

Research Article

Effects of a Fluency-Based Intervention on Students' Accuracy, Fluency, Motivation and Self-Confidence in English as an Additional Language

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Abstract

A large discrepancy between national exam results and final grades in English has been found in compulsory school in Sweden. Between 1.9% and 18.7%, depending on which school, of students receive a course grade that is different from their grade on the national exam. As a result, many students have not in reality reached the criteria for the passing grade. In this study a method of learning English as a second language through fluency-based tasks is used and the effects on accuracy, fluency, self-esteem and motivation were studied. The participants were students in year one in college. The intervention had one part where the students told each other about various topics and another where they were encouraged to practice their writing skills by keeping a journal. The students were assessed using an evaluation test, a questionnaire and a final test. The results showed an overall increase in accuracy, fluency, self-confidence and motivation in the fluency-based task.

ABBREVIATIONS

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

INTRODUCTION

When Swedish students finish compulsory school, they are all tested using standardized national exams in some core subjects. English is one of the core subjects. Students are given a 'pass' grade in English when they leave compulsory school, even if, in reality, they have not reached the criteria for the passing grade. This is a problem that has been highlighted by the Swedish Teaching Union and the Swedish media. Large discrepancies have been found between the results of the national exams and the final grades given to the students. The percentage of students that were given a higher grade than their national exam result varied between 1.9 % up to 18.7% in the different schools [1,2].

The purpose of this study was to examine a fluency-based intervention in English as an additional language and the effects on students' motivation and self-confidence, as well as accuracy and fluency. The experimental-group were students in the college that started year 1, and on paper had the grade pass from compulsory school, but in reality had not reached that level. Bahous [1] and Rubinfeld, Sinclair and Clément [4] suggest that the student's goals are directly linked to the success of additional language learning. This study focuses on testing the hypothesis that the Fluency-Based intervention will increase the student's level of self-confidence, accuracy and fluency and also enhance motivation.

Communicative competence

According to Bahous [3], one way of increasing motivation is to use communicative methods. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced in the 1970's as a reaction to the traditional grammar-translation method [5]. Gradually CLT has moved more and more towards the importance of getting the meaning across and the ability to communicate. The goal within CLT is to gain the ability to use the language in an appropriate way according to the situation, and to be able to use various 'communication strategies' in conversation. Although the main focus is on speaking, speaking is not promoted at the expense of the other skills. Communication is also encouraged within writing.

Language learning has also shifted from the control of the teacher to more of a focus on the student. Interaction and co-operation between language learners are key points as well as responding to feedback and utilizing input. Getting learners to take risks and learn through error are also important strategies for working on improving language skills. The methodology must also change to fit in with these goals and processes and is moving towards working in groups or pairs, using role play as well as working on different projects [5]. On a theoretical level, research in language learning has been interested in exploring the concept of 'Communicative Approaches'. This concept concerns two main areas: 'Communicative Competence' and 'Communicative Performance'. Competence refers to knowledge of the use of grammar and language. Performance refers to knowing when

and how to use the language in communication. These theories have been further developed and more emphasis has been put on being understood rather than using correct grammar [7].

The term communicative competence has been used in many different ways. Chomsky used the term 'competence' to refer to the rules of grammar only. It was thought to reflect the internalized system of a native speaker [7]. Hymes [8] suggested a broader concept as speech with correct grammar does not need to make sense. A sentence such as "the blue car ate the big church" is grammatically correct but incoherent. The concept of communicative competence accounts for this problem as it intended to include the 'appropriateness' of an utterance. For example, "the boy ate the apple," which is both grammatically correct and appropriate. Canale and Swain [7] suggest that native speakers tend to be more focused on the use of language, rather than the grammar, during 'normal conversation' and also liken the additional language learner to a first language acquirer. They suggest that, in the beginning, more focus should be on being understood and in understanding, as people around you will try to work out what your message is rather than thinking about the correctness of the utterance.

Language acquisition in additional language learning

Krashen [9] discusses the role of the 'Monitor Theory'. This theory suggests that adult additional language learners have two systems for gaining knowledge of a second language. One system is subconscious; we acquire knowledge, and the other system is conscious; we actively learn the language. The interaction of both these systems is needed for successful communicative competence. According to Pinker [10] we are only capable of efficiently acquiring language up until the age of 6 and then it slows down gradually until after puberty. Pinker also believes that it is very rare for adults to acquire a language as our brain seems to lose that capacity as we get older. Krashen [9] does not agree with this and proposes that adults still have the ability to acquire language, and that this ability is an important part of language development. Carroll [11] suggests that those who still have a high aptitude for language learning are those who have not lost their ability to acquire language after childhood.

Bahous [3] found that the students were not motivated to learn an additional language if the teaching methods were uninteresting or unrelated to their future needs (for example methods with too much focus on writing), or lessons that did not generate new and interesting experiences. Teaching methods, therefore, play an important part in creating motivation. Harmer [6] divides motivation into two major parts: 'extrinsic' motivation which is affected by outside factors such as needs and wants, and 'intrinsic' motivation which is affected by inside factors such as feeling good about something. Although both types of motivation are of importance and often work together, Harmer suggests that intrinsic motivation is found to be the most important for success.

Students who need to pass an English course to get their qualifications might be motivated during the initial part of the course. If the students are successful and start to feel good about learning the language, the intrinsic motivation will further enhance the learning. If, on the other hand, the student finds learning the language difficult and does not feel successful, the

lack of intrinsic motivation can lead to the student failing the course [6]. Sheldon, [12] also suggest that there is a connection between self-made motives and intrinsic goal 'contents'; they both make you feel better.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Students, 1st year at a vocational college participated in this study. All the students had been given a 'pass' grade in English when leaving year 9 of Compulsory School. To discover any students that in reality fell below the appropriate 'pass' standard for English 5 (former English A), all students, 1st year were tested in reading, writing and listening comprehension during the first weeks of term. The tests used were National Exams for year 9 available at National Agency for Education [11]. Out of 62 students, 16 did not reach a pass level and were told to participate in English support. Prior to this study all of them were asked to participate and 8 of them accepted the offer to carry out specific tasks over a period of six weeks.

Interventions

The intervention consisted of one lesson of 80 minutes per week in school, and three specific homework tasks per week for six weeks. This included speaking, writing and grammar but with focus on fluency. Each student was asked to find a text in a newspaper, online, in a magazine or use any other source of his or her choice. They chose their own topic of interest. Once they had found an interesting topic they had to make sure they understood all the words in their text. The students were asked to translate all the words that they did not understand and write them down. They also had to make a wordlist by picking out five words from the ones they did not understand. The students then prepared to talk about their text in groups of three to four participants. Everyone in the group took turns telling each other about their text. When they introduced their topic they also explained why they chose the topic, and what made it interesting to them.

After each meeting they made journal entries including:

- The date of the meeting.
- The names of members of the group that attended.
- A short summary of their own and the other member's texts, and the reasons for why they chose them.
- What they thought of the texts and why.
- A description of what happened in the meeting including comments about the meeting as a whole. For example: if everybody was well prepared and if the presentations were easy to understand.
- What they learned from the presentations.
- What they could improve for their next presentation.

Assessment

In order to assess the change in the student's motivation, self-confidence, written accuracy and fluency, the evaluation test was compared with a final written test and a qualitative questionnaire at the end of the tasks. The evaluation test was the writing part

of a year 9 National Exam available at National Agency for Education (2011). This test was administered to all students, 1st year to discover those that fell below the pass criteria. The test procedure followed that of the National Exam; the students had one hour to answer one out of two questions which both tested their accuracy and fluency.

At the end of the tasks, the students answered a qualitative questionnaire with a mix of open-ended questions, each followed by a semantic differential scale. The questionnaire was devised to find out how the students perceived their change in motivation, self-confidence, accuracy and fluency before their final written test.

The final test was a written assignment with the same form, level of difficulty and procedure as the evaluation test. The results were compared to both the evaluation test and the student's perceived change.

Analysis of data

The questionnaire provided data for the students' perceived change in accuracy, fluency and self-confidence. The written tests provided data for accuracy and fluency. Accuracy was analyzed for mistakes in syntax and morphology. In particular, transfer, prepositions, determiners, tense, singular and plural nouns and the inflection -s in third person present simple tense. Fluency was measured using the analytic tool VocabProfile available online (Cobb, *Web Vocabprofile*). VocabProfile analyses the 'relative proportion of words from different frequency levels' [15]. As lexical frequency sorts the total number of words into different

categories it avoids any misconceptions about repetitive use of language. If only word count is used as a measure of fluency it does not show what words are used and how many times each word is used. The categories used in the analytic tool are the first thousand most frequent words, the second thousand most frequent words, academic words and off-list words. The questionnaire and the written tests were also used qualitatively to assess the effects of the motivation and self-confidence on their writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented on an individual level. First the results from the fluency and accuracy test are reported (Table 1 and 2). Thereafter, perceived self-confidence and perceived speaking and writing ability are reported.

Fluency and accuracy

Table 1 compares the student's relative proportion of words from different frequency levels, i.e. the first 1000 most frequent words, the second 1000 most frequent words, academic words and off-list words.

The most important finding is that the majority of students show an increase of vocabulary as there was an increased use of the 2nd 1000 most frequent words in test 2 compared to test 1. Student F's scores are the reverse of the rest of the group. This could be due to the topic the student chose as this has some influence on the words used when writing about it. Student H follows the main trend when it comes to the 1st 1000 most frequent word category but not in the 2nd 1000 most frequent

Table 1: LexicalFrequencyProfile.

	1st 1000		2nd 1000		Academic Words		Off-list words	
	Test 1	Test 2	Test 1	Test 2	Test 1	Test 2	Test 1	Test 2
Student A	92.86	89.5	4.29	6.63	0.36	0.28	2.5	3.59
Student B	86.05	81.6	4.65	5.66	1.74	1.42	7.56	11.32
Student C	91.46	79.09	7.04	9.55	0	2.27	1.51	9.09
Student D	89.39	87.83	1.52	4.15	2.27	0	6.82	8.01
Student E	88.03	87.94	3.47	3.52	1.16	3.52	7.34	5.03
Student F	89.94	95.06	6.92	1.65	0	0	3.14	3.29
Student G	84.39	81.48	3.47	9.88	1.16	3.09	10.98	5.56
Student H	84.21	79.9	7.02	4.64	0.88	1.03	7.89	14.43

Table 2: Comparisons of the proportion of errors to the amount of words written.

	Test 1			Test 2		
	word count	errors	% errors	word count	errors	% errors
Student A	280	40	14.2	362	49	13.5
Student B	172	56	32.5	212	62	29.2
Student C	199	43	21.6	220	32	14.5
Student D	132	10	13.2	337	36	10.6
Student E	259	48	18.5	199	23	11.6
Student F	159	34	21.3	243	41	16.9
Student G	173	48	27.7	162	43	26.5
Student H	114	20	17.5	194	25	12.9

word category. The off-list words have, however, nearly doubled as this student wrote about different types of cars and many specific brand names were used. There is an overall increase in writing fluency among the students.

Both tasks show an overall increase in fluency and accuracy. Most students have written longer texts and become more accurate even when they had to produce a text within a set time. This could be attributed to the journal writing that the students were undertaking, and/or the acquisition process during their task. Student E showed a decrease in fluency but a quite large increase in accuracy. This student could have changed from 'one who speaks without knowledge of rules or fear of being incorrect' to 'one who feels the need for accuracy to the extent that it inhibits the communication'.

Perceived self-confidence

Figure 1 shows the students change in perceived self-confidence at the end of the task. The bars are in proportion with the students' markings on their Semantic Differential Scales.

All students have perceived an increase in confidence, which is in agreement with the results of fluency. Their increase in confidence was very clear throughout the task. They seemed to communicate without fear of being incorrect or made fools of. The one deviation from the fluency results was Student E.

Perceived increase in writing ability

Figure 2 shows the students perceived change in ability to write a longer text at the end of the task. The bars are in proportion with the students' markings on their Semantic Differential Scale.

Half the students had marked only a slight change in ability to write a longer text. The results of the change in word count from Test 1 to Test 2 was not in agreement with the perceived ability of students F and H who wrote notably longer texts.

Perceived speaking and writing fluency

Figure 3 shows the students perceived change in speaking and writing fluency at the end of the task. The bars are in proportion with the students' markings on their Semantic Differential Scales.

All students performed more confidently as the task went on. Student H was the one who seemed most worried about speaking to the other members in the group. This is in agreement with the low perceived change in fluency of Student H. Student D marked a big increase in perceived fluency that is in agreement with the test results where the word count had increased from 132 to 337 words. Student D was the student who gained most confidence throughout this task and this is clearly reflected in the results.

Perceived accuracy

Figure 4 shows the students perceived change in accuracy at the end of the task. The bars are in proportion with the students' markings on their Semantic Differential Scales.

All the students marked an increase in their perceived change in accuracy. Student D has marked by far the largest perceived increase. Taken into account that the length of text had increased dramatically, together with an increase in words in the 2nd 1000 most frequent words and the total amount of errors in the texts

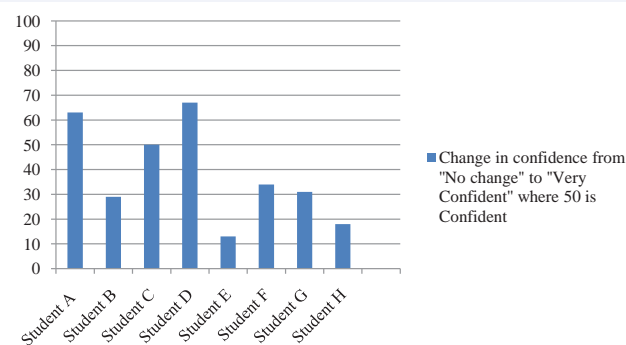


Figure 1 Perceived change in self-confidence.

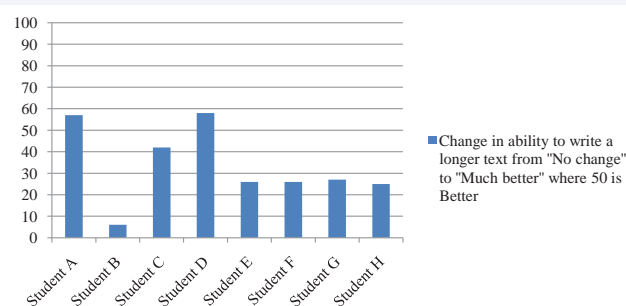


Figure 2 Perceived change in ability to write a longer text.

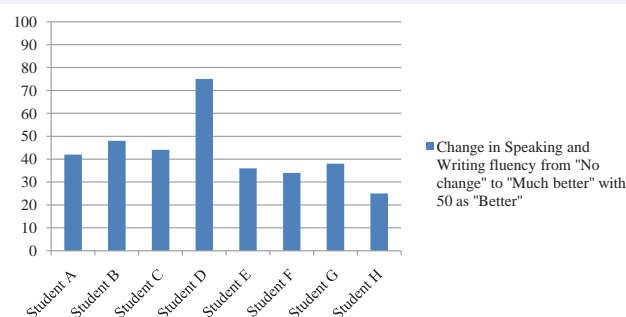


Figure 3 Perceived change in speaking and writing fluency.

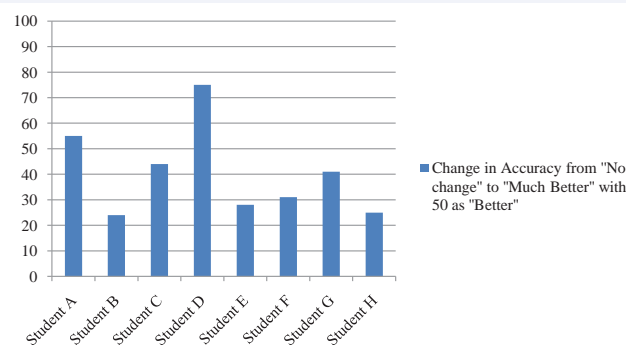


Figure 4 Perceived change in accuracy.

had decreased from 13.2 to 10.6 percent in the second test, this is a good accomplishment that warrants the increase in self-confidence.

DISCUSSION

English is a core subject in all Swedish national programs, which means that to attain their qualifications, Swedish students need to pass the English course [13]. Thus, learning English is an extrinsic goal for Swedish students. The extent to which learning English is an intrinsic goal might be marked by the low-intergrative motivation and difficulties with the English language. As intrinsic goals are most likely to motivate the students and promote well-being, it is important to try and find goals that will help the students succeed, especially those that find the English language difficult. Clearly there has been a big change in attitude towards language learning and teaching throughout the second half of the 20th century. The communicative approaches have developed towards an emphasis on fluency, rather than accuracy, and the focus has moved from the teacher to the student [6,5]. Krashen [9] points out three different types of learners: the ones who feel the need for accuracy to the extent that it inhibits the communication, the ones who have acquired most parts of the language and speak without knowledge of rules or fear of being incorrect, and finally, the ones who integrate acquisition with learning and use rules in written and prepared speech, and fluency during unprepared speech. Individual differences in how we learn an additional language call for language teaching to be flexible and adapted to suit all different types of individuals. Working in groups, using role-play and working in different projects are all methods within CLT that will encourage personal development [5].

The intervention in this study contained many of the features that according to Richards [5] provide a good learning environment. The task contained interaction through communication and encouraged the students to use their language skills and it accounted for individual differences and was done with the student in focus and the teacher in the background. The students practiced their writing by summarizing the other group member's texts in a journal. The journal was also used to highlight some of their grammatical errors. This was done in a way that did not inhibit the students' writing fluency as Tuan [14] suggests that 'correcting students' written assignments will contribute to mental blockage and inhibit fluency.

The students were made aware that fluency was more important than accuracy in their journal and that the purpose with correcting some of their errors was to help them in spotting mistakes and learn from them. The students were encouraged to ask the teacher to explain any of the faults that they did not understand. This way of writing a journal will encourage fluency at the same time as the students are made aware of their grammatical errors in a context that they have written themselves. The results showed that grammatical rules may be easier to understand if they are taught individually using the students' own texts as it follows their own train of thought. As the accuracy improved for all the students with this method, it can be concluded that it has some effect, but more studies need to be done to compare error improvement in different methods.

Difficulties in learning a language can lead to feelings of failure, and cause a lack of intrinsic motivation, which can lead to failure in the course. This is one of the biggest challenges a teacher has to overcome. To find exercises that encourage and make the student grow is very important. The attitude of the peers also plays an important part in the learning process [6,5]. This has been obvious in this study; the students were very supportive and encouraging towards each other. They even took on the teacher's role at some points; they told peers off for not being well prepared, and also supported each other by filling in word gaps as a group member forgot an English word during their presentation.

CONCLUSION

There was a change in focus from the unreachable long-term goal of passing the English course, to the reachable short-term goal of finishing this part of the course. The students have been successful in their task as it was encouraging and confidence building. This finding is in agreement with other researchers. The reason for doing something is the main contributor to a behavior. To reach the students that have had bad past experiences in their second language learning, we think that we need to understand their past and what drives them, to figure out how we best can change their attitude and help them re-gain their self-confidence and motivation. The majority of students show an increase of vocabulary between test session one and two and in addition to this, all participated students marked an increase in their perceived change in accuracy. If all students can be given a chance to learn an additional language in compliance with their individual needs and nearly all teenagers when interacting with peers online use abilities, and feel successful, we will have more motivated self-confident students as English in particular.

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