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Properties of personal speaking styles can impact assessment of L2 fluency. OASIS Summary of De Jong et al. (2015) in Applied Psycholinguistics

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Properties of personal speaking styles can impact assessment of L2 fluency

What this research was about and why it is important

Fluency is usually described as speedy and smooth delivery of speech without (filled) pauses, repetitions, and repairs. In second language learning, fluency is often used as a measure of how proficient a learner is. However, someone who pauses a lot in their L1 might likely do the same in their L2. This study was designed to test if fluency in the L2 was related to fluency in the first language. This would mean that L2 fluency is also a matter of personal speaking style. The results confirmed this. They also showed that some measures were more strongly impacted by personal speaking styles than others.

What the researchers did

The researchers studied to what extent L2 fluency measures **and** L2 fluency measures adjusted for L1 speaking styles best reflected their L2 proficiency (measured as vocabulary knowledge).

- *Participants*. 24 L1 Turkish and 29 L1 English intermediate or advanced learners of Dutch in the Netherlands.
- *Speaking tasks*. 8 speaking tasks in the L1 and 8 in the L2. The tasks were similar in the L1 and the L2, but not the same to avoid repetitions. The tasks varied in **complexity** (simple - complex), **formality** (informal - formal), and **discourse mode** (descriptive - persuasive) to get a fair sample of the speaker's speech. Example: Describe (*descriptive*) a graph depicting employment figures in the last 12 years (*complex*) to a good friend (*informal*).
- *Fluency measures*. L2 fluency was measured in 3 ways: 1) **breakdown fluency**, how many silent and non-lexical filled pauses (for example, ...*uhm*...) there were and how long they lasted, 2) **speed fluency**, the average duration of syllables in milliseconds, and 3) **repair fluency**, how many repetitions and corrections there were.
- *Corrected fluency measures*. The researchers compared the L2 fluency scores to **adjusted** L2 fluency scores. The researchers used statistical techniques to calculate corrected L2 fluency scores that take the L1 fluency scores into account.
- *Proficiency measure*. **Vocabulary knowledge** was used as a general measure of L2 proficiency. Participants were presented with a meaningful sentence in which the target word was missing except for the first letter(s). There were 90 single words items and 26 multi-word items. The multi-word items consisted of prepositional phrases and verb-noun collocations where the preposition or the verb was missing.

What the researchers found

- English and Turkish speakers had similar scores on the vocabulary tests, suggesting a similar level of Dutch.
- As expected, all speakers were less fluent in their L2 than in their L1. There were differences in fluency in L1 Turkish and L1 English, but not in their L2 Dutch. The relationship between L1 and L2 fluency measures was the same for both languages suggesting the approach can be used across languages.
- All L2 fluency measures were correlated with the corresponding L1 fluency measures (to a certain extent): for example a person who uses a lot of filled pauses in their L1 does the same in their L2.
- For most of the fluency measures, the uncorrected and the corrected scores were equally accurate in predicting the vocabulary score (proficiency), but for speed fluency the corrected score was a better indicator of L2 proficiency than the uncorrected measure.
- There was no relation between the duration of pauses and proficiency, which was a replication of an earlier larger-scale study where duration of pauses proved to be very poorly related to measures of L2 knowledge and skills.

Things to consider

- For language tests it may be profitable to have L1 behaviour as a baseline.
- Some measures of fluency (such as duration of pauses, and filled pauses) are part of personal speaking style, rather than being an indicator of L2 proficiency.

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