

What is fluency?

We often use the word ‘fluency’ loosely without thinking about exactly what it means. In day-to-day speech we equate it with being able to communicate comfortably and easily in another language. We may ask someone living in another country if they are ‘fluent in the language yet?’, meaning not only do they speak, but also do they understand the language when they hear it spoken.

We picture them coping confidently in a range of situations, taking part naturally in conversations and functioning effectively in the language. Adverbs like naturally, comfortably, easily describe the psychological state of the language user as much as their ability or competence. It is an idea that is bound up in emotions and perceptions as much as, if not more than, with the actual use of the language. We see ‘fluency’ as a quality of the speaker rather than a skill that can be learned. When talking about teaching and learning languages, this can cause problems.

Let’s take a closer look at what fluency is from a more objective point of view. When researchers study fluency, they use two fairly simple measurements; one is the rate of speech, how many syllables you produce over a given time, the second is the length of utterances, how many words you can produce in a continued string of speech without hesitation or pauses. This gives us a clear idea of what fluency in speech sounds like. But it’s not enough to measure speed and length, we also need to measure coherence and effectiveness.

One thing is being able to produce a string of words, another is that the string of words is actually comprehensible to someone who’s listening. So fluency is flow, but it is flow with meaning. This also introduces another factor, the listener. In order to be effective in our communication, we also need to take into account who we are talking to, so that our speed of delivery and our length of utterance is appropriate for our listeners. When we include this social aspect too, it becomes clear that fluency is a complex concept!

Can fluency be taught?

The easy answer is yes, or at least, as teachers, we can create the conditions that allow our students to develop fluency. And how do we do that?

Well, it’s a process and there’s no magic wand. It takes time and patience, like all learning, but there are some basic steps we can follow:

1. Allow for plenty of time and space in class for students to attempt to communicate freely i.e. include spoken activities where the students decide what they want to say and how they’re going to say it.
2. Design tasks that create a need and/or an interest in communicating – and that means both speaking and listening. It is as important that the speaker has something they want to say as it is that the listener has a reason to listen to them.
3. Allow time for preparation and scaffolding of the language before the task – this allows the students to feel more confident when they come to perform the task, and confidence has a direct effect on fluency. It immediately reduces hesitation and facilitates flow.
4. Allow time for feedback on perceived difficulty of the task, and ease of communication. Discuss any obstacles and perceptions. Did the students feel more/less fluent? Why?

Fluency doesn’t happen overnight. Neither is it a fixed quality. It varies according to the task and the audience. We can be much more fluent talking to a group of friends about a familiar topic

than we would talking to a stranger about a subject we're not sure about. And so, we need to train for fluency in incremental steps, planning for success in familiar situations, building on that success to push our students further, always making sure we give them the language tools they need to succeed.

Why is fluency important?

We still need to address another important question. Why is fluency important? And why is it important to our students? Fluency is the bedrock of how we are perceived as communicators. And the bottom line for all our students is communication. They are studying a language in order to be able to use it – and to use it effectively. This is what our teenage students want from their English lessons, from their English teachers: to be able to function competently in English, not only in the classroom, but ultimately out in the big wide world.

They want to be able to take an active part in the global online communities that are such an important part of their teenage world, be that social media, gaming or peer learning through open access forums. Our students are keenly aware – possibly more than we are – of the importance of communication, in their mother tongue, and also in English.

Excellent communication is the number one skill they need to take with them into the world if they are going to succeed, whatever their field. And communicative competency in English, let's call it 'fluency', is the key to being able to study and work in an international context, whether at home or abroad. This is what our students are aiming for. This is their number one priority in the English classroom. And it is our number one priority as teachers to help our students become successful, competent, fluent communicators.