

# Acquisition of "Fluency in L2" through an Overseas Study Program

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A growing number of Japanese young people participate in home-stay study-abroad programs with the primary purpose of improving their ability to communicate in English. Although some empirical studies have reported that as a result of short-term sojourns (from one to four months) students' scores in standard English tests rose significantly as compared with those of the control group (Iwakiri, 1993; Yamane, 1985; Yamamoto, 1992), very little research has been carried out to measure the students' speaking ability.

Our pilot study was an attempt to determine the effect of an overseas study experience on the oral production ability in L2. We compared recorded speech samples of eight students before and after the one year experience in America (Yashima, Yamamoto and Viswat, 1994). It was found that while no across-the-board changes could be observed in the frequency of grammatical mistakes or in vocabulary level, the students could continue speaking for much longer stretches of time using discourse markers more effectively, with increased speech rate and reduced silent pause. This we believe gave the impression that the students displayed a marked improvement in "fluency."

In this study we wish to take a closer look at developmental aspects of "fluency" and how they affect the native speakers' perception of the nonnative speakers' proficiency.

### 1.1 Fluency

Fillmore (1979) outlined four characteristics of native-speaker fluency: the ability to fill time with talk, the ability to talk in coherent, reasoned and "semantically dense" sentences, the ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts, and the ability to be creative and imaginative in language use. According to Lennon (1990) "fluency is an impression on the listener's part that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently." To be recognized as fluent in a language, one must be able to carry on an unrehearsed conversation in such a way that no undo effort is placed on the listener. When the listener becomes aware of the production process such as when an extended pause occurs, conversation becomes strained, the flow of talk is interrupted. Fluent speakers of a language avoid long breaks in conversation by using pause

fillers, such as "you know," "I mean," and "O.K." (Olynsk and d'Anglejan and Sankoff, 1990).

Spontaneous speech contains a certain amount of hesitation. As Chafe suggests, speech production is a creative process on an uncharted course, "pauses, changes of direction and retracing of steps are to be expected." In fact research has found that speech planning is an important function of hesitation (Goldman-Eisler, 1967; Butterworth, 1975; Beattie, 1980). Too much hesitation as often observed among L2 speakers, however, causes the decoding process of the listener to become disturbed and gives the impression that the speech is slow and disfluent. Fluency for L2 learners, therefore, reflects the ability to focus the listener's attention on the speaker's message rather than on the production process.

## 1.2 Hesitation in L2 ( Review of past research)

Maclay and Osgood (1959) categorized hesitation into filled pause (nonwords, such as "er," "em"), unfilled pause (silent pause), repeat and false starts (retraced and non-retraced). Although these four are widely recognized categories of hesitation, stutters, tongue slips, drawls and cutoffs are often regarded as forms of hesitation as well. One can also use fillers such as "you know," "well," "and" to avoid extended pauses. We believe that one learns to hesitate appropriately during the language acquisition process, and analyzing hesitation in L2 speeches gives us some important clues as to the development of fluency. To study fluency in L1, researchers have analyzed, in the tradition of Goldman-Eisler, temporal variables such as speech rate, length and positioning of silent pauses, length of fluent speech runs between pauses, frequency and distribution of filled pauses, repetitions and self-corrections. Still, not many studies on hesitation in L2 aside from the following have been conducted.

Deschanp (1980) compared hesitation in L1 and L2 in the speeches of 20 French learners of English. Although the speech rate dropped from L1 to L2, no change in the proportion of silent pause was observed. On the other hand, the syntactical distribution of pauses was different between L1 and L2. Olynsk, d'Anglejan and Sankoff (1990) attempted to identify "appropriate hesitation" that helps the listener's comprehension. They studied two kinds of speech markers in the speech of ten French speakers of English: progressive markers which are forward moving such as "uh," and repeats; and regressive markers that cause a syntactic readjustment on the part of the listener such as transitions, repair conversions and cutoffs. They found that less fluent speakers used regressive type markers more frequently than did more fluent speakers. The study seems to suggest that progressive markers are more positively related to the impression of fluency than regressive markers.

Hayashi (1984) analyzed the English speech of nine Japanese learners of English and compared the features of their hesitation with those of native

speakers of English. He reported marked differences in the distribution of pauses between NS and NNS. Japanese speakers tend to pause more frequently before function words, reflecting the difficulty they face in the use of function words or syntactic planning, whereas native speakers tend to pause before content words because they are engaged in a lexical search.

Lennon (1990) attempted to identify temporal variables of fluency as performance features that can be good indicators of perceived fluency. In a study of four German students of English who stayed in England for six months, the speech rate in L2 ( words per minute) rose, while repetition and filled pause per t-unit were reduced, and the proportion of unfilled pause time was also reduced over the stay. He found that speech rate and amount of filled pause per T-unit were important fluency indicators.

Whereas some features of fluency have been identified, the developmental aspect of fluency has not been fully explored.

### 1.3 Interpersonal aspect of fluency

Another aspect of fluency which has not received much attention thus far is its influence on interpersonal relationships. From an L2 acquisition perspective, Fillmore (1979) and other researchers have proposed that a high degree of fluency encourages native speakers to interact more extensively with second language learners and that this interaction with native speakers can play an important role in second language acquisition (Krashen 1978, Long 1983, Clement and Kryuidenier, 1985).

In our past research on Japanese high school students' intercultural experience in America, it was found that students attributed the difficulty they faced in making friends to a lack of spoken proficiency. One girl said in an interview, "I couldn't speak English well, so I couldn't make friends. I tried to speak, but then realized that they were getting bored because they went away. It was a traumatic experience. (Yashima and Viswat, 1992)." It requires patience on the part of native speakers to listen to NNS' speech which contain long and frequent pauses. The teachers and host parents probably feel it is their responsibility/duty to listen and try to understand what NNS students want to say, but for students to establish friendships with their peers, participation in conversation as equal partners is mandatory. It seems that an ability to speak "fluently" is necessary to be accepted by one's NS peer group.

### 1.4 The Objectives of this research

The primary objective of this research is to investigate how Japanese high school students develop fluency by focusing on temporal variables of the hesitation phenomena. Our hypothesis is that high school students who have spent a year studying in America will be perceived by native speakers to speak more fluently in English, and the perception of increased fluency will be reflected in a change in the speech rate and the number of disfluency markers.

Second, we hope to shed light on features of "appropriate hesitation" for L2 learners by examining how hesitation features in speech are related to native speakers' perception of fluency.

Finally, other features of fluency such as creative and imaginative language use and interpersonal features will be examined through qualitative analyses of the data.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Participants

Sixteen Japanese high school students (14 girls and 2 boys) participated in the study. They are among a group of 54 students who stayed with American families for one year while attending local high schools from the summer of 1992 to the summer of 1993 as part of the AYA (Academic year in America) program. According to a survey of students who participated in the same program earlier (Yashima & Viswat 1991), the two most important reasons for studying in America were: 1) they wanted "to learn to speak English well," and 2) they had an "interest in America and Americans." The earlier study (Yashima & Viswat, 1991, 1993) also shows that these students have an extremely positive image of Americans and a strong desire to make contact with them at the time of departure.

Prior to their departure, an orientation session was held in Japan, during which time the pre-departure data was collected.

### 2.2 Procedure

**Interview and recording:** Before and after the overseas experience, an interview was conducted by the authors in English. Each interview lasted for about 10 minutes. In the pre-departure interview questions were asked about motivation for participating in the program, family members, best friends at school. After they returned to Japan, the procedure was repeated using the same questions when possible. Each interview was tape recorded for analysis.

**Tape-editing:** Portions of interviews were extracted so that each speech sample lasted approximately 2 to 3 minutes. One person was dropped from the analyses as her speech samples were too short. A total of 30 speech samples (from pre and post interviews of the 15 students) were arranged in random order.

**Rating:** The 30 speech samples in random order were presented to four native speakers as speech samples of 30 speakers. The raters were asked to evaluate the speeches for proficiency in six categories (overall fluency, grammar, pronunciation, appropriateness, amount of information and attitude)<sup>1</sup>, assigning up to 5 points each (1: poor to 5:excellent). They were also asked to rate

their overall impression of each speaker on a 5-point scale (1: regard the student positively to 5: regard the student negatively).

## 2.3 Analyses

All the speech data was transcribed so that any sound made by the speaker was indicated on the transcripts. The amount of unfilled pauses was measured by sound analysis software, SoundEdit 16, on Macintosh. All the pauses .2 sec or longer were indicated on the transcripts. To finalize the transcripts with pauses, each of the researchers checked the transcripts three times. In addition, in accordance with Macley and Osgood's definition of "fluency," repetition, filled pauses and false starts were coded and the number of each type of hesitation was counted.<sup>2</sup> All difficulties in coding were discussed by researchers.

The following temporal variables of fluency/hesitation were measured and calculated:

### Speech rate

- 1) the number of words per minute

### Hesitation

- 2) the percentage of unfilled pauses (UP) in the total length of the text analyzed
- 3) the number of filled pauses (FP) per minute
- 4) the number of filled pauses (FP) for each word in the text (the number of filled pauses divided by the number of words in the text)
- 5) the number of false starts (FS) per minute
- 6) the number of false starts (FS) for each word in the text (the number of false starts divided by the number of words in the text)
- 7) the number of repetitions (R) per minute
- 8) the number of repetitions (R) for each word in the text (the number of repetitions divided by the number of words in the text)

The mean of the above measures was compared between the pre-departure test and post test by means of T-tests. Proficiency ratings by the NS judges on the six aspects of fluency were also compared between the pre-departure and post interviews via T-test. Next, Pearson product-moment correlations between the above measures and the subjective judgment of proficiency and the evaluation of overall impression by the four judges were calculated for the 30 speech samples. SPSS statistics package was used for all the statistical analyses.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Comparison of pre-departure test and post test

First, the mean of the above temporal and hesitation measures was

compared between the pre-departure test and post test by means of T-tests. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. EFL Fluency Developments During Stay in the U.S.A.  
(Temporal variables) N=15

	Pre-test mean (s.d.)	Post-test mean (s.d.)	t-value
<u>Speech rate</u>			
1) words per minute	66.9 (24.6)	115.2 (23.1)	-10.10**
<u>Hesitation</u>			
2) the percentage of UP(%)	48.2 (15.8)	31.8 (9.6)	4.84**
3) N of FP per minute	3.37 (2.8)	3.95 (2.7)	-0.54
4) N of FP per word	0.05 (0.05)	0.04 (0.03)	1.07
5) N of FS per minute	1.50 (1.06)	1.99 (1.49)	0.01
6) N of FS per word	0.023 (0.015)	0.017 (0.012)	1.25
7) N of R per minute	3.84 (2.26)	3.06 (2.58)	1.05
8) N of R per word	0.051 (0.039)	0.034 (0.019)	2.02*

\*\*p<.01    \*p<.05    +p<.1

(UP:unfilled pause, FP:filled pause  
FS:false starts, R:repetition)

The most striking result is the difference in the speech rate between the pre-departure and post test. The students speak in the post test almost twice as fast as they did before departure. A great part of this change can be accounted for by a reduction in the amount of unfilled pause. In the pre-departure test almost half the time per turn (48.2%) was spent without any utterance or sound. That was reduced to one third (31.8%) in the post test. The number of filled pauses per minute increased from 3.37 to 3.95, but the difference was not significant.

As for the number of false starts, no significant change was observed between the pre-departure and post tests. The difference in the number of repetitions between pre-departure and post tests almost reached the significant level.

Next, the four raters' evaluations of the students in the pre-departure and post tests were compared. Table 2 shows the inter-rater correlation among the four raters' ratings of proficiency, indicating fairly high correlations among four raters. Table 3 includes the means of all the proficiency and impression measures in pre-departure and post tests as well as the results of the T-tests. Each figure is an average of the four judges' evaluations of the 15 students.

The evaluation of proficiency significantly improved over the year in all six aspects of proficiency. Likewise the raters had significantly more favorable impressions of the speakers in the post test. Standard deviations are smaller in

the post test, indicating that there is not as much individual variation as in the pre-test (probably due to a ceiling effect).

**Table 2. Inter-rater Correlations between the Four Raters' Ratings**

	Rater 2	Rater 3	Rater 4
Rater 1	.84**	.69**	.78**
Rater 2		.65**	.74**
Rater 3			.58**

(Average correlation=.71)      \*\* p<.01

**Table 3. EFL Fluency Developments During Stay in the U.S.A.**  
(Native speakers' ratings of proficiency N=15)

Proficiency (poor:1....excellent:5)	Pretest mean (S.D)	Post test mean (S,D)	t-value
Overall fluency	2.93(.88)	4.36(.41)	-6.59**
Grammar	2.95(.58)	3.66(.43)	-5.00**
Pronunciation	2.87(.57)	3.68(.42)	-7.15**
Appropriateness	3.58(.60)	4.39(.27)	-4.52**
Amount of information	3.28(.71)	4.46(.29)	-6.39**
Attitude	3.55(.68)	4.53(.32)	-4.73**
Total	19.17(3.76)	25.08(1.70)	-6.27**
Overall impression (1:positive....5:negative)	2.41(.62)	1.86(.44)	4.26**

\*\* p<.01

### 3.2. Correlation between objective measures of fluency and subjective ratings of proficiency

Correlation coefficients of objective measures of fluency and NS' proficiency ratings were calculated with all the 30 speech samples because the NS raters were asked to judge them as the speeches of 30 different speakers. As shown in Table 4, high correlations were found between the number of words spoken per minute (W/M), percentage of unfilled pauses (UP%) and proficiency ratings. The correlations between proficiency ratings and, the number of repetitions per word (R/W) were fairly high as well. False starts per word (F/W) also showed moderate correlations with proficiency scores. (We believe false starts per minute (F/M) and repetitions per minute (R/M) are not as

sensitive indicators as F/W and R/W, because the speed factor is not controlled in the former.) A higher speech rate and a reduction in the percentage of pause were related to a higher rating of proficiency. A higher frequency of false starts and repetition per word resulted in a lower proficiency rating. Although the correlation between the number of filled pauses per minute (FP/M) and proficiency did not reach the significant level, the tendency toward a positive correlation is shown. Those measures significantly correlated with the proficiency rating were also correlated with a positive or negative impression of the speaker. This is probably because the judges rated those who they perceived to be proficient more positively.

Table 4. Correlations between Objective Measures of Fluency/Hesitation and NS' Proficiency Ratings: Pretest & Post test(N=30)

	W/M	UP%	FP/w	FP/m	FS/m	FS/w	R/m	R/w
Overall fluency	.85**	-.83**	-.22	.18	.14	-.37*	-.01	-.56**
Grammar	.72**	-.81**	-.01	.36	.07	-.39*	-.15	-.53**
Pronunciation	.73**	-.76**	-.06	.24	.06	-.39*	.06	-.53**
Appropriateness	.73**	-.81**	-.10	.25	.04	-.46*	-.06	-.58**
Amount of information	.81**	-.81**	-.12	.24	.20	-.32	-.13	-.55**
Attitude	.76**	-.79**	.02	.31	.12	-.40*	-.11	-.49**
Total	.82**	-.85**	-.10	.27	.12	-.41*	-.12	-.57**
Overall impression	-.70**	.73**	-.02	-.32	-.10	.36	.13	.58**

\*\* p<.01 \* p<.05

#### 4. DISCUSSION

As we hypothesized high school students spoke more fluently with less hesitation as changes in the temporal variables indicate. After a year's study in America they spoke much faster with substantially less unfilled pause. Repetition also decreased. In Lennon's study, three of the four subjects reduced unfilled pause time and repetitions while all four increased speech rate and reduced the number of filled pauses per T-unit over the six month stay in Britain. Except for filled pauses our results are similar to Lennon's.<sup>3</sup>

Native speaker judges perceived the students' speeches in the post test to be much more fluent and proficient than in the pre-departure test. The speed and amount of unfilled pause was most closely related to native speakers' perception of fluency. It was found that the frequency of false starts and repetition per each word also affect NS' perception in a negative way. Neither the number of filled pauses per unit time nor the number of filled pauses per word were negatively correlated with proficiency rating (in fact the former



showed a tendency toward a positive correlation). This might mean that filled pauses do not disturb the listening process as much as false starts and repetitions which have a significant negative correlation with perception of fluency. In this analysis we only included fillers such as "uh," "um," but we had the impression that students used a wider range of words that functioned as pause fillers in the post test, ie. "and," "like," "yeah," and "so," "you know," and "I mean." Although temporal variables are important aspects of fluency, we feel that to have a more comprehensive understanding of the fluency exhibited by high school students we need to look at the spoken data more closely.

Let us first look at an example in which fluency is attained through reduction of pauses.

### Example 1

Student 4 (Pre-departure interview)

I thank you it's nice to meet you Hanako please tell me about your family (.7)

S my family is (.3) a (1.0) I live (2.1) I live with (.6) my parents and (.4) two sisters (2.2) um my sister (.2) is (1.3) twenty-four years (.2) and twenty years old (6.1) I (.2) I have no pets (4.8) my (.7) old (3.1) oldest sister is (.3) working and the other sister is (4.4) um juni jun (1.8) junior college (.2) student (3.6) my (.3) father is (1.8) engineer and (.3) my mother is (.7) housewife um (63.4 seconds)

(Post interview)

I can you tell me about your (.5) family (.2) in Japan? (.1)

S okay um (.5) my family is five (.3) um my father and mother and two older sisters and (.6) m my fath (.3) my father is um (.2) an engineer and my mother is housewife (.6) and elder sister is (.6) working at Matsushita Panasonic and (.9) the other one is um kindergarten teacher (23.7 seconds)

In the pre-departure test, it took this student 63.4 seconds to say 52 words with a total unfilled pause amounting to 35.8 seconds, whereas in the post test she spoke 39 words in 23.7 seconds with only 4 seconds of unfilled pause. As is obvious from the data, she tends to pause after each word or two in the pre-departure interview, while in the post interview the average run between pauses is much longer. In the post interview she immediately responds with fillers, "okay um" after the interviewer's question, instead of making a longer pause as in the pre-departure test.

The next few examples illustrate how students came to use language in a more creative and imaginative manner.

**Example 2**

Student 1 (Pre-departure interview)

I tell me about your family (0.5)

S oh mm there are five (.2) people in my family (.4) my father mo (interruption) may I keep on aha (.5) father mother (1.0) brother and me (.4) yah and my dog ha ha

(Post interview)

I tell me about your family in Japan

S they're great ((1.2 including laugh)) uh uh there (.5) four people in my family I guess (.4) father mother (.3) a brother and me (.4) a actually my dog you know (.2) and um (1.1) well (.3) what do you mean? how can I tell I mean they're great (laugh, .8) I love them and (.5)

In this example what the student says in the post test is exactly the same as the pre-departure interview in terms of content, but in the post test, phrases such as "they're great," "I love them" make her speech more personal and intimate and as a result involve the listener to a larger extent than the pre-departure test. Here we also notice extensive use of fillers such as "I guess," "well," "how can I tell," "I mean."

She continues to elaborate on her family by supplying us with details:

um (.3) my dad he (.4) lives by himself (.5) because of his job you know he just moved (.6) we don't get you know (.3) my mom and daddy doesn't divorce just you know (.3) he has to move because his job (.2) and um (.8) he is in Hiroshima (.3) and my brother is in Tokyo (.3) and I was you know in North Carolina and my mom was alone in Kobe and (.4) I feel so sorry for my mom and (.6) you (.2) you know (.4) oh oh she is so sweet

She uses "you know" five times in this excerpt alone. English teachers tend to discourage the use of too many "you know"s because they can be irritating to the listener, but here they function as an important tool that allows the student to reduce unfilled pause and "fill time with talk." Consequently she can continue talking, while attaining a certain level of fluency and maintaining turn.

The following is another example in which the speech becomes more illustrative and imaginative in the post test and therefore making it more likely that the listener's attention will be maintained.

**Example 3**

Student 3 (Pre-departure interview)

I very good why did you decide to go to the United States?(1.8)

S because (2.2) I can (.2) speak English well (2.3) and (.9) I study English more

(Post interview)

I why did you decide to go to America for the first place? (1.0)

S an (3.0) when I was young very young little girl (.2) um um really like to speak English (.4) and my mother knows that (.5) so she tell me (.9) uh (.5) the news on the newspaper (.6) she tell me that and she tell me (.4) Akiko (.4) look this (.3) why don't you go there? (.5) and then I ( - ) because (.3) I I really like to speak English

\* (-) : The word was indecipherable.

This student has developed her narrative style. Rather than merely replying as in the pre-departure test that she likes English, she tells a story relating a personal experience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

From the present study it is possible to draw some conclusions. Firstly, high school students exhibited a marked development in fluency through their one year stay in America. This was not only confirmed by the native speakers' judgment of proficiency including fluency, but also reflected in the objectively measured temporal variables of fluency / disfluency. Second, for this group of learners, increased speech rate, reduction of unfilled pauses, repetitions and false starts seem to be associated with improvements in perceived fluency. Third, in the post interview data, creative, imaginative use of language, which Fillmore regards as a constitute of fluency, was observed. Moreover, the students employed the kinds of "interpersonal involvement features" identified by Hatch (1992) as frequently used by friends in conversations.

The students speeches in the post test contain a number of grammatical mistakes. This is not surprising considering the results of an earlier study we made which shows that students do not make notable improvement in grammatical competency over the course of the year spent abroad. These errors tend to be overlooked, however, when the speech is fluent enough to keep the listener's attention focused on the content. As Lennon says, "fluent delivery in performance directs listener attention away from deficiencies in other areas: phonological, grammatical, syntactic, discursive, lexical." We believe fluency was the aspect of proficiency which students developed in their urgent need to talk with classmates and make friends. Building interpersonal relations was found to be at the core of their intercultural adjustment (Yashima 1995, Yashima and Tanaka 1996). The students upon their return to Japan should be encouraged to strengthen their vocabulary and structural knowledge to

consolidate the proficiency attained though the overseas experience.

More refined research is certainly needed for micro analyses of hesitation. Further consideration also needs to be given to both the individual as well as the intercultural aspects of fluency, particularly in regard to the use of pause.

For future participants in overseas study programs training/English teaching prior to departure should include fluency-enhancing strategies as observed in this study so that students will be able to establish friendships with their classmates more easily. It may also be useful to give students training in the interactional aspects of conversation management by helping them to recognize how pauses function to maintain or conclude conversations. Students need to be taught ways to maintain the listener's attention by adopting better interactional involvement strategies.

In addition the results of this study should hopefully yield some suggestions in the teaching of oral fluency in general.

## NOTES

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1. Some aspects of proficiency were defined as follows and explained to the raters as such:

Overall fluency: Includes speed, timing, and frequency of pauses

Appropriateness: Reflects how appropriately the student responds to the question

Attitude: Reflects the student's willingness to speak, willingness to cooperate, friendliness, eagerness to continue the conversation

2. Filled pauses are, by definition, nonwords, such as, "ur," "um," "hmm."  
The following are examples of a repetition and false start:

*repetition* yeah that was that was great

*false start* I don't know I didn't know well

3. It is hard to compare the results with Lennon's, because he uses filled pauses/T-unit and repetitions/T-unit, while we use different units. We did not use T-units as it is a measure of structural complexity and we think to use it complicates the findings. In this study we wanted to focus on the quantity of disfluency markers.

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