

IMPROVING EFL VIETNAMESE LEARNERS' SPEAKING ABILITY THROUGH THE 4/3/2 TECHNIQUE

Tran Thi Ngoc Yen

Vinh University

Received on 25/4/2019, accepted for publication on 14/6/2019

Abstract: Previous studies have showed the effects of different methods used in teaching the speaking skill in language classrooms in Vietnam. Yet not many language practitioners have focused on activities and techniques to improve EFL learners' speaking fluency. This study looks at the use of the 4/3/2 technique in speaking classes. Data were collected through an experiment among first year English majors who were following the usual English program at a university. It was found that the treatment group outperformed the control group in terms of speaking fluency and accuracy. The study highlighted the benefits of the 4/3/2 technique and suggested that fluency and accuracy in language performance do not have to be in a trade-off relationship.

1. Introduction

Fluency in English is a prerequisite for success and advancement in many fields of employment in today's world. This was probably the reason for the shift from traditional language teaching approaches to communicative language teaching, which sets language fluency development as one of the main teaching goals. While traditional methods focus on accuracy only, the communicative language teaching approach brings fluency-oriented activities into its curriculum. This inclusion of the second aspect of language performance has been believed to bring about learners' development of both grammar competence and communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Brown, 2007; Hedge, 2000). This movement has led to several changes in English language classrooms in Vietnam. However, many English language teachers have not yet been aware of the importance of fluency development in language learning.

Language practitioners around the world have been looking for methods to help their learners improve language fluency. Among those we can find repeated reading (Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008), speed reading (Tran & Nation, 2014), and extensive reading (Nunan, 1991) for reading fluency development; *headlines* activities, *say it* activities, *Messenger*, *Marketplace* (Nation, 1989), and the 4/3/2 technique (Maurice, 1987) for speaking fluency development. This paper looks at the effects of the 4/3/2 technique on EFL learners' speaking ability development and aimed to confirm the hypothesis that speaking fluency is a trainable aspect. An experiment was carried out among 83 EFL university students and the participants' speaking fluency was measured using a pre-test and post-test.

2. Literature review

2.1. *The speaking skill and speaking fluency*

Scholars have attempted to discuss the speaking skill for decades. Some linguists see speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Burn and Joyce, 1997). They assert that what and how people speak depend on the context in which the communication occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experience, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. Similarly, Nunan (2003, p. 48) defines speaking as “*a productive aural/oral skill*” which “*consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning*”. The ability to speak is considered to involve not only the knowledge of language features, but also the ability to process information and language “on the spot” (Harmer, 2001), and therefore success in spoken production depends on rapid mental and social processing skills. Harmer (2001: 269) listed the four necessary elements for spoken production: 1) connected speech characterized by assimilation, elision, linking, and contractions; 2) expressive devices such as changing the pitch and stress of sentences, varying volume and speed of a speech, showing emotions and attitudes; 3) lexis and grammar, which are important in spontaneous speech to show surprise, approval or disagreement; 4) negotiation language which is used for clarification or reformulation of statements. Since speaking involves interaction with other speakers and listeners, a good speaker needs to understand how to take turns and how others feel about the topic under consideration. They also should be able to respond immediately.

Past research has also emphasized the importance of speaking. Knight (1992), for example, believes that speaking skills are the most essential part of an EFL course. Along similar lines, Derakhshan, Tahery and Mirarab (2015) noted that there has been a broad demand for good speaking skills as the globalization of English rises. They maintain that speaking skills are the fundamental component of successful communication and thus should receive special attention from EFL teachers. Language practitioners, therefore, should find appropriate methods for developing their learners’ speaking ability.

Some linguists define fluency in second and foreign language studies as “*the ability to speak or write a particular foreign language easily and accurately*” (Pearsall, 1998, p. 707) or “*making the most effective use of what skills are already known*” (Nation, 1997, p. 30) or “*the ability to keep going when speaking spontaneously*” (Harmer, 2001). Other scientists claim that this term has two rather different meanings in English language teaching, one involving competence in the learner and the other involving natural language use and a pattern of language interaction as close as possible to native speakers’ use in normal life (Hedge, 1993).

2.2. *Accuracy, fluency and complexity*

According to many language practitioners and researchers, L2/FL performance and competence are complex terms as they contain various components. The majority of past research has relied on three factors to describe and assess L2/FL performance and competence: fluency, accuracy, and complexity (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Skehan, 1998). Since the 1990s, these three variables have come into focus in L2/FL learning

research. It is believed that fluency, accuracy, and complexity can be used as both performance descriptors and proficiency indicators. Fluency refers to using the language with native-like rapidity, accuracy refers to being error-free, complexity refers to the ability to handle a wide range of structures and vocabulary.

Accuracy has been distinguished from fluency since the 1980s when researchers were trying to depict and measure second language oral skills. Previous research has distinguished *fluency-oriented activities* and *accuracy-oriented activities* in a language program. Fluency activities help to improve spontaneous oral linguistic production while accuracy focuses on the accurate production of language structures (Brumfit, 1984). Complexity, the third component of the triad, came into focus in the 1990s after Skehan (1998) for the first time added it to his L2 model. In the L2/FL acquisition literature, complexity relates itself to language tasks and language production.

Prior studies investigating the effect of external factors on the learner's accuracy, fluency, and complexity in language performance have proposed methods to assess the three components and explanations of how these three dimensions develop. In L1 learning, Wigglesworth (1997) confirmed that planning time provides greater advantages for high proficiency learners to make complex and fluent language production but the results were not unambiguous enough to decide whether accuracy was also developed. Conversely, Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) reported that in their research on the effect of collaborative writing on fluency, accuracy and complexity of the second language learner, accuracy was positively affected but fluency and complexity were not. In L2/FL learning, the majority of developmental measures of complexity, accuracy and fluency have been used to explore the effects of a treatment or an external factor on oral and written language production. For example, Yuan and Ellis (2003), and Mehnert (1998) examined how planning time helps learners to write better and assessed the learner's writing in three dimensions: fluency (syllables per minute (spm)), accuracy and complexity. The results showed planning time resulted in greater fluency, accuracy, and complexity. However, other authors, such as Ellis (1987) and Crookes (1989), argued that planning time affects the learner's language production in terms of complexity but did not significantly influence it in terms of accuracy. Recently Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) indicated that their findings showed careful planning time positively influenced complexity and accuracy but resulted in dysfluency.

2.3. The 4/3/2 technique

The 4/3/2 technique was first introduced by Maurice (1983) and later used by various language practitioners in their teaching such as Nation (1989), Arevart and Nation (1991), Yang (2014) and Movahed and Karkia (2014). This technique involves learners' preparing for a topic and then talking about it for four minutes to a partner, and then three minutes to a new partner and finally two minutes to the third partner.

In order to carry out this activity in language classrooms, teachers can first divide the class into two halves: one is the speaker group and the other is the listener group.

Teachers should provide topics for the speaker group to choose. They have some time to think about the topic but are not allowed to make notes. When the teacher says “Go”, they turn to their first partner and talk about the topic. The listener group is supposed to keep silent. After four minutes, they change partners and thus everyone has a different partner. The speakers talk to the new partner on the same topic but this time they are allowed to do it for only three minutes. Finally, the class change partners again and the speakers talk to their third partner on the same topic but for only two minutes. When the speaker group has given their talk three times, the listener group can go through the same sequence, this time as speakers.

Previous research has shown that the 4/3/2 technique brings great benefits to EFL learners’ speaking fluency development. Nation (1989) noted that this technique has three important features. First, the learner has a different audience each time they speak. Therefore, they have a chance to focus on communication rather than having to add new information if the audience stays the same. Second, the topic remains the same. This helps to develop learners’ confidence in their ability to talk and they have less difficulty in accessing the language they need in order to deliver the talk. Third, the time is reduced each time they talk. This encourages learners to speak faster in order to finish the talk in time. Arevart and Nation (1991) added that through 4/3/2 speaking practice, learners improve their speaking speed, reduce the number of hesitations and grammatical errors they make during the talks. In addition, they tend to use several, more complex grammatical constructions in the last of the three talks than they did in the first talk.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

This study set out to examine the effects of the 4/3/2 technique in EFL speaking class for Vietnamese learners and aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Will the participants improve their speaking speed?
2. Will the participants develop their speaking accuracy?

3.2. Participants

The participants in this experiment were EFL first year students at a university in Vietnam. There were 83 of them, 41 in the control group and 42 in the treatment group. All of them were around 19 years old and had been studying English for at least 5 years.

3.3. Materials and Procedure

Before the treatment, both groups took a general English test and the pre-test. The general English test was in the format of KET (Key English Test) with two sections: Reading and Writing, and Listening. The Reading and Writing section contained five parts of reading and three parts of listening and lasted for 70 minutes. The Listening section contained five parts and lasted for about 30 minutes. In the pre-test, the participants were asked to talk about a topic for two minutes. They had one minute to prepare for their talk. After that, both groups followed the usual English program at the university for three months. During the treatment, the experimental group was asked to

do the 4/3/2 activities once a week while this technique was not introduced to the control class. Finally, the two groups did the post-test, which was similar to the pre-test in terms of topic familiarity, difficulty and time allowance.

3.4. Results

The participants' speaking speed was measured by calculating the number of words spoken per minute and their speaking accuracy was measured by calculating the number of errors per 100 words. The per-100-word calculation was used instead of the per-minute calculation because otherwise it might not be fair for students who talked more in a minute. A student who made fewer errors in a minute was not necessarily better than someone who committed more mistakes within this time. It might have been possible that they did not say anything at all and thus made no errors.

Regarding the participants' speaking speed, the data revealed that the treatment group outperformed the control group on the post-test (see Table 1). The average speed at which the control class spoke was 62.3 words per minute (wpm) while the treatment class spoke at the average speed of 80.5 wpm. An examination of the speeds reached by the treatment group showed that only one participant spoke at the speed of under 60 wpm and 14 participants spoke at the speeds of over 80 wpm. The slowest speed was 59 wpm and the fastest speed was 107 wpm. Meanwhile, 13 out of 41 participants in the control group spoke at the speeds of under 60 wpm and only two reached the speeds of over 80 wpm. The slowest speed was 27 wpm and the fastest speed was 82 wpm.

Tab. 1: *Means and standard deviations of post-test speaking speeds for both groups*

	Control group	Treatment group
Number of students	41	42
Mean	62.3	80.5
SD	9.7	11.4

The results also indicated that the treatment group significantly increased their speaking speed while the control group just gained a slight increase (see Table 2).

Tab. 2: *Means and standard deviations of speed increases for both groups*

	Control group	Treatment group
Number of students	41	42
Mean	8.8	26.6
SD	2.4	9.4

p < 0.05

As it can be seen from Table 2, the treatment group made an average increase of 26.6 wpm whereas the control group increased their average speed by 8.8 wpm. The one way ANOVA test results showed that there was a significant difference between the treatment group's improvement and the control group's improvement. These results were reinforced by the fact that the two groups had similar average scores on the general English test and on the pre-test (see Table 3).

Tab. 3: Means and standard deviations of speeds on pre-test and scores on general English test for both groups

		Control group	Treatment group
Number of students		41	42
Speeds on pre-test	Mean	53.4	53.9
	SD	9.9	10.1
Scores on general English test	Mean	62.4	62.0
	SD	21.3	22.2

The data in Table 3 indicated that the two groups were at similar levels of English proficiency and speaking rates at the beginning of the experiment. This eliminates the possibility that the increases they made were thanks to their starting level of English, or that the control group did not do as well as the treatment group because of the ceiling effects.

Regarding speaking accuracy, it was found that the treatment group and control group both made a slight increase from the pre-test to the post-test (see Table 4). The data showed that on the pre-test, the treatment group made 17.9 errors per 100 words and the control group made 18.3 errors per 100 words. This means that at the beginning of the experiment, the two groups did not noticeably differ in terms of error vulnerability. On the post-test, the treatment group reduced their error number to 14.1 and the control group made it to 15.4. The one way ANOVA test indicated that there was no significant difference between the improvement made by the treatment group and that made by the control group. However, the result was pedagogically meaningful because it proved that the development of fluency does not necessarily have to be accompanied by a decrease in accuracy.

Tab. 4: Means and standard deviations of pre-test and post-test accuracy scores for both groups

		Control group	Treatment group
Number of students		41	42
Pre-test accuracy	Mean	18.3	17.9
	SD	3.5	3.7
Post-test accuracy	Mean	15.4	14.1
	SD	2.8	2.7
Accuracy improvement	Mean	2.9	3.8
	SD	0.5	0.6

4. Discussion

This study set out with the aim of exploring the benefits of the 4/3/2 technique in EFL speaking ability development. Previous studies in this issue have reported positive effects of the technique in increasing learners' speaking fluency and accuracy (Maurice, 1987; Nation, 1989; Arevart & Nation, 1991). However, in those studies, the improvement was measured by comparing the participants' performance in their first talk with that in their third talk. This research looks at the issue from a different angle. The

measurement was done outside the treatment and through the use of pre-test and post-test.

It was found that the treatment group outperformed the control group in terms of speaking speed. While the control group increased their average speed by 8.8 wpm, the treatment group increased their average speed by 26.6 wpm. The difference was statistically significant. In addition, on the post-test, compared with the control group, more students in the treatment group reached the speed of over 80 wpm and fewer remained their speed at lower than 60 wpm. These results were reinforced by the fact that on the pre-test, the two groups gained similar scores on speaking performance and English proficiency. These findings are in line with those of previous studies by Nation (1989) and Yang (2014).

Another obvious finding that emerged from the study is that the treatment group made a slight increase in speaking accuracy. Even though the control group also improved their accuracy, the fact that their increase was smaller than that of the treatment group indicated that the 4/3/2 technique did have an impact on the participants' ability to access the language they needed to deliver the talk. This result collaborates Nation (1989)'s finding and confirms that fluency and accuracy do not have to be in a trade-off relationship.

There are possible explanations for the improvement that the treatment group gained. First, the change of audience over the three talking times might have freed the speakers from the burden of having to think of new ideas to keep the audience interested. Therefore, they had a chance to focus on communicating the message in a smoother and faster manner. This, in turns, provided the participants an opportunity to adjust and modify their talk, thus reduce the number of errors they made each time talking. Second, the topic remained the same, which allowed the participants to develop their confidence in their ability to deliver the talk, hence facilitated their speaking accuracy. Third, the time was gradually reduced, forcing the participants to speak faster to finish their talk in the given time. This might have enhanced their speaking fluency.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the impacts of the 4/3/2 technique in EFL speaking ability development. An experiment among 83 university English majors was carried out in a period of three months. A pre-test and a post-test were utilized to measure the participants' speaking performance. The study has identified two major findings. First, the treatment class improved their speaking speed to a much larger extent than the control class. Second, they also gained a slightly bigger increase in accuracy.

An issue that was not addressed in this study was whether the participants' speaking performance improved during the treatment. Due to time and personnel limitations, the students' talks in the experimental lessons were not taken into consideration. It is therefore recommended that in further research, participants' performance while taking part in the 4/3/2 activities are recorded and analyzed. Another limitation of this study is that the participants' speaking fluency was evaluated only by looking at accuracy and speed. It did not take into account such criteria as the number of false starts, hesitations, and repetitions. Future work can examine these aspects to obtain

deeper insights into the nature of speaking fluency development. A further study could also assess the *what*, apart from the *how*, to see if this technique facilitates learners' ability to control the content of their talk.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that speaking ability can be developed through the use of the 4/3/2 technique. The findings are consistent with those in previous studies and broaden our view of the relationship between fluency and accuracy in language performance. The study's results suggest that those English language teachers who wish to help learners develop their speaking ability should consider carrying 4/3/2 activities, and that an increase in speed does not have to go hand in hand with a decrease in accuracy.

REFERENCES

- Ahmadian, M. J., & Tavakoli, M. (2011). The effects of simultaneous use of careful online planning and task repetition on accuracy, complexity, and fluency in EFL learners' oral production. *Language Teaching Research*, 15(1), 35-59.
- Arevert, S. and Nation, I. S. P. (1991). Fluency improvement in a second language. *RELC Journal*, 22(1), 84-94.
- Brown, H.D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.
- Brumfit, C. J. (1984). *Communicative methodology in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, A. & Joyce, H. (1997). *Focus on speaking*. Sydney: National Center for English Language Teaching and References.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1-47.
- Crookes, G. (1989). Planning and interlanguage variation. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 11(4), 367-383.
- Derakhshan, A., Tahery, F. & Mirarab, N. (2015). Helping adult and young learners to communicate in speaking classes with confidence. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 520-525.
- Ellis, R. (1987). Interlanguage variability in narrative discourse: Style shifting in the use of the past tense. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 9(1), 1-19.
- Ellis, R., & Barkhuizen, G. (2005). *Analysing learner language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gorsuch, G., & Taguchi, E. (2008). Repeated reading for developing reading fluency and reading comprehension: The case of EFL learners in Vietnam. *System*, 36(2), 253-278.
- Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching*. Essex, England: Longman.
- Hedge, T. (1993). Key concepts in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 47(3), 275-277.
- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*. Oxford: Oxford

- University Press.
- Knight, B. (1992). Assessing speaking skills: a workshop for teacher development. *ELT Journal*, 46(3), 294-302.
- Maurice, K. (1983). The fluency workshop. *TESOL Newsletter*, 47, 279.
- Mehnert, U. (1998). The effects of different lengths of time for planning on second language performance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 20(1), 83-108.
- Movahed, R. & Karkia, P. (2014). Reading/Listening and the 4/3/2 on EFL students' speaking skills. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 6(1): 54-66.
- Nation, P. (1989). Improving speaking fluency. *System*, 17(3), 377-384.
- Nation, P. (1997). Developing fluency in language use. *KIFL Academic Journal*, 6, 30-35.
- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology: A Textbook For Teachers*, London: Prentice Hall.
- Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. New York: McGraw- Hill.
- Pearsall, J. (Ed.) (1998) *The new Oxford dictionary of English*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tran, T. N. Y. & Nation, P. (2014). Reading speed improvement in a speed reading course and its effects on language memory. *Electronic Journal of English Language Teaching*, 11(1), 5-20.
- Wigglesworth, G. (1997). An investigation of planning time and proficiency level on oral test discourse. *Language Testing*, 14(1), 85-106.
- Wigglesworth, G., & Storch, N. (2009). Pair versus individual writing: Effects on fluency, complexity and accuracy. *Language Testing* 26(3), 445-466.
- Yuan, F., & Ellis, R. (2003). The effects of pretask planning and on-line planning on fluency, complexity, and accuracy in L2 monologic oral production. *Applied Linguistics*, 24, 1-27.
- Yang, Y. I. J. (2014). The Development of Speaking Fluency: The 4/3/2 technique for the EFL learners in China. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 3(4), 55-70.

TÓM TẮT

PHÁT TRIỂN KHẢ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH CHO NGƯỜI HỌC VIỆT NAM BẰNG KỸ THUẬT 4/3/2

Các nghiên cứu trước đây đã báo cáo hiệu quả của các phương pháp mà giáo viên sử dụng trong quá trình dạy Kỹ năng Nói nói chung tại các lớp học tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam. Tuy nhiên, chưa có nhiều nhà khoa học và giáo viên tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam quan tâm đến việc sử dụng các kỹ thuật để giúp học sinh nâng cao độ lưu loát trong khi nói tiếng Anh. Nghiên cứu này xem xét kỹ thuật 4/3/2 trong các lớp học tiếng Anh. Số liệu được thu thập thông qua thực nghiệm đối với sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm thứ nhất. Kết quả cho thấy nhóm thực nghiệm vượt trội so với nhóm đối chứng cả về độ chính xác và độ lưu loát. Nghiên cứu đã góp phần làm nổi bật lợi ích của kỹ thuật 4/3/2 và đưa ra nhận định rằng độ chính xác và độ lưu loát trong ngôn ngữ không cần thiết phải tỷ lệ nghịch với nhau.