

Accuracy and Fluency in Learning English as a Second Language: Towards Achieving Balance in Light of Learners' Needs

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الدقة والطلاقة في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية: نحو تحقيق التوازن في ضوء حاجات المتعلمين

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Received: 01-03-2026	Accepted: 12-05-2026	Published: 21-05-2026
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Abstract

This study discusses the debate between accuracy and fluency in learning English as a second language and highlights the importance of both aspects in developing learners' linguistic competence. Accuracy refers to the learner's ability to use grammar, structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation correctly, whereas fluency is related to the ability to use language effectively for communication in real-life situations. The study argues that focusing on one aspect while neglecting the other may lead to weaknesses in language performance; accuracy alone is not sufficient for effective communication, and fluency without an appropriate level of accuracy may affect clarity and language quality. The study also examines teaching approaches that can help achieve a balance between accuracy and fluency, such as the Presentation, Practice, and Production approach and Task-Based Learning. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of considering learners' needs and learning purposes, particularly in the context of English for Specific Purposes. The study concludes that balancing accuracy and fluency depends on learners' levels, objectives, and target situations, while highlighting the teacher's role in designing activities that integrate correct language use with effective communication.

Keywords: Accuracy, Fluency, English Language Learning, Second Language Acquisition, Task-Based Learning, Learners' Needs, Language Communication.

المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مناقشة جدلية الدقة والطلاقة في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية، وبيان مدى أهمية كل منهما في تنمية الكفاءة اللغوية لدى المتعلمين. وتتناول الدراسة مفهوم الدقة بوصفها قدرة المتعلم على استخدام القواعد والتراكيب والمفردات والنطق بصورة صحيحة، في مقابل الطلاقة التي ترتبط بقدرة المتعلم على استخدام اللغة للتواصل الفعّال في مواقف حقيقية. كما توضح الدراسة أن التركيز على أحد الجانبين دون الآخر قد يؤدي إلى ضعف في الأداء اللغوي؛ فالدقة وحدها لا تكفي لتحقيق التواصل، والطلاقة دون قدر مناسب من الدقة قد تؤثر في وضوح المعنى وجودة الاستخدام اللغوي. وتناقش الدراسة بعض المداخل التعليمية التي تساعد على تحقيق التوازن بين الدقة والطلاقة، مثل مدخل العرض والممارسة والإنتاج، ومدخل التعلم القائم على المهام، إضافة إلى أهمية مراعاة حاجات المتعلمين وأهدافهم من تعلم اللغة، خاصة في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن تحقيق التوازن بين الدقة والطلاقة يعتمد على مستوى المتعلمين، وأهدافهم التعليمية، وطبيعة المواقف التي سيستخدمون فيها اللغة، مع التأكيد على دور المعلم في تصميم أنشطة تعليمية تجمع بين صحة الاستخدام وفاعلية التواصل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدقة اللغوية، الطلاقة اللغوية، تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، اللغة الثانية، التعلم القائم على المهام، حاجات المتعلمين، التواصل اللغوي.

Introduction

Fluency and Accuracy are two fundamental aspects of second language acquisition. Accuracy can be defined as the learner's ability in performance to avoid making errors, supposedly reflecting higher levels of control in using the language. Fluency is the capacity to use language in real time, to emphasize meanings, possibly drawing on more lexicalized systems (Fahim, et al., 201).

The debate about accuracy and fluency is an argument that has been debated for a long time. It is clear that the learners who want to study English as a second language focus on accuracy and learning the grammar usage and give more importance than fluency. According to Cook (2001) from the 1950's, to the early 1990's, teachers were using a traditional approach which focused on teaching sentence level grammar rules without verbal communication. Some researchers pointed out that acquiring a language means learning grammar rules and forms, whereas some people have a different point of view and argue that to learn a language means to learn how to use a language in authentic communications (Molnar, et al., 2014). Therefore, this essay will discuss whether fluency is less important than accuracy depends on the learners' level and their target needs of learning in second language acquisition. It will explain the balance between accuracy and fluency. This essay will first summarize definitions of accuracy and fluency. It will then focus on the importance of accuracy and fluency in English learning and clarify that they are both essential in language acquisition. After that, it will discuss various approaches such as PPP (presentation practice production) and TBL (Task-Based learning) in order to find balance between accuracy and fluency. Finally, it will give an argument about the need for accuracy and fluency.

An overview of Accuracy and Fluency.

Accuracy means how to correct learners' use of the language system, in addition to their use of grammar structure, vocabulary and pronunciation. It is usually compared to fluency when it indicates a learner's level of speaking or writing (Hunter, 2011). Plenty of activities can be used in the classroom to assist learners in producing language with fewer mistakes. For instance, a game of word arrangement to create correct sentences and questions, students have to focus on grammar as well. Drills can be one of the most useful strategies, especially with pronunciation.

In addition, can give some exercises related to particular grammar rules with corrective feedback to help learners to notice their own mistakes. These kinds of activities can contribute to develop accuracy in ESL learners. According to Ellis (1990), one of the important ways of developing accuracy is to realize your mistakes and be aware of how to correct them.

Fluency means helping learners how to communicate well in meaning regardless how many mistakes they make in grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation. It is often compared with accuracy, which is concerned with the type, amount and seriousness of mistakes made (Kuhn, 2004). In order to improve fluency, teachers should concentrate on a group of activities, which focus on communication such as conversation, speaking games and opening a discussion with learners and encouraging them to perform an authentic discourse. This will involve students working in groups and make a relaxed and dynamic environment.

The importance of accuracy and fluency.

In this part, it will be argued that second language acquisition requires both accuracy and fluency. Many researchers have discussed these two components, and have raised arguments in support of either one or the other. As Eskey (1983) claims, "fluency does not insure a formal accuracy in a language." Giving a special interest to fluency, may cause the significant effect on accuracy. However, it will be shown that both accuracy and fluency are interdependent, and neither one is useful without the other. Accuracy and fluency have been used both as performance descriptors for the oral and written assessment of language learners as well as indicators of learners' proficiency underlying their performance, as they have also been used for measuring progress in language learning (Housen and Kuiken, 2009).

Many years ago, teaching methods prioritized accuracy over fluency. For instance, language teachers used the grammar translation method for many years. That was the classical model of teaching method concerning grammar explanation and translation (Cook, 2001). For this as a method, it was important for learners to learn about the form of the second language. The role of the teacher was very restricted, as he/she has controlled in teaching. Students just learn from the teacher and they do what the teacher says, and many learners take into account that the correct answers are necessary and important. If they do not know the answer or make some errors, then it is the teacher's role to give them the correct answer. Nevertheless, in language learning accuracy cannot be considered as sufficient. According to Wang (2015) in the method of grammar translation, the language that learners were using in the class is almost always the learners' mother tongue. Therefore, there is no significant attention to the listening and speaking in the target language. Fluency should be considered in language learning when it comes to listening and speaking skills in the class. There are two essential ways in which fluency takes a role in students' reading improvement; firstly, it involves the development of automatic word recognition, secondly, it deals with prosody, or those elements of fluency that allow oral reading to sound like spoken language (Kuhn, 2004).

An argument in preference of fluency is the functionality of language in authentic life. In everyday life, people usually use the language to express their feelings and thoughts. Fluency is the essential element between communicators, when the purpose is to exchange meaning between them (Wang, Y. 2015). There are some difficulties often faced by ESL learners, while they are communicating each other, that is their expression does not achieve their communicative intention. So speakers may use some strategies in order to solve this issue. For

example, might take advantage of prediction for more successful communication. That is if the two speakers are talking in the same context, one of them can predict what the other one intends to say. For example, from my experience years ago, in one of the hotels in Tripoli, the receptionist was trained for speaking English just to be able to communicate with foreign people. In this situation, in spite of the receptionist having quite inaccurate grammar, he could communicate with some British tourists. As a result of that the British tourists could predict the responses of the receptionist, what they have asked for, the situation (they are at a hotel reception) so, even it was inaccurate language they understood what he meant.

Approaches in finding the balance between accuracy and fluency.

In this section, two different teaching approaches for balancing between accuracy and fluency are considered. The first one is the PPP (presentation, practice, production). It is a classical style for the planning of language lessons, both in the course-books and in classrooms. This approach focuses on the form of language. With this approach (for example, the passive voice) will be presented by the teacher, and then will be practiced in activities and exercises, which are more focused on writing and speaking model. The common way in this case is often pattern drills, after that, the students will have full liberty to use the language that they have learnt in written and spoken and spoken exercises. However, this approach has been criticized because it concentrates only on the grammatical structure, and as a result the linguistic needs of learners may not be satisfied. Moreover, the production stage of this procedure are often based on inauthentic activities which are not very helpful for learners. According to British Council, BBC (2016), this approach has some disadvantages, which can be summarized as following:

- Students feel comfortable and confident with the new language as they produce it accurately, after a few other lessons, learners will not have the ability to produce language conspicuously, or maybe they will not be able to produce it at all.
- Once the learners are able to produce the language, they will overuse the target structure and thus the language the language seems unnatural.
- In the practice stage, learners may stop using target language because they realize that they are confident to use existing resources to complete their activities and exercises.

The second approach is TBL (Task-Based Learning) which can play an important role in developing fluency. Nunan (1989) defined TBL as a technique where learners are encouraged to achieve some activities or find out a solution for problems using their languages. It is an approach in which tasks require a specific outcome that can be achieved by students in using language.

The bright side of this approach is the language is practiced for a real purpose and that means authentic communication can take place. In addition, Murray (2012) points out that when learners are preparing their report to the whole class, in this case, they are obliged to look at language form in general instead of concentrating on one form. Students can perform much better in English use if the focus on form and structures taken away (Murray, 2012). According to Thornbury (1997), the main target of Task-Based Learning is to merge all four skills and to move from fluency to accuracy. TBL has certain stages in a lesson, which start with (pre-task), in this stage, the teacher introduces the task and provides the students with clear instruction to perform the task. Teacher may give students language that will be used in this task. Second, (during-task) teacher give students the opportunity to use the target language and no matter if they commit errors. Teacher has to be ready to clear up any language question or to provide students with any advice. The last stage is (post-task) in this stage, students are provided with

an opportunity to repeat the performance of the task. Teacher may also ask students to practice activities to rise their confident (Careless, 2002).

However, some may ask, why do learners need to balance accuracy and fluency. This question can be answered by looking at ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Each designed course should meet the learners' needs (Wood, 2009). Before designing a course, language teachers should pay more attention to learners' needs to clarify which is more needed; accuracy or fluency. Achieving this purpose depends on how much information can teachers collect about learners' needs in order to know their target needs, and according to that, teacher will realize whether they need to focus more accuracy or fluency. For example, in some situations the learners need English grammar and vocabulary intensively in order to differentiate between grammatical tenses and usage, and the right position of some vocabularies. This situation requires accuracy more than fluency. Still fluency can overcome accuracy when the person aims to study English in order to use the language in specific purposes such as a tourist guide or a hotel receptionist. In this case, teachers may use some methods before designing a course such as questionnaire, interview, and observation. These methods enable them to gather information learners' target situation, then teachers can analyse strategies to manage the target situation, then they can create syllabus according to the documents saying which strategies needed more focus on the two elements accuracy or fluency. For instance, if the documents indicate that the learners need English for only communication, the syllabus should be focused on fluency more than accuracy. However, if the purpose of learners focuses on language form, the method should be concentrated on accuracy. Next is to select and design materials that focused on these strategies. Finally, teachers determine appraisal procedures to examine learners' acquisition of accuracy and fluency (Hunter, 2011).

Personality factors.

I think we as language teachers should be fair in developing accuracy and fluency in learning. It is very important for non-native learners to acquire both for those who are not at a low level of proficiency. In my experience as a second language learner, the fact is that I can speak fluently, understand native English people, but I still lose the use of accuracy when using English for academic purposes. For example, during my academic writing, spontaneously I am thinking in my first language (Arabic) and write my thoughts in the target language (English). This is absolutely a problem, and that is because of the lack of the Accuracy in the target language. That is why I am thinking of some suitable approach such as TBL, which may cover the improvement of both accuracy and fluency. On other side, it was argued that many learners of second language have learned grammar rules perfectly, but they could not use it in the target language to express their real feelings and thoughts and communicate in authentic life (Ellis, 2005). As a result, it could be the teacher does not give students materials that are relevant to the authentic context and communicative situation. Ellis (2003) suggested a solution for this issue, which is to integrate grammar into communicative syllabus to supply purposeful task-based discourse samples. As an example, for the general-purpose learners, grammar- meaning correspondences may be given at their beginning levels, such as comparing between present simple and past simple. Students in this case will not find any difficulty to differentiate between these two verbs. After that, students are then taught grammar-function correspondences such as the tone of must is stronger need to. Having established these two simple tenses, the teacher can suggest the use of prepositions or conjunctions, and try to use them in the two tenses present and past. This strategy will not just acquire students' grammar rules that concentrate on accuracy but it will enable them to focus on fluency as well.

Conclusion

It can be seen that, although many language learners have intensified accuracy over fluency as mentioned previously, it can distinctly be noticed that both fluency and accuracy are significant at various needs for different students of different targets. In spite of some disputations, indicate the importance of accuracy in acquiring linguistic form to use and produce language. Fluency is essential as well as accuracy, taking into account the implantation in a genuine environment. This essay focused on both accuracy and fluency in view of the fact that both strategies are needed in second language acquisition. Concentrating on accuracy or fluency depends on learners' needs, targets and course purposes.

TBL and ESP approaches can present appropriate balance between accuracy and fluency for language teachers, helping them in designing courses that are pertinent to learners' needs and purposes. These courses can improve the effects of learning by the feedback and evaluation. Even though, ESP can provide a suitable solution for this problem, teacher's ability is important also to design a course. As a result it is recommended that language teachers should follow a training program to achieve actual development in future.

Personal reflection

Personally, this essay answered questions that confused me a lot about which are one of language aspects more important accuracy or fluency. After searching in linguistics approaches, I completely understand that this question is could be answered according to students' needs, in the future I will know the suitable way to indicate either fluency or accuracy should be focused in my course. However, both accuracy and fluency are very important in language learning, and following linguistic approaches, such TBL is the right way to make the balance between them in the class. When I was doing my pre-session course, I have met many ESL learners, some of them are fluent (make their meaning clear) but not accurate (make many mistakes). This personal experience encouraged me to find out more strategies of balancing between accuracy and fluency, hopefully in the future we as English teachers can provide all language learners with those two aspects.

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Compliance with ethical standards*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

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