BOOK REVIEW

Tavakoli, Parvaneh & Clare Wright. 2020. *Second Language Speech Fluency. From Research to Practice*. Cambridge: C.U.P. ix + 190 pp.
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Fluency has a long tradition as an aim in L2 teaching and assessment, where it has been especially discussed as part of the complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) triad (or more recently CALF with the addition of lexis). In this work, the focus is exclusively on fluency, problematizing the construct and placing it in a broader perspective with the ultimate aim of “provid[ing] a unifying account of L2 fluency across different subdisciplines of applied linguistics, discuss[ing] how these different perspectives can complement each other and [...] emphasiz[ing] the need for a more collaborative approach to researching L2 speech fluency.” (o.c.: 2) As such, the focus of the book is on research, rather than practice, and the subtitle may be slightly misleading since also the chapters on language pedagogy and language testing mainly focus on the research conducted in these domains and the implications for further research.

The introductory chapter provides a preliminary exploration, linking fluency to communicative competence and introducing Segalowitz’ (2010) distinction between cognitive fluency, utterance fluency and perceptual fluency. The chapter goes on to discuss fluency in relation to cognitive models of speech production and CA(L)F models, and concludes with a brief survey of recent research trends introducing other aspects such as context, affective factors, and perceptions of fluency.

The second chapter starts with a discussion of fluency as a measure of automaticity linked to an increased ease of access to linguistic knowledge (i.e. cognitive fluency). In such a view, speed, pausing and repair would be seen as resp. positive and negative indicators of L2 fluency. The authors point out that such operationalizations are problematic. Pauses, for example, have multiple functions, some of which are common between L2 and L1, or they can relate to individual speaking behaviour. Pausing behaviour is also determined by the type of interaction (monologic vs dialogic) and listeners’ perceptions of fluency will, in turn, be determined by this. The authors support these and other points referring to research on pausing in L1 and L2 and research on individual learner traits.

In chapter three different measures of fluency are reviewed. The chapter starts with a brief historical overview, before zooming in on speech fluency, breakdown

fluency (pausing) and repair fluency. The authors provide an overview of different indices of fluency (o.c.: 55) and go on to identify a number of measuring issues related to the need for contextualization; most research has been conducted in monologic settings, and cannot be transposed to other settings such as conversation or computer-mediated communication.

With its focus on authentic language use, the task-based language teaching (TBLT) framework has provided a fruitful context for fluency research. Chapter four surveys the effects on fluency of several parameters of task design and task implementation, such as organization, reasoning demands, amount and immediacy of information, familiarity, planning time, number of participants, etc. The authors argue for the introduction of an additional socio-pragmatic perspective paying attention to communicative purpose and communicative effects.

Chapter five zooms in on language pedagogy. It starts off with an analysis of descriptors of fluency in three benchmarks set in policy documents (the CEFR, the UK GCSE, and the Hong Kong ELC), and summarizes three studies on how fluency is treated in different textbooks. This is followed by a four page summary of the research on classroom activities promoting fluency. The term 'activities' may be a bit of a misnomer, given that four out of the six refer to points of attention (formulaic sequences, planning time, awareness raising, task repetition) rather than specific activities (the 4/3/2 technique and strategy training). The chapter concludes with a review of three studies on teacher perceptions of fluency. The authors conclude that evidence of L2 pedagogy relating to fluency is limited, and that fluency is not systematically defined and discussed in its own right, but is usually seen as a corollary of proficiency.

Fluency has taken centre stage in the assessment of spoken language. Chapter six starts off with a brief historical survey, followed by a comparison of how fluency is operationalized in four major tests (Aptis, IELTS, PTE Academic and TOEFL iBT). Next, the authors review five studies investigating in how far objective measures of fluency correlate with proficiency in assessed test samples. The picture that emerges is that fluency development is not linear, and that it cannot be used to distinguish specific levels of proficiency. The authors advocate using qualitative methodologies to gain a better insight into different levels of proficiency, and review the results of three studies using a conversation analysis approach. A concluding section addresses the problems faced by raters. Automated measuring of temporal aspects of fluency has been suggested as a solution to subjectivity issues, but the authors seem to be rather sceptical, echoing Ginther et al.'s (2010: 394) argument that the ultimate aim of testing is predicting the ability to communicate successfully with humans.

Chapter seven considerably broadens the scope of the discussion. The authors address the limitations of fluency research to date, in that it has mainly used

native speaker norms and focused on English as a foreign language. They suggest rephrasing the norms in terms of L2 speakers, taking into account their L1 background, and using learner corpora. The chapter continues with an exploration of what can be learnt about fluency development from study abroad (immersion) research and concludes with an extended summary of Wright (2020) on developing fluency in Mandarin.

The concluding chapter recaps the main ideas from the different chapters. The authors strongly advocate the use of multilingual norms and emphasize the multidimensionality of fluency. It could be argued that, in emphasizing the use of multilingual norms, the authors are, paradoxically, taking a very English-centered standpoint. Surely, it is because English is increasingly used as a lingua franca that the native speaker norm no longer holds. If one follows the authors' argument (o.c.: 39) that the judgement of the recipient of the speech act should be taken into account, one could also argue that native speaker norms are still important for less internationalized languages and less international contexts. The authors convincingly demonstrate that fluency merits a more nuanced treatment, taking into account various aspects of the speaking context and individual speaking styles – the latter does mean that automated ratings will always remain elusive.

References

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