:

- “The use of the technique in classes was useful for me because I realize that I am able to speak in English.”

- “Using the technique in classes allowed me to speak without fear of making mistakes; in addition, I felt more confident in what I said.”

Conclusions and Reflections

Limitations

It is important to say that students' perceptions were essential to identify if the use of the 3/2/1 technique during classes had an impact. As the study was conducted in a university, absenteeism was an issue. Every student missed at least one class during the implementation of the technique. Another limitation during the research was the number of sessions to work with the technique. In order to motivate students to develop their speaking fluency, it would be necessary to practice the technique for a longer period of time. This essentially means that seven classes were insufficient to accomplish this objective. Additionally, as they did not attend all the classes, they missed at least one of the implementations, which led them to not learning the vocabulary necessary to develop their discourse.

Finally, another limiting factor was the number of students versus the time to practice. Each class was only 90 minutes, and because there were 20 students, they could not practice the technique more than twice per class. However, this situation cannot be generalized, and the conditions may vary depending on each context.

Implications for Practice

This study has significant implications for ESL teachers. Action research proves to be essential when teachers are looking for the best strategy to help their students do their best in their English classes. The findings in this study support previous research that suggests the use of the 3/2/1 technique fosters students' speaking fluency. The results obtained during this investigation can be useful for teachers who would like to investigate the same topic in their own contexts. Based on the researcher's personal experience, carrying out this study was an enriching experience: She could identify a problem, reflect on it, and try to find a solution. It is necessary to mention that carrying out action research in the ESL context is a positive tool for ESL teachers and students looking for professional development. This research contributes to teachers' motivation to develop new methodologies for the teaching ESL, which makes students more involved in their learning. By using this technique, teachers provide all the tools students need to be able to deliver a speech for six minutes without being interrupted. By participating in this research, both Molina and her students benefitted by developing a new strategy that allowed them to improve their speaking skills. There was an acclimation period for students to get used to the technique and its methodology, but once they acquired it and practiced it a couple of times, they realized how useful it was for the development of their speaking skills.

The use of the 3/2/1 technique can be applied in several contexts, such as the reading-aloud technique in which the students read a passage in three minutes, the same passage in two minutes, and finally in only one minute. This could help students improve their fluency in reading or their pronunciation, according to the researcher's objectives. In either case, this technique can contribute to making students talk during class so that eventually their fear of speaking in front of the class will diminish or even disappear.

Improving fluency can be one of the most difficult aspects of speaking to improve among second language learners; therein lies the importance of this study, because through the application of the 3/2/1 technique, students' fluency can actually be improved. The repetition of the same speech three times and the reduction of time for each speech not only improves students' fluency, but also makes them feel more confident and less embarrassed to speak in front of their classmates, which was one of the primary objectives of this study.

Although the use of the 3/2/1 technique during classes created minimal improvements in the speech of the students, allowing them to increase their WPM and reduce the length and amount of pauses during their speeches were nontangible benefits related to anxiety and fear reduction.

The differences in students' speeches between the pretest and posttest were not statistically significant; however, there was a change, and through continuous practice both inside and outside the classroom, the use of this technique can with consistent practice eventually succeed in developing students' fluency.

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Appendix

Entrevista

1. ¿Qué es para ti fluidez?
2. ¿Qué tan importante es para ti hablar en inglés en comparación con las otras habilidades (escuchar, leer, escribir)?
3. ¿Te gusta hablar en inglés durante la clase? ¿Cómo te sientes al hacerlo?
4. ¿Qué importancia le otorgas al hablar fluidamente en inglés? ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué no? ¿A qué lo atribuyes?
5. ¿De qué manera hablar inglés fluidamente es útil para ti?
6. ¿Te consideras un hablante fluido? ¿Cómo te das cuenta si lo eres o no?
7. ¿Crees que el uso de la técnica del 3/2/1 es útil para hablar fluidamente en inglés? ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué no?
8. ¿Cuáles serían para ti las ventajas de esta técnica?
9. ¿Cuáles serían para ti las desventajas de esta técnica?
10. ¿Recomendarías el uso de la técnica 3/2/1 en las clases? ¿Por qué sí? ¿Por qué no?
11. ¿Cuál es tu percepción hacia el uso de la técnica 3/2/1?