Spoken Fluency Practices in Increasing Language Learners Performance

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Abstract

In order to communicate effectively, language skills and knowledge should be integrated and reach the goal of communication. Language knowledge is taught meanwhile skills are developed, both takes time but the skills consume longer. Fluency in this case holds an important role especially in productive skills. As EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners who just enrolled in the English program, having a low fluency mostly occurred. Regarding to that these learners are probably passive language users therefore there are some trainings to increase their productive as well receptive skills. This study focuses on spoken fluency with the goal to reach a comprehensive utterances and ideas once their scores increased. By applying 4/3/2 fluency techniques hopefully students speaking performance would be well-developed. The experimental research will take place in UBM and the subjects are 7 students of English Language and Culture Department. The procedure will apply a recording application and analyze with a mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative).

Keywords: *spoken fluency, language learning, EFL*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Being a communicative learner is an important aspect in order to support language-learning process. Ideas and opinions would be spoken better if the language learners are able to deliver it thoroughly. There are several aspects rely under communicative language speaking such as fluency, accuracy, language expression, and also vocabulary aspects. Each has its own roles to develop learners' language skills.

Even though the English as a Foreign (EFL) teaching has been gradually changed from a traditional grammar-based model to a communicative language teaching approach, however there are some learners who still considered as passive learners especially when it comes to speaking the language. For the past

five years in during the researcher's teaching, the condition is found mostly among early semester students (first and second semester). Some indicates that they could not speak in normal rate whenever they talk in English. Fluency, in this case, has shown lacking among the learners. On the contrary speaking fluently is very important not only for communicating but also as one of the assessing criteria in many international language tests like IELTS and TOEFL.

Furthermore, fluency defines as the ability in delivering speech based on speech rate, pauses (including their location, length, and frequency), and length of speech runs between pauses (Lenno 1990, Schmidt, 1992, Wood 2001, taken from (Kellem, 2009). Based on classrooms activities that promote fluency, there are seven principles to build fluency, those are *repetition, speaking time, preparation, using familiar and motivating topics, ensuring appropriate level, imposing time limits and teaching formulaic sequences.*

Measuring fluency can also be done by (1) looking at the speed (2) flow of language production and the degree of control language items and (3) the way language and content interact. (qtd Yvonne Prefontaine, 2010)

It should be admitted that in English teaching, raising oral fluency is on the most difficult challenges mostly with in countries where learners share a common mother tongue where learners share a little or no exposure to the foreign language outside the classroom. The reason is quite simple that is when learners are asked to perform their ideas in English they often just chat in their native language. Even though they have shown the effort quite hard but still they return to use their native language. Supports and motivation always come along during the learning process, however these also show less positive results.

Speaking fluently in this case can be viewed as an initial and potential skill to equip learners capability whenever they start their English program in the university level. Therefore they current study would like to propose some techniques that possibly could help students in increasing their spoken fluency.

1.2 Research Questions

Two questions will be addressed in this proposed research. The first question is a common question that is widely discussed by many scholars, whereas the last questions will be answered by a mixed method with qualitative and quantitative methods. The research questions are delivered as follow:

1. What are the difficulties facing by the learners towards their English spoken fluency?
2. Will the speaking fluency achievement during the practice task in class increasing?

1.3 Research Objectives and Significance

Nation (2007) stated that the importance of speaking fluency and suggested many techniques for improving fluency. One of the most well-researched activities for improving a learner's speech rate is called the 4/3/2 technique. By applying the technique, it is believed that learners' speech rate will be increased especially when they communicate in various types of conversation.

The following study will hopefully help learners in increasing their fluency level by applying the proposed techniques. Regarding the importance of fluency as a means of communication. Moreover the effect of increased fluency can also probably affect the learners language accuracy.

2. Literature Review

Lennon (1990) distinguishes *fluency* into general and specific meaning, those are "overall (speaking) proficiency and "smoothness and ease of oral linguistic delivery". Furthermore Skehan (2003 taken from De Jong, et al, 2013) explains *utterance fluency* is measurable in a sample of speech which is constructed with several aspects i.e *breakdown fluency, speed fluency,* and *repair fluency. Breakdown fluency* looks into the ongoing flow of speech by counting the number and length of filled and unfilled pauses. *Speed fluency* has to do with calculating speech rate like number of syllables per second. *Repair fluency*

measured by how often speakers use false starts, make corrections, or produce repetitions. *Speed fluency* which focuses on *speech rate* is a sound indicator of fluency. In most studies, speech and articulation rates seems to rise with overall fluency.

In Fillmore (1979, taken from Yang, 2014) defined four abilities of speaking fluently: a) the ability to talk at length with few pauses; b) be able to produce the sentences coherently, reasoned and semantically; c) have appropriate expressions in a wide range of contexts; d) be creative and imaginative in language use. For Nation (1989, taken from Yang, 2014) he provides three aspects of fluency those are "speed and flow of language production; the degree of control language items such as pausing, rhythm, pronunciation and stress; and the way of content interrupting.

Fluency development furthermore is explained as a "meaning-focused strand" which means that learners will become fluent learners if they familiar with the content, the focus is on processing the meaning and there is some pressure to push the performance at a fast speed. Moreover the EFL learners should put 25% time and effort on fluency development. Eventually, it was found that speaking fluency development will improve the grammar accuracy which is an additional contribution to the development of speaking fluency. (Nation 1995, taken from Yang, 2014).

Another definition underlies the term oral fluency is stated by Sajavaara (1987 taken from Jamatlou, 2011) who states ot as "a combination of two aspects of linguistics acceptability and smooth continuity of speech" which followed by Lennon (1990, taken from Jamatlou, 2011) which divided oral fluency into some elements such as; "idiomaticness, appropriateness, lexical range, and syntactic complexity".

2.1 Measuring Oral Fluency

To quantify fluency at such a global level, a multitude of measures have been introduced. Tavakolu and Skehan (2005) have proposed to make a

distinction between several aspects of fluency which has been mentioned earlier, those are *breakdown fluency, speed fluency, repair fluency*. What are included in breakdown fluency are *pauses* and *flleld pauses* and speed fluency discusses on the *speech rate and articulation rate*, whereas repair fluency discussed about numbers of correction used by a speaker.

Furthermore temporal measures of fluency have been categorized differently in different studies. Kang (2008 taken from Jamatlou, 2011) categorized it into two main categories, those are:

1. Rate measures: *speech rate, articulation rate, phonation time ration, mean length of runs*
2. Pause measures: *mean length of pauses, number of silent pauses per minute, number of filled pauses per minute.*

Kormos (2006) lists the most frequently examined measures of fluency with their brief definitions.

Measure	Definition
Speech Rate	The total number of syllables produced in a given speech sample divided by the amount of total time required to produce the sample (including pause time) expressed in seconds. This figure is then multiplied by sixty to give a figure expressed in syllables per minute. Riggenbach (1991) suggested that unfilled pauses under 3 seconds should not be included in the calculation of speech rate
Articulation Rate	The total number of syllables produced in a given speech sample divided by the amount of time taken to produce them in seconds, which is then multiplied by sixty. Unlike in the calculation of speech rate. Pause time is excluded. Articulation rate is expressed as the mean number of syllables produced per minute over the

	total amount of time spent speaking when producing the speech sample.
The number of silent pauses per minute	The total number of pauses over 0.2 sec divided by the total amount of time spent speaking expressed in seconds and is multiplied by 60.
Total words in English	the overall words produced by the speakers in a particular amount of time including the lexical fillers such as *like, you know, I mean.*
Total number of syllables in English words	This measure reflects the number of syllables included in English words produced in every turn.

2.2 Speech Rate and Pausing

Speech rate has been a central variable in many studies not only on fluency and speech production but also on phonetics and phonology (Jamatlou, 2011) Moreover speech rate, as agreed by majority of researchers is the most salient measure of fluency and highly correlates with scores given by judges. (Kormos and Denes 2005)

Further, the following is the proposed calculated speech rate listed by Jamatlou (2011) from various researchers

- Words per minute (Ejzenberg, 1992)
- Words per second (Binnenpoorte et al., 2005)
- Syllables per minute (Kormos and Denes, 2004)
- Syllables per second (Temple, 1992)

Pausing, on the other hand reflects a hesitation of a speaker. It further can be categorized as *places of pauses, length of pauses,* and *frequency of pauses.* Goldman-Eisler (1968) points out; changes in the amount of pausing affect the rate of speech and thus our perception of fluency.

Mora (2006, taken from Munoz, 2006) divides pausing in oral frequency into several parts, as follows:

- *Pause frequency*, which is the number of pauses per minute or per words occuring both clause-internally and at clause boundaries.

- *Internal pause frequency*, is the number of clause-internal pauses per minute or per word. Clause-internal pauses usually used to marking dysfluency
- *Internal filled pause frequency:* is the number of clause-internal filled pauses per minute or per word. Pauses filled by lexical fillers (discourse markers) such as *well, you see, you know, etc.*
- *Internal silent pause frequency:* is the number of silent (i.e. unfilled) clause-internal pauses per minute or per word.

2.3 Fluency Development Activities

Based on Nation's research, he found out that an activity that was designed to increase fluency also affected to students reduction of errors and an increase in grammatical complexity. He further explains that *fluency* could be develop according to the following situations:

1. The learners involved in activities with familiar content therefore they do not need to think further about the topic.
2. The activity involved is *a meaning-focused* such as *problem solving activities, role plays, or split information tasks*
3. There is a support and encouragement for the learner to perform at a higher than normal level. This means that learners should be speaking and comprehending faster, hesitating less, and using larger planned chuncks than they do in their normal use of language.

Based on the following possible situations, there are two kinds of techniques that are possible conducted in the classrooms.

1. *4/3/2/ technique*

   Introduced by Maurice (1983 taken from Nation, 1990), here the learners work in pairs with one acting as speaker whereas another one as a listener. The first speaker is given 4 minutes talking about a particular topic while the partner listens. Then the speaker change to other pairs with each speaker giving the same information to a new partner in three minutes until

the speaker moves to another pair and gives a two-minute talk. This technique is believed encouraging since the speaker chooses the ideas and language items, and plans the way of organising talk. The limited spoken time (4 and 3 minutes) allow the speaker to bring these aspects under control in order to maintain the fluency.

2. *10-minutes plan*

Crookes (1989, taken from Nation, 1990) based on his study, found out that learners were performing better especially when they are given time to prepare before talking. Moreover they can produce longer utterances and more grammatically complex speech. Techincally, planning and preparation can be done individually. Some numerous ways are suggested as follows:

- brainstorming the topic
- pre- reading on the topic
- observation of others doing the activity
- repeated opportunities to the activity
- preparing and practising in the first language
- prediction activities

It is also explained that the goal of the listening or speaking reach a higher level that it would without the preparation.

2.4 Fluency as in Communicative Language Tools

Besides measuring based on the speech rates, there are also language tools where fluency takes part in each of the tool. Explained in Brown (2003) effective language users make use not only pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary but also paralinguistic features and pragmatics.

Paralinguistic Features

The features deal with elements of language excluded verbal language such as gestures, facial expressions, head movements, eye movements. Whenever the speaker feel more confident in their language, the speaker will use more

gestures. In this case paralinguistic fluency helps whenever the conversation breaks down or failed in delivering the message.

Pragmatics

Besides having the knowledge in the language expression, understanding the contexts and social situations in which the language is being used also help learners to speak fluently. Since the differences can cause communication problems, they should be taught in order to improve students' fluency.

2.5 Previous Studies

Many studies discusses on learners fluency, the goals are varied but in general they would like to find out which techniques are effectively help learners in increasing their speech rates. Schollf and Yudkin's (1991) implemented *sixty second strategy* that advised learners with a slow speaking speed to choose a context about 180 words to read it loudly and practice for many times. Then learners are encouraged to achieve a goal of finishing the reciting in one minute without losing the original meanings. Fluency is directly associated with speed in this circumstance.

Schneider (2001) used the *pair-taping* as a means of classroom interactions. Other techniques also proposed by Brenham and Stoops (1996) by applying *talking zone, speaking line,* and *conversation game.*

Since the following research is going to adapted 4/3/2 techniques, therefore some studies successfully applied the technique with beneficial results. Yang, Yingjie (2013) implemented the technique in order to help the Chinese EFL learners to practice their speaking skills. There were 16 participants from various universities who learned English in Singapore. The result shown that not only their speaking influency increased but also most EFL learners' grammar structure improved. Plus the willingness of participating in public speaking also higher.

Another study was also conducted by Mohaved (2014) where he designed an experimental study in order to improve students' speaking skills with Persian language. It is said that the students speaking ability was evaluated once at the

beginning and then at the end of the term. The students were recorded doing the 4/3/2 and then for each student, the number of words spoken per minute and the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts per 100 words in each of the three deliveries and also the number of errors 100 words were calculated to investigate their fluency and accuracy, respectively. The result shows a positive effect on students' speaking fluency also their accuracy as well.

3. Research Methodology

In order to examine temporal measures of L2 spoken fluency, one group of English L2 learners was considered. Due to time constraint 7 participants among 16 were selected. They were all at second semester students of English Language and Culture major. The spoken data was elicited using topics that they have familiar with and the pre and post-test used the two-minutes speed talking. The main objective of this study was to aim their fluency level by using the speaking time. Therefore, the following research will apply an action research with a mixed method analysis whereas the quantitative is used to calculate the fluency elements that they produced and the qualitative is used to give description toward the findings.

3.1 Research Subjects

The subjects participating in this study are two groups of students of English Language and Culture in second semester. For the experimental group, there are 7 students with rather similar level of English proficiency (based on their grades).The participants were considered intermediate learners on the basis on their GPA scores. The 4/3/2 technique will be applied for the first 30-minute every weekly meeting. Results will be gathered at the end of the semester in order to measure the fluency.

3.2 Research Instruments and Data Collection

The group of students firstly would be asked about general questions on their lives, interests, and memories. The response would be recorded. At the last meeting, the students would be asked the same questions again and comparing results and evaluated.

During the treatment weeks, the 4/3/2 technique is implemented; some interesting topics will be delivered. Some students will be selected randomly in each week and their deliverance will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to see if the technique had any kind of influence on students' fluency, grammatical accuracy, and control of content.

3.3 Data Analysis

In order to evaluate the students' fluency, a particular application is used in order to measure the number of words spoken per minute during the students' talk. Also calculating the number of hesitations, and repetitions. In order to get the result the calculation formula is following the global measures of fluency proposed by Jong (Jong, Steinel, Florrijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2013) and modified by Jamatlou (2011) The following is the table of formulation.

1. Speech Rate (SR) =

$$\frac{\text{The total number of syllables produced in a given speech sample}}{\text{Total time taken to produce the speech sample (in seconds) including pause time}} \times 60$$

2. Mean Length Pauses (MLP) =

$$\frac{\text{Total length of pauses above 0.2 second}}{\text{Total number of pauses above 0.2 seconds}}$$

3. The number of Silent Pauses per Minute (NSPPM) =

$$\frac{\text{Total number of pauses above 0.2 second}}{\text{Total time taken to produce the speech sample (in seconds)}}$$

For calculation of articulation rate, pauses shorter than 0.2 are not regarded as hesitation so they are not included in total length of pauses.

4. Then Number of Filled Pauses per Minute (NFPPM) =

$$\frac{\text{Total number of filled pauses above}}{\text{Total time taken to produce the speech sample (in seconds)}} \quad \text{X 60}$$

Filled pauses are silences filled by gap filters such as *uhm, er,* and *mm*.

Furthermore, the result of the formulated data is presented in graph form and the goal is to answer the first research question.

4. Findings

The following are the result taken from the data analysis in order to answer the second research questions which asked about whether the practices on fluency in the classroom would help to increase their spoken performances or not by looking at their speech rate an pausing. First below is the result based on the total of words and the syllables uttered by the students. The elements calculated based on the global measures of fluency from seven students.

Figure 4.1 Total of Words Spoken
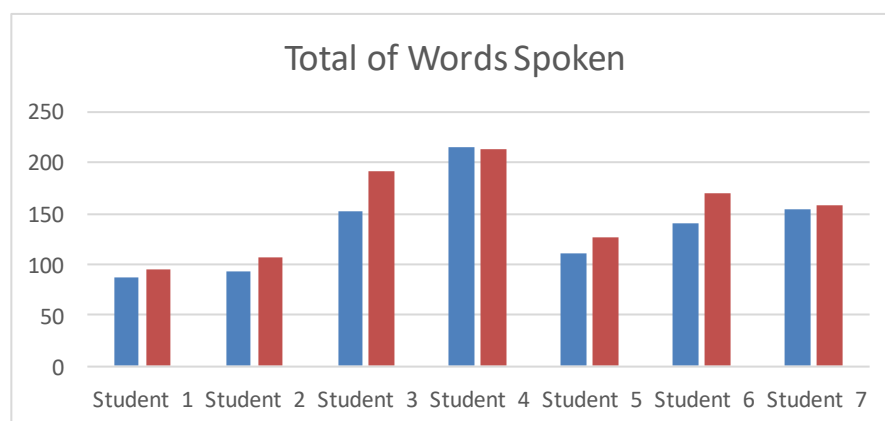
The data above was taken before and after the fluency treatments implemented. With the alloted time for 120 seconds, the average of students'words spoken is 136 words. For the most number is 215 words and the least one is 88 words. The numbers are counted by excluding the pauses and fillers for each turn. There is a slight increase at the post test compared with the pretest, even though it is not a significant result.

Figure 4.2 Total Syllables
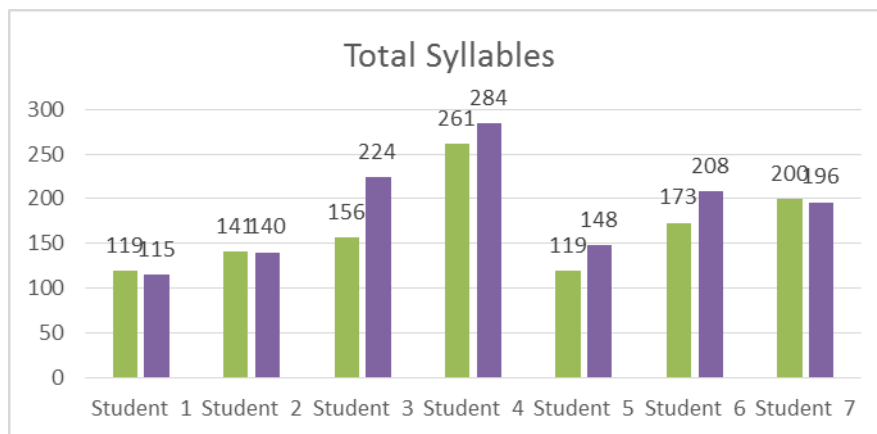
For the total syllables from the words spoken, it is shown that the average result at the pretest is 167 syllables and 187 syllables at the post test. The highest number of syllables is 284 and the lowest number is 115. Even though the graph shows that there are a slight differences between the pre and posttest however there is no significant result shown between the pre and posttest.

4.1 Result on Speech Rate

As described earlier that the speech rate is calculated based on the total syllables divided by time allocated (120 seconds) and multiplied by 60 (seconds). Result is shown below:

Figure 4.3 Speech Rate
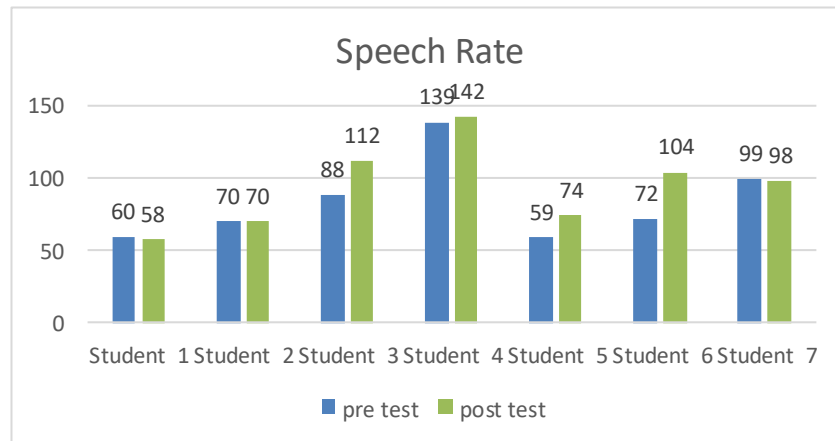
The number of syllables in a minute got its highest number on Student 4's on pre and posttest (139:142) which shown as his best rate for two minutes talking. Following him is Student 3 has got the lesser speech rate that is 88:112, however she shows her improvement at the post test. Student 6, on the other hand shows more improvement, where at first she could utter 72 syllables per minute and got increase for up to 104 syllables per minute.

4.2 Result on Pausing

Figure 4.4 Result on Pausing
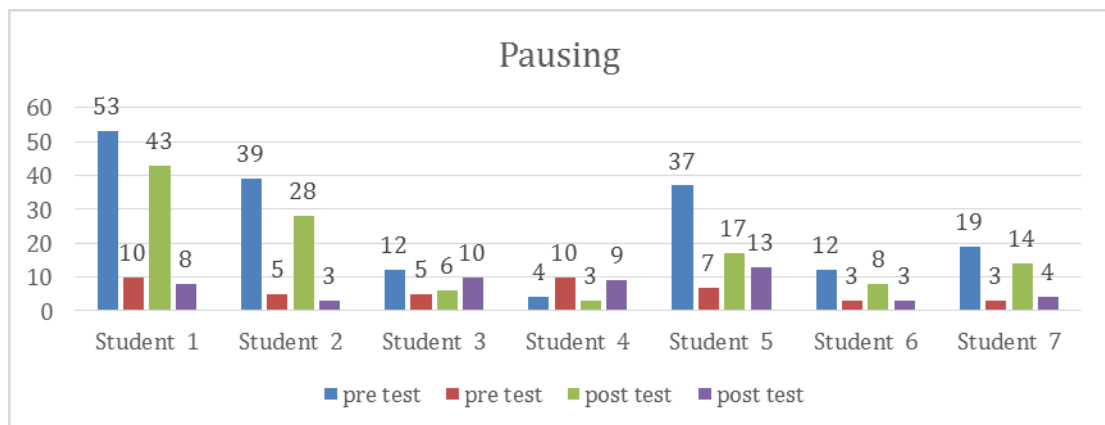
Pausing elements which measured in the oral fluency were total pausing and filled pausing. Based on the result below, pausing numbers are decreasing in post-test

compared to the pre-test. For Student 1, he was starting to have pausing for the total around 53 seconds and 10 seconds with filed ones. Almost most of the allotted time, he paused and shown his hesitations. For the post test, Student 1 did lesser pausing. Student 3 and 4 on the other hand use more filled pausing and less than silent pausing. The rest of the respondents also show improvement in their fluency by looking at the reduced number of pausing.

4.3 Discussion

As the previous literature mentioned that oral fluency is divided into three categories, those are: *breakdown fluency, speed fluency, and repair fluency* therefore the following discussion elaborate about those categories. Furthermore in order to seek the answer for the research questions, the classroom observation is also included.

The first research questions is *What are the difficulties facing by the learners towards their English spoken fluency?* Based on the observation it is shown that confidence influences the students' performance most. It affects in different way, for example in Student 1, he shows more pausing during his first test. From two minutes speaking, around 53 seconds According to Kamonpan (2010), confidence is playing an important role for the speaking fluency and together with appropriate task design, it could enhance the English learners speaking skill. Filled pauses such as *uhm, err* are also used by all of the students, by looking at the filled pauses (Figure 4.4) student 4, as the most confident one, still use the filled pause more than some other students who show lesser confidence.

The second problem that occurred during their performance is finding the right word in English. Student 7 for example, asking several words such as amount of money *(35 ribu rupiah).* Also for student 1 when he about to explain a particular phrase in English, he stopped and did not express more after that even more his next sentences were mixed up.

Next problem relies on the vocabulary selection, for example Student 6, she keeps repeating the phrase *"someone that death"* while referring *dead person.* For other students who could not find the right words usually they repeating the last words trying to recall the word that they are going to use. Student 2, in this case, she was repeating the phrase *we can..we can..we can..* until she find the phrase *get difficult in learning.*

For the second research question that asked whether l the speaking fluency achievement during the practice task in class increasing or not. Based on the overall finding, the three elements of fluency e.g. *breakdown fluency, speed fluency,* and *repair fluency* showed some improvements. However none of the result showed any significant result. Starting the total words spoken (Figure 4.1) shows that students oral fluency performance were increasing slightly. Based on the observation, the vocabulary they used were also more various and lesser in making pauses. In line with the words spoken, the total syllables are also increasing supported by the speech rate. Even though the post-test task was asking to speak within two minutes without preparation, they keep performing well despite the pretest which gave them time to prepare.

As mentioned earlier that their confidence would likely to influence their performance as well, looking from the result the pausing the produce is also decreasing. Like in Student 5, at the pretest she paused or 37 seconds and 7 seconds for the filled one but then in post-test she got lesser hesitation by using her time speaking to the maximum level. The better performance is also shown in all participants.

5. Conclusion

Based on the result, it can be concluded that fluency can help the students to have a better performances especially in their speaking skill. The students who at first having hesitation by applying a certain of method and approaches can be possibly trained and they may overcome their lack of confidence by reducing the pause in between their speech.

Besides reducing the pauses, fluency practices can also increase the students' words production. According to the result the spoken words and their syllables production were also slightly increased. Either the topic is familiar or less familiar, still they can overcome the difficulties well. As Nation (1990) stated that the goal of fluency-directed communication activites is to enable the learner to integrate what they have known previously and express it into their language capacity as a result of focussing on the communication of messages. The 4/3/2 technique motivates the students to speak comprehently since they have different audiences every time they speak. This may also add some point that motivation may come depending on who are the audience they are facing with.

As for the suggestions itself, there are some other areas of speaking skill that need to be imporved in the future, such as language accuracy and language expression. These three elements of speaking are becoming the basic skills for the speaking comptetency. Based on the fluency practices in the class, it provides some evidences that these elements are teachable either simultaneously or continuously. However in order to have a better result, both should be practiced separately and also the students are able to focus on each their speaking ability.

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