FLUENCY, CONFORMITY AND ACCURACY: A THREE WAY DISTINCTION.

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*In this article, Dave Willis challenges teachers to reconsider the familiar fluency –
accuracy dichotomy, and offers an alternative, three-way classification for classroom
activities that more accurately describes current post-behaviourist approaches to
language teaching. He goes on to illustrate his model with materials and activities that
aim to promote both fluency and accuracy within a meaning-focussed approach.*

1 Distinguishing fluency, conformity and accuracy.

It is common in ELT nowadays to recognise a distinction between *fluency* on the one
hand, and *accuracy* on the other. These terms were highlighted by Brumfit (1984), who
saw fluency activities as those in which learners are concerned primarily with meaning,
and activities which focus on accuracy as those in which learners are concerned primarily
with form. It seems to me that this is very much an oversimplification. This is not to say
that it is not a useful distinction. We should remember, however, that when Brumfit was
doing this research in the late seventies and early eighties the ELT profession was still
based very much on behaviourist theories of learning. Control and grading were much
more strictly applied than they are now. The three stage *presentation → practice →
production* methodology was strictly applied as a methodological base. At the same time
some SLA researchers, in particular Krashen (1981), were issuing a serious challenge to
this established approach and suggesting that any focus on form or, in Brumfit's terms,
accuracy, was quite unnecessary.

It was in this context that Brumfit called for a re-examination of current practice. His
view was that we should take account of research findings but, at the same time, we
should protect those elements of the established methodology which seemed to be of
value:

> Many language learners have testified to the usefulness of (such traditional
> learning activities as exercises and drills), and an authoritative rejection of such
> procedures needs to be based on firmer evidence than has been forthcoming. Much
> more useful would be to explore the role that such traditional practices have had
> for learners who have found them helpful. (Brumfit 1984 p320)

So the distinction between accuracy and fluency was designed to focus on the relationship between traditional practice and the recommendations prompted by much SLA research.

Although things have moved on a good deal since the 1980s the accuracy/fluency dichotomy is still with us. I would argue that in the present day it has not only outlived its usefulness, but actually gets in the way of useful discussion of what happens in classrooms.

I suggest that we now need at least a three way distinction. I would accept the term *fluency* more or less as it stands. In the place of Brumfit's *accuracy* I would propose the term *conformity*. This in turn entails a redefinition of the term *accuracy*. I would propose that we distinguish the three concepts as follows:

> **Fluency:** Activities in which learners focus on meaning without feeling the need to conform to standard language norms. In these activities language is produce spontaneously without preparation, normally in informal circumstances.

> **Conformity:** Activities in which learners produce language forms sanctioned by the target form. In these activities there is little or no concern with meaning. The purpose is to explore the target language code for its own sake. There is a concern to analyse or produce acceptable forms irrespective of meaning. Most of the activities Brumfit classifies as focusing on *accuracy* I would see as focusing on *conformity*. Learners are asked to fill gaps, to listen and repeat, to participate in a drill by replying to a question using a particular language form. All of these activities require them to produce a particular form. Teachers will be recognise the forms produced as 'right' or 'wrong', and will provide feedback along these lines. So *conformity* requires learners to produce specified forms in line with target norms. It will usually involve a conscious focus on precise wordings and speculation as to how these wordings fit within the overall language system.

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Accuracy: Activities in which learners are concerned to communicate meanings but are also concerned with form. They will be concerned with form in two ways. First they will be concerned that the words they choose do indeed convey the meaning they want, and convey that meaning clearly and appropriately. This is similar to the concern we all have when we read through a piece of writing to ensure that it says what we want and says it in a way which takes the reader into consideration. In many cases this will involve producing language which is, as far as possible, free of error.

2 A teaching sequence involving fluency and accuracy.

The following sequence is based on the task-based methodology described by Willis and Willis (1987) and elaborated by J. Willis (1996).

Activity 1(Task):

You are going to read a newspaper article about someone trying to rob a shop. Here are some ideas to help you with the story.

The characters: a shopkeeper; her children; a man; an eight-year-old boy; the police.

The setting: a corner shop in Ashton-under-Lyme, near Manchester.

The props: a balaclava[1]; a plastic carrier bag; a pistol.

Some clues: "I am not sure whether it was real or not" (The shopkeeper)
"As I gave him his change a man came in" (The shopkeeper)
"He threw a plastic carrier bag at me, pointed a gun at me and told me to put everything in." (The shopkeeper)
"We are taking this very seriously, as we would any robbery involving a firearm..." (The police)

Can you guess what happened in the story? Compare your ideas with others in your group. Try to include all the details given above in your story.

This activity would probably be preceded by an introductory phase led by the teacher.

Learners would be given the opportunity to ask for help with lexis – items like *balaclava* and *pistol*. Once learners settle to this task, however, they become involved in a series of language production activities which focus very much on what I have defined above as *fluency*. There is discussion involving short turns and overt interaction as learners begin to work out the details of the story. This usually moves on to a stage at which a narrative begins to emerge, one member of the group tends to take over and propose a narrative with comments and contributions from other members. Generally learners are very much concerned with working out their story. They are not too worried about how accurate their language is, they are simply concerned with putting together a narrative. They are working within a small group. They are thinking through a problem at the same time as finding words to express the solution. They are all involved in the task and share responsibility – no-one is simply standing by as an observer. The discussion is full of stops and starts, interruptions and unfinished sentences – very much the kind of thing you would hear from a group of native-speakers working on a problem. A teacher who listens in discreetly and unobtrusively will hear all kinds of ungrammatical language. Much of this will be the kind of thing which, given time, learners might be well able to correct for themselves.

After this fluency-based activity learners move on to:

Activity 2 (Preparation):

Write down a few notes to help you tell the story to the class. Do not write more than ten words.
Prepare your story.

At this stage learners become much more concerned with the kind of language they are producing. They are preparing for a communicative situation which is quite different from that in **Activity 1**. They are preparing for a situation in which one person will be presenting a story not to a small group, but to an extended audience – the whole class. And the storyteller will not be working out the narrative at the same time as telling it but will be presenting a prepared rather than a spontaneous narrative. The other members of the class will be observers, listening to the narrative rather than participating in its construction. This different communicative situation calls for quite different language. As group members prepare for someone to tell the story to the class as a whole are not only

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[1] A *balaclava* is a woollen hat which cover the whole head, leaving only a small opening for the nose and eyes.

concerned to tell a story, they are concerned to tell the story in a way which will reflect well upon the group. They are concerned to tell the story clearly and, probably, in an entertaining manner. They are also concerned to tell it in language which is, as far as possible, free of error. There is, it seems, a focus on *fluency* – telling a clear concise and entertaining story. But the main focus here is on *accuracy*. Learners decided in **Activity 1** what they want to say. In **Activity 2**, at the preparation stage, they are concerned not so much with what to say as with how to say it.

At the next stage one learner from the group is asked to tell the story:

> **Activity 3 (Report):**
> Now tell your story.
> As other groups tell their stories listen carefully to see if they are the
> same as yours.

Here again there is a focus on accuracy within the context of fluency. The storyteller is at pains to produce a fluent and convincing narrative, but there is also a concern for error free performance. This final stage provides a rationale for what has gone before. The purpose of **Activity 2** was to prepare for this report stage. It also provides language input as groups listen to stories from other groups. Learners are encouraged to listen carefully to other versions of the story.

Finally learners are given the opportunity to read the newspaper story:

> **Activity 4:** Read the newspaper article. Is it the same as your story?

Pistol-packing eight-year-old tries
to rob corner sweet shop.

POLICE were last night searching for an eight-year-old who attempted to hold up a sweet shop with a pistol, *writes David Ward.*

The boy, wearing a balaclava, threw a carrier bag at the shopkeeper at the corner store in Ashton-under-Lyme, Greater Manchester, and ordered her to fill it up.

"I don't know whether he meant the bag to be filled with sweets or money," said the woman, who does not wish to be named. "It didn't appear to be a toy gun to me. I was not sure whether it was real or not. But it didn't look like the toys my little boy has.

The boy went into the shop and bought some Smarties for 25p. "He gave me a 50p piece and as I gave him his change a man came in. He waited until the man went. Then he threw a plastic carrier bag at me, pointed a gun at me and said: 'Put everything in'."

He fled when the woman, who had her two children with her, pressed an alarm.

The boy is described as 3ft 6in tall, dressed in jeans and a dark coat.

A police spokesman said; "We are taking this very seriously, as we would any robbery involving a firearm, fake or not."

(Guardian, 22 February 1994)

When learners come to the reading they will be prepared for reading. They will come to the text with a set of expectations and with a number of questions in mind. Hopefully they will be reading the article because their curiosity has been aroused and they actually want to resolve these questions. This mirrors to a large extent the context of reading outside the classroom. We normally read with a purpose and a context, and with expectations as to what will come from the reading.

3 Summary.

I would summarise the activities outlined and relate them to accuracy and fluency as follows:

Activity 1: Focuses mainly on fluent production. Learners are producing language in real time and rarely stop to consider *how* to express themselves.

Activity 2: Focuses mainly on accuracy. Learners know basically what they want to say, they are now concerned with how to say it in a new and more demanding communicative situation.

Activity 3: Builds on Activities 1 and 2 by combining accuracy and fluency.

Activity 4: I would argue that this should be regarded as a fluency activity. Learners are working to make sense of the reading in the light of the expectations that have been built up earlier. There will be occasional focus on form as learners come up against something new or something which causes difficulty. When this happens they may focus consciously on form in an attempt to resolve their difficulties. A similar phenomenon is familiar in the context of reading in the first language. There are occasions when we lose track of meaning and, as a result, stop and go back carefully paying conscious attention to the wording of the message.

4 Conformity.

In the sequence above there is no instance of activities based on *conformity*. The particular task-based approach on which this lesson is based takes the view that meaning is prior to form – that learners should first engage in meaning and only then go on to see in abstract how these meanings might relate to language form. The lesson would go on to draw learners attention to the wording of the text they have already processed for meaning. In this text for example we might go on to focus on verbs followed by the *to-infinitive*:

Patterns with *to*:

1 Pick out all the phrases with *to*.
Can you rewrite them using the following words: *seem; told; tried; want; wanted*.
  e.g. He ...ordered her to fill it up.
    He told her to fill it up .

2 Look at these two patterns:

  Pattern 1: ... who did not **wish to** be named. (Verb + *to)*
  Pattern 2: He **ordered her to** fill it up. (Verb + N + *to)*

3 Here are the verbs most commonly found in Pattern 1:

  agree; appear; attempt; begin; choose; continue; decide; expect; forget; happen; hate; help; hope; intend; learn; like; love; mean; plan; prefer; pretend; promise; refuse; remember; seem; start; try; want; would like.

  Can you find pairs of verbs which are the same in meaning?
  e.g. appear/seem

  How many of these words are to do with thinking or feeling?

  Here are the verbs most commonly found with Pattern 2:

  advise; allow; ask; dare; enable; expect; help; intend; invite; mean; order; persuade; prefer; tell; want; warn (usually warn someone not to...); *would like.*

  How many of these can you find in the first list?
  How many are to do with speaking?

4 Write down:
  • something you *want/would like* to do over the next year.
  • something you *hope/intend/plan* to do in the next month.
  • something your teacher doesn't *allow you* to do in class.

- something a computer *enables you* to do.
- something you *would like someone* to give you.

The purpose of these exercises is to provide information about the language system. Sometimes this information will be new to learners. Sometimes it will simply be drawing attention to or systematising knowledge about the language which is already familiar to learners.

The final exercise, exercise 4, has the appearance of a *fluency* activity. In fact it has nothing to do with fluency. Learners are not asked to use language spontaneously to achieve a particular outcome for a particular audience. They are asked to produce sentences with a particular form. Their performance will not be judged according to how effectively they communicate, it will be judged simply according to whether they manage to produce sentences of the required form.

5 Learning purpose.

I said earlier that Brumfit's two-way distinction was an oversimplification. The same criticism could be made of the three way distinction I have proposed here. I believe, however, that the three way distinction is more appropriate to the analysis of the kind of lessons we are likely to see in classrooms nowadays, and that it is more in line with current thinking on second language acquisition.

First by re-labelling Brumfit's *accuracy* with the term *conformity* it recognises that the activities involved are not creative and do not involve meaning. Brumfit's *accuracy* label is beguilingly attractive. The achievement of *accuracy* could easily be seen as central to language learning. The achievement of *conformity* can more readily be seen as a means to an end.

Secondly the tripartite distinction enables us to recognise that *accuracy* is a feature of the learner's system and cannot exist independently of meaning. Ever since the interlanguage studies of the 1970s it has been recognised that the ability to produce acceptable sentences in the target language (conformity) does not guarantee the ability to deploy those sentences in language use (accuracy). Learners need first to have appropriate forms brought to their attention. They then need time before these forms will be absorbed into their language system. Once we recognise this distinction between *conformity* and

accuracy we are less likely to make the assumption that what is taught will be learned in the sense that it will become part of the learner's system. We recognise that it is possible for learners to 'know' something, in the sense of recognising it as an acceptable form of the language conformity), without being able to deploy it in use (accuracy).

Thirdly we recognise that not all forms of communication require the same attention to form. There is a place in the classroom for fluency in which there is little attention paid to form. Learners need opportunities to express themselves without having to worry too much about form.

Given this we might look at the purpose of different activities in the language classroom:

> **Fluency:** Fluency activities provide learners with opportunities to practise making the most of the language they already have. Such activities mirror the spontaneous use of language outside the classroom.

> **Conformity:** These activities provide learners with information about the language system, and help them to systematise their knowledge. Such activities do not lead directly to the ability to use the language. They do, however, make it more likely that the items under study will be noticed in future input and are therefore more likely to be incorporated in future output.

> **Accuracy:** These activities provide the link between *conformity* and *fluency*. Language which has been noticed as a result of *conformity* activities may be incorporated into fluent performance first by conscious manipulation. Such activities take the learner's own language system as a starting point and builds on that to develop the learner's grammar.

Brumfit made his accuracy/fluency distinction to enable and encourage teachers to examine and interpret their experience in a situation in which a broadly behaviourist approach was challenged by an approach which questioned the value of a focus on form. If we are to examine and interpret our experience in classrooms which set a much greater premium on language use we need to develop new models.

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