

INDIGENOUS RATING SCALES FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF FLUENCY

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Introduction:

Communication is all pervasive and is an indispensable skill in the present scenario. English Language Teaching at the tertiary level aims to develop the four major skills of the language – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The learners who are exposed to the receptive skills (Listening and Reading) and productive skills (Speaking and Writing) in the language classroom are periodically assessed. In teaching, all the skills are given their due importance but in testing only the writing skills of the learners are primarily evaluated. Fluency or speaking skill is rarely gauged in Indian classrooms because of various technical and administrative constraints. This is generally regarded as the chief reason for the inability of the tertiary learners to converse fluently in English. The students who are assessed for their fluency in campus interview find it extremely difficult to get selected. This research paper attempts to suggest indigenous rating scales for fluency which can be used effectively to assess the learners at tertiary level.

Fluency – Definition and Components:

Fluency is considered to be a very important component in effective oral communication. Fluency, which is associated with the ability to speak easily or readily, has gained greater significance in the era of globalization. Success in today's life has become a

correlative to the acquisition of fluency. Considering the vitality of fluency, Communicative Language Theories project fluency as one of the main objectives in imparting the language skills.

Lennon (2000) defines fluency as ‘the rapid, smooth, accurate, lucid, and effective translation of thought or communicative intention into language under the temporal constraints of speech’. Weir (1993) considers fluency as the ‘smoothness in execution’. He further regards ‘effortless in communication’, ‘smoothness’ and ‘flow of speech’ as the constituents of linguistic fluency. Beardsmore in his online article ‘*Testing Oral Fluency*’ calls fluency the ‘ability to manipulate connected speech’. Ejzenberg (2000) in her paper ‘*The Juggling Act of Oral Fluency: A Psycho-Sociolinguistic Metaphor*’ explains fluency as ‘the perception of the ease with which a speaker delivers the message, making it appear to be smooth and naturally paced to the learner’. Hesitation markers and pauses which hinder fluency are well studied by Fulcher (1996) and Riggensbach (1991). Pawley and Syder (2000) in their seminal paper titled ‘*The One Clause-at-a-time Hypothesis*’ identify pause as a potential marker of encoding acts and distinguish the planned and unplanned pauses in fluency.

There are certain common elements that emerge when the stated definitions for fluency are well considered. Three components prominently stand out as elements responsible and associated with fluency. They are (i) Transfer of Meaning, (ii) Delivery of Meaning and (iii) Effortless in Production. Testing is an integral part of all education. Fillmore (1979) explains that fluency can be measured by looking at the flow of language production, the degree of control of language items and the way language and content interact. The basic unit required for testing fluency is the production of language. The production of language may be done through structured tasks (Eg. Extempore) and unstructured tasks (Eg. Role Play, Personal Interview, Group Discussion).

Rating Scales for Testing Fluency:

There are several Western rating scales available to test oral fluency. Lado (1970) recommends five components for the analysis of oral language. They are: 1. Pronunciation (including the segmental features - vowels and consonants – and the stress and intonation patterns), 2. Grammar, 3. Vocabulary, 4. Fluency (the ease and speed of the flow of speech) and 5. Comprehension (response to language as well as initiation). Lado's sample oral rating scale further divides each of these five components into five segments for clear analysis and for the examiner's purpose of marking. The numbers given at the beginning indicate the marks and the standards or the norms for deciding on the marks to be awarded are given against each mark. The scale for fluency is as follows:

- 5 - Speech is as fluent and effortless as that of a native speaker.
- 4 - Speed of speech seems to be slightly affected by language problems.
- 3 - Speed and fluency are rather strongly affected by language problems.
- 2 - Usually hesitant; often forced into silence by language limitations.
- 1 - Speech is halting and fragmentary as to make conversation virtually impossible.

FSI Rating Scale rated the candidate on a six-point scale. The six-point scale has factors like Accent, Grammar, Vocabulary and Fluency. Fluency was rated between uneven to complete on a six point scale. The point arrived at was weighed and converted to a complex FSI Level. The scale moreover, assumes linear development in language proficiency from zero to perfect. For example, in FSI fluency rating scale, in Band One, the candidate finds it virtually impossible to converse and in the Last Band the candidate speaks like a native speaker. The FSI fluency band considers the factors like speed of delivery; hesitation and unevenness modified by 'very',

‘frequently’ and ‘occasionally’ in bands two to four. The FSI scale provides a model for many oral skills test to emulate. The concepts behind the FSI scale even though not well defined found their way into several speaking skill rating scales.

The ILR rating scales which came into existence in 1968 contains six bands. The scale like FSI begins with no ability and sums up with native-speaker ability. The ACTFL rating scale as reported by Fulcher (2003) has ratings for students like Novice (low, Mid, High), Intermediate (low, Mid, High), Advanced, Advanced Plus and Superior. This scale treats all those who secure three and above in ILR rating scale as Superior. The Revised 1999 ACTFL scale has three sections for Advanced level (High, Mid and Low) to allow finer discrimination among advanced learners. Abdul Shahir (2007) introduced a fluency rating scale which places the learners in seven different bands.

Some of the leading testing bodies such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Certificate in English Language Skills (CELS), Certificate in English as a Foreign Language (CEFL), Business English Certificate (BEC) and Business Language Testing Service (BULATS) have separate rating scale and measurement techniques to assess fluency. However, they do not meet the specific requirements of an Indian teacher when attempting to test fluency in the traditional classroom environment.

Designed Fluency Rating Scale:

Fluency can be assessed through structured language task like extempore and unstructured tasks such as role play, group discussion and personal interview. For structured

language task, Robert Lado's scale has been modified considering the Indian learners' linguistic and communicative competence. The scale designed is as follows:

Marks	Criteria
5	The Speech is fluent and effortless. It is also close to the level of the native speaker
4	The speech is fluent and there are negligible pauses, repetition, self-correction and monosyllabic prefixes.
3	The speech shows speed and momentum but there are more pauses, repetitions, self-corrections and monosyllabic prefixes.
2	The speech is continuous to some extent but the learner is hesitant and he is often forced into silence because of language limitations.
1	The Speech is so halting and in pieces. There is hardly any continuous flow of words.

Rating Scale for The Unstructured Language Tasks:

To rate learners' fluency in the unstructured language eliciting tasks like Group Discussion, Role Play and Interviews, Abdul Shahir's rating scale is simplified to suit the requirements of every language teacher. Instead of placing the learners on the six different bands, the modified scale assigns the learners a score of zero to five for their proficiency in oral fluency.

Score	Criteria
0	Speaker does not reach a level which qualifies him to get the score of one
1	The speaker gives answers in phrases and uses incomplete sentences. The speaker frequently repeats words and also hesitates to speak more. More of fillers such as 'ums' and 'ahs' can be heard and there is more silence between words or ideas. The struggle could also be seen in the body language of the speaker.
2	The speaker is better than those who get a score of one. More hesitation markers can be observed in his language. He speaks fairly in small sentences. Mostly the speaker finds it difficult to complete sentences. Even when asked some related questions, he finds it difficult to add to his language output. His body language also reveals confidence and also his struggle to express his ideas.
3	The speaker is less hesitant than those who get a score of two. He repeats sentences only as semantic fillers and to get more time to generate new ideas. He will give more ideas when prompted or asked related questions. He also self-corrects his speech which is a sign of his monitoring the language output. His gestures and postures complement his oral language.
4	The speaker shows his ability to speak at length giving his opinions with examples. He displays his ability to use different sentence structures. He too monitors his language output and is evident with his self-correction. The learner looks more confident in his nonverbal communication.
5	The speaker is natural in his speech. He uses fillers with ease. His fluency is obvious even when he changes his sentence structure. He moves from one idea to another effortlessly. He also substantiates his arguments with ease and is fluent even when expressing his opinions. The speaker looks absolutely relaxed and the flow of language is quite natural. The speaker is also very close to the fluency level of a native speaker.

Conclusion:

The western rating scales are too intricate for the testing of fluency in a traditional Indian classroom scenario. They are difficult for both the teacher and the student. The designed rating scales are simple even for the learner to understand and perform as per the requirements. The scales also make the teacher assess fluency in a regular classroom without the aid of technology. The designed rating scale if used in schools and colleges would definitely boost the assessment of fluency and would serve as a great tool to promote learners' mastery of oral fluency.

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