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DEVELOPING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SPEAKING FLUENCY IN ENGLISH: APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

РОЗВИТОК ВІЛЬНОГО УСНОГО МОВЛЕННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ У СТУДЕНТІВ УНІВЕРСИТЕТУ: ПІДХОДИ ТА СТРАТЕГІЇ

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Speaking fluency has become an essential component of second language proficiency, particularly in higher education where students are expected to participate in academic discussions, professional communication, and international exchanges. Although many university students receive years of English instruction, developing fluent oral communication remains challenging due to limited opportunities for meaningful interaction, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and excessive focus on grammatical accuracy. The article examines effective strategies for teaching speaking fluency in English to university students, focusing on theoretical perspectives, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, and emerging technological developments. Particular attention has been paid to the link between fluency, accuracy, and complexity as well as the necessity of a balanced approach to oral language instruction.

Based on research in communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, cognitive approaches to fluency, and recent technology-enhanced learning, the article argues that fluency development requires ongoing opportunities for purposeful communication, repeated performance, strategic support, and learner-centred instruction. Recent developments in artificial intelligence and digital learning environments have also been considered as potential tools for increasing speaking practice and providing personalized feedback. The article concludes that effective fluency instruction should integrate communicative tasks, cognitive support, and carefully designed technological resources while maintaining the central role of meaningful human interaction. The teacher's role is to create conditions in which students can actively use English, experiment with language, discuss meaning, make mistakes and receive constructive feedback.

Key words: speaking fluency, EFL, communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, oral proficiency, AI-assisted language learning.

Вільне мовлення стало важливим компонентом володіння другою мовою, особливо у вищій освіті, де від студентів очікується участь в академічних дискусіях, професійному спілкуванні та міжнародному обміні. Хоча багато студентів університетів роками вивчають англійську мову, розвиток вільного усного спілкування залишається складним завданням через обмежені можливості для змістовної взаємодії, хвилювання та тривогу, страх помилок та надмірну увагу до граматичної точності. У статті розглядаються ефективні стратегії навчання вільного мовлення англійською мовою студентів університетів, зосереджуючись на теоретичних перспективах, педагогічних підходах, методах оцінювання та нових технологічних розробках. Особлива увага приділяється взаємозв'язку між плавністю, точністю та складністю мовлення, а також необхідності збалансованого підходу до навчання усного мовлення.

На основі досліджень у галузі комунікативного викладання мови, викладання мови на основі завдань, когнітивних підходів до плавності мовлення та навчання з використанням технологій, у статті стверджується, що розвиток вільного мовлення вимагає постійних можливостей для цілеспрямованого спілкування, стратегічної підтримки та навчання, орієнтованого на студента. Нещодавні розробки у сфері штучного інтелекту та цифрових навчальних середовищ також розглядаються як потенційні інструменти для покращення практики говоріння та надання персоналізованого зворотного зв'язку. Стаття підсумовує, що ефективне навчання вільному володінню мовою повинно поєднувати комунікативні завдання, когнітивну підтримку та ретельно розроблені технологічні ресурси, зберігаючи при цьому центральну роль змістовної людської взаємодії. Роль викладача полягає у створенні умов, за яких студенти можуть активно використовувати англійську мову, експериментувати з мовою, обговорювати значення, робити помилки та отримувати конструктивний зворотний зв'язок.

Ключові слова: вільне мовлення, англійська як іноземна мова, комунікативне викладання мови, викладання мови на основі завдань, усне володіння мовою, навчання мови за допомогою штучного інтелекту.

Problem statement. The ability to communicate effectively in English has become an important educational goal in universities around the globe. Globalization, international academic collaboration, and the growing use of English as a lingua franca have created greater demand for graduates who can fluently and confidently communicate in spoken English. As a result, universities increasingly recognize oral communication competence as a vital academic and professional skill. Many university students who have studied English for several years continue to experience difficulties with oral fluency. Learners may possess considerable grammatical knowledge and vocabulary but struggle to produce spontaneous speech, maintain conversations, or express complex ideas in real time. These difficulties reflect the complex nature of speaking, which requires simultaneous control of linguistic knowl-

edge, cognitive processing, pronunciation and communication strategies.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Research in second language acquisition has demonstrated that fluency is a multidimensional construct involving speed, smoothness, automaticity, and the ability to communicate effectively without excessive hesitation [13]. Unlike written language, spoken communication requires rapid decision-making and immediate language production. Therefore, developing speaking fluency requires more than memorizing vocabulary or studying grammatical structures; it requires extensive opportunities to use language for meaningful purposes.

Since the early 2000s, approaches to teaching speaking have increasingly moved away from teacher-centred instruction and controlled practice toward communicative and task-based methodologies. *Communicative Language Teaching* emphasizes authentic interaction, while *Task-Based Language Teaching* promotes language use through meaningful tasks that require learners to negotiate meaning and solve problems [5, 12]. These approaches have significantly influenced university English programs and continue to shape current research on oral communication development.

At the same time, recent research has expanded understanding of fluency development by examining cognitive processes, individual differences, classroom interaction, and technological innovation. Studies on speech fluency have highlighted the importance of automaticity and processing efficiency, suggesting that repeated speaking practice can help learners access language resources more rapidly [13].

Furthermore, digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI)-based applications, virtual communication platforms, and automated feedback systems, have created new possibilities for increasing speaking practice beyond the traditional classroom.

However, technology alone does not guarantee improved speaking ability. Successful technology-enhanced language learning depends on appropriate pedagogical design, meaningful communication, and integration with established language teaching principles. Therefore, examining both traditional and emerging approaches is necessary for understanding how university students can improve their speaking fluency.

The purpose of the article is to critically review research on developing speaking fluency to university students. In particular, it explores four main questions. First, it examines how speaking fluency has been approached in second language research. Second, it considers which theoretical and pedagogical approaches can effectively support the development of fluency. Third, it discusses the challenges that may influence university students' speaking fluency. Finally, it explores how recent technological developments can contribute to and improve speaking instruction. The article also aims to provide practical implications for university English instructors and contribute to ongoing discussions about effective strategies for developing speaking fluency.

Presentation of the main material. Speaking fluency is a central but complex concept in second language research. Although commonly associated with the ability to speak smoothly and naturally, fluency includes several dimensions related to speech production, cognitive processing, and communicative effectiveness. Researchers have therefore distinguished between different types of fluency, including cognitive fluency, utterance fluency, and perceived fluency [13].

Cognitive fluency refers to the speaker's ability to access and produce language efficiently through relatively automatic processing. As learners gain experience, frequently used words, grammatical structures, and conversational routines become more accessible, reducing the mental effort required during speech production. Increased automaticity, according to Segalowitz, enables learners to use more cognitive resources to organizing ideas and managing interaction [13].

Utterance fluency refers to measurable characteristics of spoken production, including speech rate, pause frequency, moments of hesitation, and length of fluent speech segments. Researchers often examine features such as the number of words spoken each minute, average length of phrases, and silent pauses to evaluate changes in learners' oral performance [8]. These measures provide useful indicators of development, although they do not fully represent communicative effectiveness.

Perceived fluency concerns how listeners evaluate the smoothness and ease of a speaker's communication. A speaker may use the language that is not fully grammatically correct but still can be perceived as fluent if communication is clear, appropriately paced, and easy to follow. Recent research has emphasized that understanding and clarity are key aspects of successful oral communication in addition to traditional fluency.

A widely used framework in second language research is the relationship among complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Skehan explains that language learners often face competing demands when producing speech [14]. Increasing complexity may reduce accuracy or fluency because learners have limited attention resources. Therefore, effective instruction requires activities that help students gradually develop all three aspects. In university contexts,

speaking fluency should not be understood simply as speaking quickly. Academic and professional communication requires the ability to organize information, express relationships between ideas, respond appropriately to others, and adapt language according to context. Therefore, effective fluency instruction should combine speed and automaticity with interactional competence and communicative effectiveness.

Theoretical Foundations for Teaching Speaking Fluency. *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT) has strongly influenced speaking instruction since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasize grammatical knowledge and controlled language practice, CLT views communication as both the goal and the process of language learning [10]. In speaking classrooms, CLT encourages activities that require genuine information exchange, negotiation of meaning, and purposeful interaction. Examples include discussions, interviews, role plays, debates, and collaborative problem-solving tasks. Such activities increase students' opportunities to produce extended speech and develop confidence in using English.

For university students, CLT is particularly relevant because academic and professional environments require learners to use English for authentic purposes rather than simply demonstrate knowledge of language forms. However, research has also noted that successful implementation of CLT depends on factors such as teacher expertise, classroom size, assessment practices, and institutional expectations [12].

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) represents one of the most influential developments in communicative pedagogy. Ellis defines tasks as activities in which learners use language primarily to achieve a meaningful outcome rather than to practice isolated linguistic forms [5]. Leaners may complete communicative tasks such as solving a problem, making decisions, planning projects, and completing information-gap activities. These tasks create conditions similar to real-world communication and encourage learners to produce more natural fluent language.

Segalowitz argues that fluency develops when learners become able to retrieve and combine linguistic information with less conscious effort [13]. From this perspective, repeated speaking practice is essential. When learners repeatedly perform speaking tasks, common expressions and grammatical patterns become more readily available, allowing them to communicate with fewer pauses and hesitations. This approach has important implications for university teaching. Students need opportunities not only to learn new language but also to practice using existing knowledge more efficiently. Activities such as repeated presentations, timed speaking tasks, and structured discussions can contribute to improved fluency.

Research on task repetition has shown that performing similar speaking tasks more than once can improve fluency by allowing learners to reduce planning demands and focus more attention on language production [3]. This finding has important implications for university teachers because repeated practice can help students develop greater confidence and automaticity. The examples of the task repetition may include the following techniques:

Shadowing, in which learners echo audio input in real time, developing prosodic fluency (rhythm, stress, intonation) alongside processing speed [8].

Retelling and summarizing tasks, which combine listening comprehension with fluency practice by requiring learners to reproduce content in their own words under time pressure.

Long argues that task-based approaches are especially suitable for advanced learners because they connect classroom activities with real communicative needs [11]. In higher education, tasks can be designed around academic presentations, seminars, professional communication, and discipline-specific discussions. For university students, tasks can be connected to their academic and professional interests. For example, students studying business can negotiate a business decision, engineering students can explain a technical process, and students in social sciences can discuss a social problem. Such tasks increase the relevance and authenticity of classroom speaking. However, task difficulty should also be carefully controlled. If a task requires language far beyond students' current resources, learners may spend too much time searching for vocabulary and composing sentences. Appropriate preparation and task sequencing can therefore make communicative tasks more productive.

Challenges Affecting University Students' Speaking Fluency. Although speaking fluency is an important goal of university English education, many learners continue to experience difficulties developing effective oral communication. These challenges are influenced by linguistic, psychological, instructional, and contextual factors.

One major challenge is the difficulty of producing language quickly and efficiently during spontaneous communication. Many university students have studied grammar and vocabulary extensively but have had limited opportunities to use English in real-time interaction. As a result, they may experience slow lexical retrieval, frequent pauses, and hesitation

while organizing their ideas. Segalowitz explains that fluent speech depends on the development of automatic processing [13]. When learners must consciously search for vocabulary or monitor grammatical structures, speech production becomes slower and less continuous. Therefore, students require regular opportunities to practice language use within realistic time limits.

Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in speaking fluency. Students often report that they know many words receptively but cannot access them quickly during conversation. This gap between knowing vocabulary and using it spontaneously can significantly reduce confidence and communication effectiveness. University learners particularly need productive academic vocabulary, discourse markers, and common expressions that support extended speaking. Teaching vocabulary in meaningful contexts and encouraging repeated use can improve learners' ability to retrieve appropriate language during interaction.

Psychological factors strongly influence students' willingness to speak. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and concern about negative feedback can reduce learners' participation in classroom discussions. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope identified communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as major components of foreign language anxiety [9]. Although this research was conducted earlier, subsequent studies have continued to demonstrate that anxiety remains a significant barrier to oral communication. For university students, anxiety may be intensified by academic expectations, public presentations, and comparisons with more competent speakers of the language. Creating non-threatening and supportive classroom environments and providing low-pressure speaking opportunities can help learners gradually develop confidence. Goh and Burns suggest using guided reflections in the form of a writing journal to help students eventually lower their language anxiety. It may give teachers a chance to acknowledge their students' feeling of anxiety and provide positive feedback. If it is appropriate, students can openly be invited to discuss their anxiety [7].

A common limitation in many universities' English programs is the imbalance between teacher talk and student talk. Classes may focus heavily on reading, grammar explanation, and written exercises, leaving limited time for extended oral practice. Fluency development requires substantial speaking time. Short answers to teacher questions are generally insufficient because they do not provide opportunities for learners to develop ideas, maintain interaction, and practice spontaneous language production. Pair work, small-group discussions, presentations, and collaborative tasks can increase individual speaking time and provide more opportunities for meaningful communication.

Assessment practices can also influence students' approaches to speaking. When examinations emphasize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge more than communication ability, students may prioritize correctness over fluency. Focusing exclusively on linguistic accuracy may discourage students from taking risks and experimenting with language. Therefore, effective instruction requires activities that help students gradually develop all three aspects and university speaking assessment should include criteria related to fluency, interaction, and communicative effectiveness [12].

Strategies for Developing Speaking Fluency. Research from the past two decades suggests that effective fluency instruction requires a combination of meaningful interaction, repeated practice, strategic support, and learner's autonomy. Communicative tasks provide learners with opportunities to use English for genuine purposes. It is essential to create an interactive learning environment that allows students to practice spoken English regularly. Group discussions, debates, interviews, presentations, and problem-solving activities encourage students to express opinions, explain ideas, and respond to others. Richards emphasizes that communicative activities should involve real meaning rather than mechanical repetition [12]. For university students, tasks can be connected to academic disciplines, professional situations, and real-world issues.

One of the most supported approaches for improving speaking fluency is task repetition. Bygate demonstrated that repeating similar speaking tasks allows learners to improve performance because they become more familiar with the content and reduce cognitive demands [3]. For example, students may first complete a group discussion, receive feedback, and then repeat the discussion with improved language and organization. While free conversation is valuable, many learners benefit from structured activities that gradually increase speaking demands. Teachers can use a progression from controlled practice to guided communication and finally spontaneous speaking. Some useful activities may include timed monologues, information-gap tasks, role plays, academic discussions, student presentations or debates. These activities help students develop both confidence and fluency.

Feedback should support communication rather than interrupt it. Excessive error correction during

speaking activities may increase anxiety and reduce willingness to communicate. The method of *delayed error correction* has become increasingly popular in recent years. *Delayed error correction* is an effective strategy used in teaching English as a second language where the teacher waits to correct students' errors until a later time, instead of addressing them immediately during class. The approach contrasts with *immediate error correction*, in which the teacher corrects the error instantly when it is made. There are multiple reasons why delayed error correction can be beneficial in language teaching: it allows teachers to concentrate on repeated pronunciation mistakes, ambiguous expressions, vocabulary choices, and grammatical patterns that affect communication. This approach can help to maintain a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere, allowing students to concentrate on their learning [2].

Peer feedback and self-assessment can also encourage learners' awareness and independence. Students can also participate in peer feedback. This practice can help students to develop a better understanding of their own speaking abilities, become more experienced in listening to spoken English, to engage more deeply with the learning goals and expected outcomes of the speaking course, and to learn from each other. Teachers also benefit from peer assessment, as they can share the task of assessment with their students and raise students' autonomy [7]. Students can also record short speaking activities and assess them using a simple checklist. For example, students may consider the following questions:

1. Did I speak fluently without too many pauses and hesitations?
2. Did I structure what I said accurately?
3. Did I use useful phrases to link my ideas?
4. Did I ask and answer questions effectively?
5. What would I improve in my next performance?

Recording and reflecting on speaking performance can make progress more visible. It also shifts some responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student. Teachers can combine self-assessment with specific goals. For instance, a student might initially aim to speak for one minute with limited hesitation and later increase the target to two or three minutes.

Exposing learners to authentic spoken English supports fluency development by providing models of pronunciation, discourse organization, and conversational strategies. University students can benefit from academic lectures, podcasts, interviews, presentations, online discussions, authentic video materials. Combining listening input with speaking activities encourages learners to recognise useful expressions and incorporate them in their own communication. Fluent speakers do not always know every word or structure; they use communication strategies to maintain interaction. Teaching students how to paraphrase, clarify meaning, request repetition, and use discourse markers can improve their ability to communicate successfully despite linguistic limitations.

Technology, AI, and the Future of Speaking Instruction.The rapid development of digital technologies has transformed approaches to second language speaking instruction. Since the early 2000s, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has expanded opportunities for learners to access authentic materials, communicate beyond classroom boundaries, and receive additional language practice. More recently, artificial intelligence (AI), speech recognition systems, and conversational applications have created new possibilities for supporting speaking fluency development.

One of the main advantages of technology-enhanced learning is the expansion of opportunities for oral practice. Traditional classroom settings often limit students' speaking time; however, digital platforms allow learners to practice speaking independently and repeatedly. Online communication tools can also support interaction through virtual discussions, collaborative projects, and international exchanges. Technology should create additional opportunities for meaningful language use rather than simply provide mechanical practice. For university students, AI tools may be particularly useful because they reduce some barriers to speaking practice. Learners who feel anxious about speaking with classmates or teachers may find AI-based conversation less threatening and may practice more frequently.

ChatGPT and *Gemini* – interactive chatbots that facilitate real-time linguistic interaction – have widely been used for developing oral speech and communication skills. They help learners improve their conversational practice and explain grammar rules, word meanings, idioms, and phrasal verbs, which is particularly beneficial for building linguistic competence [1].

Technologies such as *SpeakandImprove* and *SmallTalk2Me* analyse pronunciation, grammar, and stylistic accuracy, helping learners prepare for international language exams and interviews, or simply improve their communication skills [1].

Teachers can utilize platforms, such as *Twee*, to create exercises focused on reading, listening, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking. AI helps tailor tasks to specific learning needs, thereby facilitating the effective assessment of higher education students' knowledge. Furthermore, AI-integrated platforms like *Duolingo* and *Promova* are popular choices for testing and improving language skills, as they adapt

the educational process to the individual needs of students. The use of game-based elements and motivation systems makes the assessment process more engaging and productive [1].

Recent studies indicate that AI-supported speaking applications can contribute to improvements in oral performance when activities are carefully designed and combined with appropriate instructional guidance. However, AI feedback should be interpreted critically because automated systems may not always accurately evaluate pragmatic appropriateness, interactional competence, or complex communication.

Conclusions. Speaking fluency remains a central part of university English education, yet it continues to represent a significant challenge for many learners. Research demonstrates that fluency development is a complex process involving linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, interaction, confidence, and meaningful practice. The article concludes that communicative and task-based approaches provide strong foundations for developing speaking fluency. Activities that require genuine communication, repeated performance, and purposeful interaction allow learners to improve automaticity and confidence. At the same time, cognitive approaches highlight the importance of practice that helps learners access existing language knowledge more efficiently. Recent technological developments, particularly AI-supported speaking tools, provide promising opportunities for expanding speaking practice and offering personalized learning experiences. However, technology is most effective when combined with sound pedagogical principles and teacher guidance.

For university students, successful fluency instruction requires a shift from viewing speaking as the application of previously learned language knowledge toward understanding it as a skill developed through continuous use. Universities should therefore provide learners with frequent opportunities for authentic communication, supportive feedback, and flexible learning environments that prepare them for academic and professional interaction in English.

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