

口语 流利性发展 研究

The Development of L2
Oral Fluency in EFL
Classroom Setting

张文忠
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PREFACE

This book constitutes part of an ongoing project that aims to describe the development of English majors' oral proficiency. Reported here is an investigation into the oral English fluency development of Chinese university students as revealed from their oral production, and the way the external learning context contributed to this development. The development of oral English fluency over time was investigated by comparing the subjects' oral production at two points in time. The external learning context under investigation included the subjects' classroom learning experiences and their contacts with English outside classes.

Based on Levelt's (1989) speech production model and Anderson's (1982, 1983) ACT* theory, a conceptual framework of L2 oral fluency development in the foreign language classroom setting was constructed, which outlined the relationship between the factors that influence the development of L2 oral fluency. It was proposed that L2 input is first noticed and taken up by learners, then processed by the learning mechanisms. Through the workings of the learning mechanisms, increase in English practice over time exerts deep influence upon L2 learners' speech production mechanisms. The effect of English practice is reflected as changes in the indices employed in the measurement of L2 oral fluency.

Data for the study were collected in a 28-week period from 12 first-year English majors in English Department of Wuhan University in China. The subjects were chosen from 22 volunteers out of the 64

students enrolled in 1997. Their English learning experience was observed and their oral fluency was tested before and after data collection. The data consisted of (i) the subjects' classroom English learning observed; (ii) information concerning their out-of-class contact with English provided by weekly questionnaires; (iii) information concerning a criterion against which the coherence of the subjects' speech could be judged; and (iv) the subjects' two narratives elicited at an interval of 28 weeks to determine the subjects' oral fluency development, and the orthographic transcriptions of the oral production.

It is found that the subjects have increased their ability to allocate their attentional resources to four aspects of speech production. These aspects are: (i) smoothness of speech delivery, (ii) coherence of speech content, (iii) complexity of syntactic structures employed, and (iv) variety of lexical items used. Their increasing ability appeared to be related to the proceduralization in the formulator in Levelt's terms, as can be seen from the improvement in fluency indices such as (i) speaking rate, (ii) phonation/time ratio, (iii) mean length of run, (iv) mean length of c-units after pruning, (v) 9-syllable repair-free speech runs, (vi) subordinate clauses per T-unit, and (vii) ratio of reformulation and replacements to total repairs. The proceduralization in the formulator not only freed some attentional resources for the choice of linguistic elements, but also helped reduce the cognitive demand on the Leveltan conceptualizer, making it possible for the subjects to pay more attention to the content of speech, as revealed by the improvement in the content index, i. e., ratio of reported necessary events to total necessary events.

It is concluded that L2 learners' oral fluency development is a demonstration of their development of on-line processing ability by way

of the more efficient use of the partially proceduralized linguistic knowledge. However, as the subjects' degree of proceduralization is still very limited, the subjects are still at the "associative" stage in Anderson's terms. They are far from what Anderson called the "autonomous" stage where they could concentrate on what to say, and let language take care of itself. This is shown by the fact that the improvement in delivery smoothness, speech coherence, syntactic complexity and wider lexical variety was achieved at the expense of accuracy. To compensate for this deficiency, the subjects had to rely on the monitoring system or use other production strategies such as repetition to solve the problems.

This study is descriptive in nature, and is limited in at least two ways. First, although it touches upon the overall development of L2 oral fluency, only one phase in the process of development is dealt with, that is, the first year of their four-year English learning at college. A more complete picture of the development calls for further observations. Second, although inferential statistics is applied, I still feel it is difficult to decide to what extent the results can be generalized to the majority of freshman English majors learning the language at universities in mainland China.

Zhang Wenzhong

Changsha, 2002

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