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STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SPEECH FLUENCY IN L1 AND L2

The aim of this paper was to examine students' attitudes towards the knowledge of concepts related to speech fluency in general and the teaching practice regarding Croatian (L1), as well as English and Italian (L2). Two groups of respondents participated in this research – 47 students of Croatian studies and Phonetics, and 59 students of English and Italian studies from two universities in Croatia. Students of Croatian studies and Phonetics agreed with claims referring to the familiarity with the concept of speech fluency and the phenomenon of filled pauses and hesitations. They showed a significantly higher degree of agreement with statements related to theoretical knowledge regarding speech fluency, compared to students of English and Italian studies, which could be explained by a greater number of courses dealing with speech fluency development. Also, in foreign language teaching, fluency is commonly understood as linguistic competence or good command of a foreign language, thus, less courses aim at the development of fluency in the narrow sense. A qualitative analysis of the considered claims leads to the conclusion that it would be desirable to introduce more courses in the study programs of English and Italian studies, aiming at improving speech fluency in the narrow sense. Also, regardless of the larger number of courses in the study programs of Croatian studies and Phonetics, students pointed out that greater emphasis should be placed on additional activities aimed at developing fluent speech.

Key words: *fluent speech, silent pauses, filled pause, hesitation phenomena*

1. Review of Relevant Literature

Speech fluency as part of communicative competence has been the subject of scientific interest since the middle of the last century. In the Croatian education system, this topic has been updated in recent years, at the beginning of the implementation of the *Comprehensive Curricular Reform.* Important is the decision on the adoption of the *Curriculum for the subject Croatian language* for primary and grammar schools in the Republic of Croatia, which states that the student is fluent if he/she avoids speech errors, delays, self-corrections, restarts, and hesitations (Official Gazette, 2019). According to the Common European Framework, one of the descriptors used to describe the six different levels in L2 development, refers to fluency (Council of Europe, 2001). It is evident from the descriptors that the emphasis is not only on the learner's knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules, but also on the ease with which the learner applies the acquired knowledge. It is interesting to note that perceived fluency is also included at the C1 level, placing emphasis on the listener and his/her perception of fluent speech ("... *can express himself/herself spontaneously..., skilfully avoiding difficulties, so fluently that the interlocutor is not even aware of it.* "). Thus, the term fluency usually refers to smooth rendering of speech as a result of efficient functioning of all levels included in the process of speech planning and production. Analysing speech fluency, the researchers found the fundamental variables that could be explained and described by the psycholinguistic aspects of speech production (Tavakoli and Wright, 2020; Yan et al., 2021).

Fluency is observed in a broader and in a narrower sense. In a broader sense, fluency is commonly used by foreign language teachers in terms of linguistic competence or good command of a foreign language. On the other hand, fluency in a narrower sense is associated with rapid and smooth oral proficiency devoid of hesitations. Such narrower understanding primarily includes the evaluation of speech with respect to the temporal variables and the frequency of speech disfluencies (Segalowitz, 2010; 2016).

Speech production is a complex process in which it is necessary to harmonize all levels of speech planning and speech production (Tavakoli, and Wright, 2020, Segalowitz, 2016; Kormos, 2006). Undesirable speech phenomena, resulting from more demanding conceptual plans or insufficient knowledge of vocabulary or morpho-syntactic rules in a foreign language, may impair the understanding or may indicate the incompetence of the speaker (Diachek and Schmidt, 2023). Interruptions of speech continuity are known as pauses, hesitation phenomena, and speech disfluencies (Watanabe and Rose, 2012). Unphonemic segments are differently termed in the available literature,

thus, we encounter the terms filled pauses (e.g. Kjellmer, 2003), fillers (e.g. Bortfeld et al., 2001; Fox Tree, 2001), and hesitation disfluencies (e. g. Corley and Stewart, 2008).

Researchers agree that formulaic language is an important factor in the development of fluent speech. Wood (2010: 42) defines formulaic sequences as multi-word units of language that are stored in memory as unique lexical units and conjured and produced as wholes. The basic feature of formulaic sequences is their consistent repetition in everyday communication in order to realize a series of conventional speech acts, but they are also very important for discourse organization, seeking feedback from the interlocutor, and have a multitude of other functions. The use of formulaic expressions increases the degree of fluency in different ways. For example, by choosing a formulaic expression or a partially prefabricated expression, further utterance will not require excessive planning and individual retrieval of each individual lexical unit. Therefore, the acquisition of formulaic language is a key factor in the development of L2 fluency, and it is actually a successive phenomenon leading to gradual automation, whereby constraints in working memory capacity are compensated due to the direct retrieval of pre-stored and highly automated strings from long-term memory. The results of empirical studies have shown that automation occurs due to multiple encounters or invocation of the same lexical units from the mental lexicon. In other words, formulaic sequences are automated as a result of multiple repetitions and repeated activations, resulting in a high degree of their arousal in lexical selection, i.e. significantly reduced cognitive efforts in their production. Highly fluent foreign language speakers possess a larger repertoire of automated and preformed items that make it easier for them to plan the upcoming speaking units (Segalowitz and Freed, 2004; Götz, 2013; Nergis 2021; Thomson, et al., 2019).

In addition to formulaic sequences that contribute to more fluent speech, the speech rate is also an essential factor in the perception of the speaker's fluency. There have been numerous studies investigating the subjective fluency level of non-native speakers (e.g., Ginther et al., 2010; Kormos and Denes, 2004; Rossiter, 2009). According to research data, the best predictors of speech fluency are speech rate and the mean length of runs.

Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005) are among the first researchers to try to link the results of fluency research and language teaching in formal contexts. Tavakoli and Hunter (2017) have conducted research to gain insight into how foreign language teachers define and understand the concept of fluency and how they teach it. The results indicate that most teachers define fluency as a high level of language proficiency, being less familiar with the research carried out for the purpose of fluency testing. The authors emphasize that

fluency in the narrow sense is not systematically defined and that there are no tests by which fluency is consistently measured. Encouraged by the guidelines in modern education, the aim of this paper is to examine the attitudes of students as the most important component of the educational process, towards their own speech competencies and the teaching practice of speech fluency in the mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (L2), in the increasingly complex requirements of modern society. The research was conducted with the aim of obtaining answers to the following research questions:

> (1) What are the attitudes of students of Phonetics and Croatian studies towards the theoretical knowledge of phenomena related to fluency and the teaching practice in their mother tongue? (2) What are the attitudes of students of English and Italian studies towards the theoretical knowledge of phenomena related to fluency and the teaching practice in foreign languages? (3) Are there statistically significant differences in attitudes between the compared groups?

2. Methods

The research was conducted on two groups of respondents who completed an online questionnaire on the perception of their own speech competences and teaching practice in the academic year 2023/2024. The first group of respondents (N= 47) were students of Phonetics at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, as well as the students of Croatian studies from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split. The second group of respondents (N= 59) consisted of students of English and Italian studies from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, Croatia. The testing tool for the students` attitudes is a questionnaire consisting of 18 items related to the theoretical knowledge of different concepts (speech production and speech perception, speech fluency, hesitation phenomena etc.), as well as the perception of one's own speech competences. It should be pointed out that speech fluency is taught through various courses in the Croatian and Phonetics study programs (e.g. Language theory, Phonetics and phonology, Croatian language in writing and speaking, Speaking skills in teaching, Oratory skills, Speech fluency, etc.), and through some courses in the English and Italian study programs (e. g. Language Exercises, Text and Discourse). The items can be seen in Table 1.

The participants expressed their level of agreement with a certain statement by circling answers on a 5-degree Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). Given the previous quantification, ratings greater than 3.5 can be considered

agreement, while ratings of less than 2.5 can be considered disagreement with a particular claim.

The statements in the questionnaire, Table 1, were compiled on the basis of scientific research data on perceived fluency, which, according to Lennon (2000), refer to the listener's subjective impression of the speaker's fluency. Examining the qualitative aspects of fluency, Préfontaine and Kormos (2016) and Kovač (2021) found that the predictors of fluency in a foreign language are speech rate, mean length of utterance, the frequency of silent and filled pauses, efficiency/ease in choosing words, as well as rhythm and prosody. The collected qualitative data show that the speech rate is a prominent predictor of perceived fluency, but that this relationship is not linear, i.e. that optimal intelligibility is obtained at a moderate speech rate. Pietraszewski and Schwartz (2013) pointed to the conclusion that accent is the basis of spontaneous and implicit social categorization, in other words, foreign accent leads to the categorization of the speaker as somebody who belongs or does not belong to the group. Derwing and Rossiter (2003) also found that prosodic accuracy contributes to the overall impression of fluency in L2. Götz (2013) stated that the variable related to intonation patterns is extremely neglected in foreign language teaching in German schools or universities. The author warned that intonation patterns do not only refer to speech naturalness and rhythmicity, but are also very important due to their communicative functions. Götz (2013) and Segalowitz (2010) emphasized social appropriateness or sociolinguistic competence and naturalness of speech as vital factors in the assessment of L2 fluency. Naturalness is identified with idiomaticity and includes a very precise selection of words and phrases that convey the intended meaning.

Table 1: Statements to be judged along a five-point Likert scale.

State-ment No.	Statement
1.	I am familiar with the concept of speech fluency in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1.
2.	Throughout my studies, I encountered the concept of filled pauses in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1.
3.	Throughout my studies, I encountered the concept of discourse markers in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1.
4.	I am familiar with the nature of different hesitation phenomena in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1.

5.	I am familiar with the problem of insufficient variety of discourse markers (tendency of repeating the same expressions) in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1.
6.	I am familiar with the process of speech production (how speech is created from planning to articulation) and with the difficulties that we may encounter in each of these phases.
7.	I am familiar with the strategies of improving speech fluency in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1- at times when I lack the necessary language resources (e. g. use of formulaic language).
8.	I am familiar with the concept of perceived fluency, i.e. the variables influencing the interlocutor's perception (e. g. speech rate, filled pauses).
9.	Throughout my studies, sufficient attention has been paid to proper pronunciation and intonation patterns.
10.	Throughout my studies, sufficient attention has been paid to the development of oratory skills.
11.	Throughout my studies, sufficient attention has been paid to expressive reading with an emphasis on speech naturalness.
12.	Throughout my studies, the importance of silent pauses and adequate speech rate has been emphasized.
13.	Throughout my studies, I have had sufficient opportunities to practice creative speaking activities in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1 (expressing my own opinion, story retelling, confronting opposing opinions, etc.).
14.	Throughout my studies, the emphasis has been on grammatical and spelling rules, and less on the active application of these rules.
15.	I consider my own speaking competences in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1 to be good.
16.	I notice errors and frequently occurring filled pauses in others while speaking English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1.
17.	I notice my own errors (grammatical, lexical, pronunciation) and frequently occurring filled pauses.
18.	I think that the course *Development of speech fluency in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1* (or some similar courses, e.g. Oratory, Communication skills, etc.) should be introduced.

3. Research results

Research results are based on the group of 47 students of Phonetics and Croatian studies who expressed their attitudes regarding speech fluency in Croatian as L1, and 59 students of English and Italian studies who expressed

their attitudes towards speech fluency in L2. Table 2 illustrates arithmetic means and standard deviations for each of the questions from the questionnaire.

Appropriate statistical test provides the answer to the question of whether the results were obtained from the same population, i.e. if the differences are a matter of coincidence, or they in fact appear because the data were obtained by sampling different populations. Considering that Likert scale is of ordinal type, and two independent samples are compared, we used the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test. Test results are presented in Table 3 (The level of significance is 0.05).

Given that the arithmetic mean for the majority of statements in both groups of respondents is greater than 3,5, it can be concluded that positive attitudes prevail. From Table 2 it is evident that students of Croatian studies and Phonetics agree with claims 1, 2 and 4 (as opposed to students of English and Italian studies), which refer to the acquaintance with the concept of fluent speech and the phenomenon of filled pauses and hesitations. A statistically significant difference was obtained between the compared groups, Table 3. The reasons can be found in the fact that students of Croatian studies and Phonetics have attended during their studies more courses directed at teaching the speech fluency phenomenon. Although both groups express an agreement with the third statement *Throughout my studies, I encountered the concept of discourse markers in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1,* students of Croatian studies and Phonetics display a significantly higher degree of agreement with this statement, Table 3. As previously mentioned, speech fluency is taught through various courses in the Croatian and Phonetics study programs (e.g. Language theory, Phonetics and phonology, Croatian language in writing and speaking, Speaking skills in teaching, Oratory skills, Speech fluency, etc.), and through fewer courses in the English and Italian study programs (e. g. Language Exercises, Text and Discourse). The fewer number of courses might be explained by the fact that fluency in a foreign language is often understood in a broader sense, as linguistic competence, and not as rapid and smooth oral proficiency devoid of hesitations.

Table 2: Arithmetic means and standard deviations for the statements from the questionnaire

State-ment No.	Croatian students (L1)		English/Italian students (L2)	
	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation
1.	4,383	0,796	3,407	1,205
2.	4,191	0,947	3,492	1,278
3.	4,511	0,831	3,797	1,095
4.	3,915	0,905	3,356	1,047
5.	3,255	1,259	3,288	1,190
6.	4,191	0,741	3,661	0,940
7.	3,830	1,028	3,593	0,967
8.	3,511	1,019	3,373	0,963
9.	2,745	1,170	3,424	1,148
10.	2,489	0,997	3,441	1,005
11.	2,723	1,192	3,237	1,119
12.	2,894	1,088	3,017	1,058
13.	3,362	1,092	3,729	1,157
14.	3,596	1,210	3,678	1,041
15.	3,894	0,915	3,983	1,008
16.	4,447	0,686	4,000	0,695
17.	4,043	0,932	4,102	0,662
18.	4,532	0,687	4,136	0,819

Table 3: Results of Mann-Whitney test for each statement

Mann-Whitney test Statement No.	U	p	Statistically significant difference
1.	702,0	< 0,0001	Yes
2.	937,5	0,002	Yes
3.	795,5	< 0,0001	Yes

4.	961,0	0,004	Yes
5.	1366,0	0,896	No
6.	945,0	0,002	Yes
7.	1176,0	0,160	No
8.	1250,0	0,360	No
9.	947,0	0,004	Yes
10.	722,0	< 0,0001	Yes
11.	1050,0	0,027	Yes
12.	1312,0	0,626	No
13.	1111,0	0,066	No
14.	1361,0	0,863	No
15.	1289,0	0,510	No
16.	898,5	0,001	Yes
17.	1344,0	0,757	No
18.	1017,0	0,011	Yes

Both groups of students are familiar with the process of speech production and strategies for the improvement of speech fluency (claims 6, 7), although students of Croatian studies and Phonetics expressed a significantly higher degree of agreement with the knowledge of the processes of speech production, Table 3. Both groups agree with claims 14 and 15: *Throughout my studies, the emphasis has been on grammatical and spelling rules, and less on the active application of these rules; I consider my own speaking competences in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1 to be good.*

Interesting results were obtained for the last three claims (16, 17, 18) where a high degree of agreement was recorded (arithmetic mean is 4.00 or more for both groups of subjects). The claims are as follows: *I notice errors and frequently occurring filled pauses in others while speaking English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1; I notice my own errors (grammatical, lexical, pronunciation) and frequently occurring filled pauses; I think that the course Development of speech fluency in English/Italian as L2/Croatian as L1 (or some similar courses, e.g. Oratory, Communication skills, etc.) should be introduced.*

The analysis yielded a significant difference for the claims 16 and 18, that is, students of Croatian studies and Phonetics show a noticeably high degree of agreement with these claims (Table 3). It is interesting to point out that the only claim (10) with which the students of Croatian studies and Phonetics disagree is that sufficient attention has been paid to the development of oratory skills in the teaching process.

By analysing the retrospective comments, we will single out some of the comments which may provide a better insight into the research topic:

- *"I am not in favour of introducing a new course, but the mentioned concepts from the questionnaire should be included in the already existing courses."*

- *"At the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, such courses already exist."*

- *"Such a course is needed because we are aware of the importance of communication, not only in business life, but also in everyday situations. We talk every day, we exchange information. For some, it's a smaller challenge, for someone it's a bigger challenge. Breathing exercises should be more emphasized."*

- *"Creating a message from the mental image to speech production is a layered process influenced by various factors. We are aware that rhetorical/ oratorical devices can make this process easier."*

- *"Such courses are important because during our studies we encounter presentations in almost all courses. Here we often notice jitters, stuttering, poor nonverbal communication and generally vague and incohesive sentences, with lots of errors and filled pauses. Also, it is necessary to take care of political correctness, which additionally requires greater attention to the choice of the words. There is also the problem of lack of vocabulary due to the unpopularity of reading in the native language."*

From the obtained results, it is possible to conclude that there exists a highly developed awareness of the need to be fluent in L1, as well as in L2. Although students of both groups are familiar with the concepts of speech production in general, they still highlight the desire for an additional course in which the emphasis would be placed on the further development of speaking skills.

4. Conclusion

Speech fluency is a performance phenomenon that refers to the efficient and unproblematic development of psycholinguistic processes of language planning and production. Therefore, it is recognized as an important field in foreign language research. It is evident from the analyzed questionnaire that

both groups of respondents - students of Croatian studies and Phonetics, but also students of Italian and English studies, are aware of the importance of speech fluency development. Furthermore, by comparing the lesson plans, it can be concluded that students of English and Italian studies have significantly fewer courses whose main goal is the development of fluent speech, which implies the acquisition of different mechanisms that will help them in planning and producing utterances under time pressure. This is especially important for speakers of a foreign language who sometimes, due to insufficient knowledge of lexical units and morpho-syntactic rules, encounter difficulties in formulating utterances. The students of Croatian studies and Phonetics showed a significantly higher degree of agreement with the statement concerning the familiarity with the concept and functions of discourse markers and formulaic sequences. The observed difference in the number of courses related to the development of fluency can be explained by the fact that despite the recognition of the importance of fluent speech in a foreign language, fluency is still most often defined in terms of language proficiency, and less often as rapid and smooth oral proficiency devoid of hesitations. However, despite the larger number of courses aimed at the gradual improvement of speech fluency, students of Croatian studies and Phonetics, due to the challenges of modern times, express a desire for the implementation of additional courses aimed at the practical application of the acquired knowledge.

As far as teaching fluency in a foreign language is concerned, contemporary research emphasizes the exceptional importance of developing fluency in the narrower sense, that is, the development of fluency with respect to the temporal variables and the reduction of different forms of speech disfluencies.

The importance of this research is primarily reflected in the conclusions related to the need for further awareness of the concept of fluency in a foreign language and the creation of pedagogical guidelines aimed at the development of fluent speech, which is the result of the effective functioning of all phases involved in this process.

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STAVOVI STUDENATA O GOVORNOJ
FLUENTNOSTI U J1 I J2

Cilj je ovog rada bio ispitati stavove studenata o poznavanju pojmova vezanih uz fluentan govor općenito i nastavne prakse u hrvatskom (J1) te engleskom i talijanskom (J2). U ovom istraživanju sudjelovale su dvije skupine ispitanika – 47 studenata fonetike i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti te 59 studenata engleskog jezika i književnosti te talijanskog jezika i književnosti s dva sveučilišta u Hrvatskoj. Studenti hrvatskog jezika i književnosti i fonetike slažu se s tvrdnjama koje se odnose na poznavanje pojma fluentnog govora i fenomena zvučnih stanki i oklijevanja. Oni pokazuju značajno veći stupanj slaganja s tvrdnjama vezanim uz teorijska znanja o fluentnom govoru u odnosu na studente engleskog jezika i književnosti te talijanskog jezika i književnosti, što se može objasniti većim brojem kolegija koji se bave razvojem govorne fluentnosti. Također, u nastavi stranog jezika fluentnost se obično shvaća kao jezična kompetencija ili dobro vladanje stranim jezikom, stoga je manja zastupljenost kolegija kojima je cilj razvoj fluentnosti u užem smislu. Kvalitativnom analizom razmatranih tvrdnji dolazi se do zaključka da bi u studijske programe engleskog jezika i književnosti te talijanskog jezika i književnosti bilo poželjno uvesti kolegije s ciljem unaprjeđenja fluentnosti u užem smislu. Također, bez obzira na veći broj kolegija na studijskim programima hrvatskog jezika i književnosti te fonetike, studenti smatraju da bi veći naglasak trebalo staviti na dodatne aktivnosti usmjerene prema razvoju fluentnog govora.

Ključne riječi: *fluentan govor, tihe stanke, zvučne stanke, fenomeni oklijevanja*