How to Achieve Fluency
A Learner Perspective

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Abstract— In the scholarly literature on fluency in languages learning there is a preponderance of work which dissects fluency into a range of measurable indicators such as accuracy, speed, range of vocabulary, etc. What is not discussed very often is what learners who achieved the holy grail of fluency think about themselves as language users. Crucially, what is lacking is a clear understanding of how these learners arrive at fluency. In this preliminary study, I will describe a small set of case studies of young adult fluent speakers of Italian and their accounts of how they became fluent. I will draw out implications for the teaching and learning of languages on the basis of these accounts.

Fluency; learner perspective; Italian; SLA; tertiary language programs

I. DEFINITIONAL ISSUES AND COMPLEXITIES

The standard orthodoxy for the past two decades in relation to measuring proficiency in L2 research has been the CAF model which combines syntactic complexity, grammatical accuracy and fluency together as testable variables. Lambert and Kormos note that this approach has come under sustained criticism in recent work on SLA [3]. While each factor can be claimed to be empirically and theoretically justified as interdependent, multilayered, multifaceted, and multidimensional constructs in the L2 performance of an individual, it is also clear that these three factors do not develop collinearly, that over time they continually interact and affect each other, and that there are both internal and external pressures on these factors. From a definitional point of view, there is no clear consensus in the research literature on how complexity, accuracy and fluency are described. Clearly, grammatical accuracy is the ‘most straightforward and internally consistent construct of the CAF triad’ [1], while complexity and fluency show considerable variation in definition. Fluency, particularly in spoken language performance, is generally characterised as some ‘undefined given’ [5], related to native speakers norms and defined narrowly in relation to speed, breakdown and repair. Segalowitz succinctly identifies the ambiguity of the term when he notes that

[for example, in English the word fluency can mean different things in different contexts. Sometimes it refers to a person’s global competence or proficiency (She is fluent in Japanese), sometimes to the fluidity of speech (He is a fluent public speaker), sometimes separately to speaking, listening, reading, or writing abilities. [4]

In this preliminary study, I explore both conceptions of fluency in spoken language as well as the journey to fluency of eight young adult speakers of Italian L2.

II. THE CASE STUDIES

A. A pilot project

To begin to explore how proficient learners understand and have reached spoken fluency, I designed a preliminary pilot study in the first half of 2016. I identified eight past students of Italian, all now young professionals working in different fields, four female and four male, as participants. After the appropriate human ethics approvals, I carried out a short semi-structured interview, which was recorded and later transcribed, with each participant after which they completed an online questionnaire on the topic via SurveyMonkey. The nature of the data collected was largely qualitative although some data relating to educational background in Italian and general demographics were also collected.

B. The participants

The eight participants ranged in age from 21 to 29 years old. All were L1 speakers of English with the majority having some familial contact with Italian. All participants studied Italian through all levels of schooling. The majority of participants held qualifications up to graduate level. Table 1 summarises details about participants, including their wider linguistic abilities.

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<th>The participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender and age</td>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>Male 23</td>
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<td>Female 24</td>
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<td>Male 25</td>
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<td>Female 24</td>
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* = non-heritage  
P = Primary  
S = Secondary  
It = Italian  
Fr = French


The participants

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Gender and age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Languages spoken</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UG = Undergraduate</td>
<td>Sp = Spanish</td>
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<td>H = Honours</td>
<td>Ch = Chinese</td>
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<td></td>
<td>M = Masters</td>
<td>Ja = Japanese</td>
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<td>* = not all years</td>
<td>La = Latin</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Cal = Calabrian</td>
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<td>Sic = Sicilian</td>
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C. Data collection instruments

The semi-structured interviews revolved around the following questions:

- Would you consider yourself a fluent speaker of Italian?
  - Please elaborate?
- When did you become fluent?
- What factors influenced this?
- What would you suggest to people who want to become fluent?
- What’s your definition of fluency?

The online questionnaire comprised of ten questions as follows:

- What’s your name?
- Are you male or female?
- What is your age?
- Please list your formal educational qualifications and the dates of each course of study. Include primary and secondary education and indicate when and for how long you studied Italian. Also, note any periods of overseas study and include place, duration and language of instruction.
- What languages do you speak? For each language, describe your level of fluency.
- Thinking about Italian, describe your history with the language. Please include details relating to formal study, casual use, informal learning, periods of in-country study/tourism (indicate dates and length of time) and anything else relevant to how you achieved your current level of competency.
- Again thinking about Italian, describe how you use the language in your daily life. Think about all possible aspects of use: reading, speaking, listening, writing, talking about Italian, etc.
- Do you or will you use Italian in your work situation? Please explain.
- Are there any significant relationships that depend on your use of Italian or are there particular people with whom you tend to use Italian?
- How strongly have you been motivated to achieve fluency in Italian? Can you explain this motivation?

D. Initial results

Even with only eight participants, the data produced provide a wealth of nuanced information that will not be covered here. In the current paper, I limit myself to discussing how participants characterize fluency as well as how they believe they reached fluency. I then tease out some generalisations from the data and some initial considerations for teaching and learning Italian and, by implication, other additional languages.

III. FLUENCY AND HOW TO GET THERE

While all participants considered themselves fluent, some comments relating to individual definitions of fluency highlighted the complexity of the notion for participants.

- “being fluent in a classroom is very different from being fluent socially” (f2)
- “…very very proficient...but I think I lack the native nuances of the language” (f3)
- “a fluent speaker with some vocabulary gaps...but I wouldn’t say native speaker level” (f4)
- “I’m probably not native...but native-like...” (m1)
- “it depends who I’m with...if I’m with stronger speakers I get more anxious...” (m3)

These comments reveal how pervasive the native speaker norm remains. The situational nature of fluency and the differences between formal instructional use and the real world demonstrates an understanding of gap that needs traversing in L2 acquisition. Further comments unpack these ideas further.

- Converse on any topic and feel like you’ve not been misunderstood (m2)
- Communicate in a way that’s effortless, smooth and natural, obviously correct, in a way that sounds Italian (f1)
- At a point where you don’t rely on reference material to communicate sufficiently – being able to find other ways to say what you mean (f2)
- You’re in a situation where previously you would have struggled – something you don’t necessarily realise at the time (m4)
- Having the capacity to express whatever you’re thinking – you don’t feel like you’re not getting your message across...communicating in a grammatically correct and cultural way (f4)
- It’s the point where you can ask and figure it out...to understand without needing to...if you’re learning in the conversation, I’d say you’re not fluent (f3)

What is clear in these comments is the notion of progression or journey. The participants clearly identify turning points in the development of their spoken proficiency. This conceptualization allows participants to identify clearly moments which contributed to their transition from less to more fluent. When asked when and how they became fluent, participants offered the following reflections:
• “at the end of the trip to Italy...” (m3)
• “once I was in Rome and the lady asked if I was from Naples... The last Wednesday of a four-week subject in Italy...” (m1)
• “after university Italian... A bit of time overseas” (f4)
• “I can identify stages: mini-immersive environment at university... Intensive in Italy... half way through my 6 months in Italy...” (m4)
• “I went and did 3 months in Rome...native immersion” (f3)
• “exposure... everything at uni was in Italian...” (f2)
• “definitely the exchange to Venice...also two trips to Italy since...” (f1)
• “I would only count that after my exchange to Bologna...” (m2)
• “prolonged period of speaking Italian every day” (m2)
• “churning through it every single day... personal motivation and obsession... It has a place in my life... Engage every day...” (f4)

These comments show beyond doubt that the thing which had the strongest impact on individual fluency was in-country immersion and prolonged, daily exposure and use of Italian.

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It emerges from a preliminary analysis of the data, that the participants have a nuanced understanding of spoken fluency which is strongly related to situation and context. They identify a clear distinction between formal language learning situations and the exigencies of real-world communication. Similarly, the perceived proficiency of interlocutors can create fluency degradation on speakers due to affective responses. All participants exhibited a high level of discomfort in labelling themselves as fluent. In every case, statements of fluency were tempered with limitations or caveats, even in the case of the participants which have undertaken objective testing of their linguistic proficiency. This could be related in some way to the Australian notion of tall poppies, whereby it is seen as presumptuous to claim to have exceptional ability and is much more socially acceptable to be self-deprecating. In any case, it is well known that self-evaluations tend to underrate competence. Notably, participants saw the achievement of fluency as a correlation of self-realisation or identity (re)construction in the L2. This was related to an ability to use humour or word play with success. In effect, when participants felt they could express what they wanted to with all its light and shade they felt fluent.

What contributed most highly to arriving at a state of fluency was clearly regular, consistent use. Seven out of eight participants described using Italian every day both in face-to-face exchanges as well as virtually via social media or other technologies. Their language use was multimodal and both productive (speaking, writing, singing) and receptive (listening, reading, watching). Furthermore, it ranged across formal and informal settings and was consciously undertaken. The eighth participant described the negative image of this situation, that his drop in fluency can be attributed to limited use.

In terms of motivation, all participants expressed a high and long-lasting desire to achieve fluency. More importantly, all participants identified relevant communicative needs underpinning their use of Italian.

By considering these participants’ conceptions of their own fluency and the contributing factors to its development, we can consider generalisations and construe a model of interacting behaviours which would lead learners to fluency. Figure 1 attempts to represent this graphically.

According to Hughes and collaborators, “[e]ffortful engagement refers to the volitional, or effortful, aspect of involvement in instructional activities and includes trying hard, not giving up in the face of difficulty, and directing one’s attention to instructional activities [2]. In the case of these participants, this was a clear precondition to their eventual achievement of fluency. Steve Thorne has recently identified the importance of effortful engagement to successful language learning [6]. Combining this with immersion and genuine communicative need in meaningful situations all with a positive disposition, we can trace a journey to fluency. The clear implication for teaching and learning of languages is the provision of these conditions as a way of ensuring students can realise their desire to become fluent speakers of additional languages.