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PERCEPTION OF L2 FLUENCY IN STUDY ABROAD CONTEXT

by

Riikka Ullakonoja & Hannele Dufva 2008

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Perception of L2 Fluency in Study Abroad Context

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Abstract

This article discusses the results of an on-going study investigating twelve Finnish university students' fluency in three Russian L2 reading aloud tasks administered before, during and after their period of study abroad. Here, we discuss the students' self-evaluated fluency and their responses to questions concerning the development of their pronunciation skills, comparing these with the fluency ratings given to them by Finnish teachers of Russian.

Introduction

This article deals with perceptions of Finnish university students' fluency in Russian - their foreign language (L2) - and the potential influence on their fluency of a period of study abroad. Aside from being a topic of research, L2 fluency is an explicit goal in foreign language education (e.g. CEF; Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Council of Europe 2001). Teachers frequently use the term fluency to refer to their students' spoken or read-aloud production. It is also often mentioned in everyday life contexts and non-native speakers are commonly evaluated on the basis their spoken performance, e.g. the degree of foreign accent. The aim of this study is to investigate the possible relationship between evaluations of students' read-aloud fluency by teachers and students' own evaluations. An experimental phonetic analysis of fluency in students' read-aloud speech was previously conducted by the first author (Ullakonoja 2008a).

Here, L2 fluency is defined as perceived ease and fluidity of reading aloud. This would include such factors as an 'appropriate' speech rate, 'smooth' performance and the ability to pause at syntactically correct locations (Riggenbach 1991; Lennon 2000). We discuss perceived fluency both in terms of students' self-evaluations and teachers' ratings. Factors such as the students' language proficiency, linguistic accuracy, production of segmental or prosodic features or their overall oral performance are not discussed. Research seems to support the claim that study abroad increases learners' L2 fluency, sometimes significantly (e.g. Freed 1995; Towell et al. 1996; Freed et al. 2004; Lafford 2004; Trofimovich & Baker 2006). However, there are also studies suggesting that not all learners may equally benefit from it. As Simoes (1996) and Segalowitz & Freed (2004) argue, differences between speakers can be considerable. Further, Freed et al. (2004) showed that students in intensive domestic immersion gained most in terms of fluency when three contexts (at home, immersion and study abroad) were compared.

To sum up, the existing research seems to indicate that although study abroad may not be a sufficient condition for the development of L2 fluency, in most cases it is beneficial, particularly in that it offers the kinds of learning opportunities that may not exist at home or in the conventional domestic classroom setting. Abroad, learners are exposed to L2 in their everyday activities in various institutional, casual and media settings, and are bound to engage in interactions with native speakers. However, the

extensive exposure and the scope of potential communicative situations may not be beneficial to all. Some students may simply feel “overwhelmed by the amount, delivery rate, and complexity of the language that surrounds them” (Segalowitz & Freed 2004: 174).

Material and methods

Twelve Finnish female university students majoring in Russian who participated in the same 3.5 months' programme of study abroad during their second year of university studies participated in the study. Before university they had studied Russian as a foreign language from one to ten years. During their stay in Russia, they studied Russian for foreigners at Tver State University. Half of the students resided with a host family while the rest were accommodated in dormitories for foreign students. Their oral performance in Russian was recorded three times: prior to, during and following their stay in Russia. The task was to read aloud two dialogues in pairs. The longest continuous turn, consisting of six sentences from each student, from each recording session was chosen as a sample to be rated for fluency by 30 Finnish teachers of Russian. The teachers heard the stimuli (n=36) once in a randomized order, without knowing they contained multiple samples from the same speaker, and rated each sample. The sample size was limited, both because of the size of the student group participating in the exchange programme and because of the length of the listening task, which was around 20 min. This was considered optimal for the participants' concentration on the task and the reliability of their ratings.

On the basis of the teachers' evaluations, a mean fluency rating was obtained for each student for each recording session. In analysing the material, Ullakonoja (2008a) found that the students' L2 fluency, as evaluated by the teachers, increased during the 3.5 months' study abroad. For 8 out of 12 students, the increase was statistically significant (the difference between the ratings of each student prior to and following the stay were compared by the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test, $p < 0.005$). In the teachers' evaluation form used by Ullakonoja (2008a), the scale ran from one ('not fluent') to five ('very fluent') with no verbal descriptions given for the values between one and five. To see whether the potential variation in the use of the scale influenced the results and to normalize the ratings of each teacher, we have here performed a recalculation using z-scores where mean and standard deviation values are calculated across all the ratings given by teacher t (z equals mean subtracted from x multiplied by standard deviation, where x is a rating by teacher t).

Further, in this report we explore the students' self-evaluations of their L2 fluency development, using the responses to a questionnaire that they completed during the recording sessions. On a three-point scale of yes/no/don't know, they were asked to respond to statements concerning their views on the development pronunciation and the role of teaching and native speaker contacts therein. To analyse the responses, the students were divided into two groups according to the development of their fluency (as estimated by teachers). Group 1 (G1) consisted of students (n=8) whose teacher ratings of their L2 fluency were statistically significantly better after the stay in Russia than prior to it. Group 2 (G2) comprised the rest (n=4). For comparison of the mean fluency ratings of the students and their responses, the 'no' and 'don't know' answers were treated as one category. The reasoning behind this was that an affirmative answer indicated that the student had been attentive to the development of her oral skills and

aware of the possible changes while this was not necessarily implied by 'no' or 'don't know'. Thus we took the distinction to reflect - to a degree - self-awareness on the part of the student. Below, we compare the students' self-evaluations with the teachers' fluency ratings to determine whether a relationship exists between the two. Each subject's response to the statements (Q1-Q8) in the questionnaire is compared with their average teacher-rated fluency after the stay (both the mean and z-score mean) as well as with the difference between the fluency ratings prior to the stay and following it.

Results

First, we recalculated the results obtained by Ullakonoja (2008a) concerning the teachers' ratings of the students' fluency. When the statistical reanalysis (difference between means of each student in Paired Samples t-test) using the z-scores was performed, the results confirmed the earlier findings: 8/12 students had a higher mean fluency rating in the middle of the stay than prior to it and 9/12 students received a higher rating following their stay than prior to it. Also, for 7/12 students the teachers' rating was significantly higher following the stay than prior to it ($p < 0.005$). Thus, most students were judged as more fluent after than before their stay abroad. Also, 8/12 were significantly more fluent readers in the middle of the stay than prior to it ($p \leq 0.005$); however unlike in the earlier study, only one student showed a significant ($p = 0.0001$) improvement in teacher-rated fluency after her stay. These results are consistent with those of the earlier study (Ibid.).

Second, we analysed the students' responses to the questionnaire and compared these to the teachers' evaluations of their performance. In Q1 (I have paid attention to practising my intonation and/or pronunciation outside the classroom), seven out of twelve students said they had practiced by themselves. No difference in the responses to Q1 was observed between G1 and G2. No association was found between the answers to Q1 and mean teacher-rated fluency after the stay. In answers to Q2 (I have noticed that my pronunciation improved noticeably during my stay in Russia), half of the students reported improvement. Again, groups G1 and G2 did not differ. However, mean teacher-rated fluency was higher (mean=3.5) for those who had noticed an improvement than for those who had not (mean=3.2) (Q2). All the students felt that their fluency had improved during their stay (Q3, I can now read and speak Russian more fluently than before my stay).

In Q4 (I actively tried to get into contact with Russians during my stay), 4/12 students reported they had attempted getting into contact with the local people whereas 4/12 had not and 4/12 answered 'don't know'. Only one student in G2 reported being active in seeking contact compared to three in G1. Interestingly, those who did not report seeking contacts with native speakers of Russian, had a higher mean fluency rating (mean=3.4) than those who did (mean=3.2). When asked about the role of their teachers (Q5, I would have wished that my Russian teachers would have paid more attention to teaching pronunciation and correcting my mispronunciations), most students (8/12) stated they would have wished more support from their teachers. The students who responded positively had a higher mean fluency rating (3.5) than those who responded negatively (3.1). Again, more students (75 percent) in G1 than in G2 (50 percent) answered affirmatively. In Q6 (I still have problems with producing intonation in the way I wish), some students (5/12), most from G2, felt that they still had not achieved their target intonation. Mean teacher-rated fluency was higher (mean=3.4) for those who did not report problems than for those who did (mean=3.2).

When asked about whether they had attempted to make their pronunciation better on their own (Q7, I tried independently to improve my pronunciation), most students (7/12) said that they had not. Here, half of G2 responded affirmatively as against only 25 percent of G1. However, mean teacher-rated fluency was higher (mean=3.5) for those who answered affirmatively than for those who did not (mean=3.3). In the final question, Q8 (I paid attention to practising correct pronunciation), only two students, both from G1, reported that they had tried to practise. They also had a clearly higher mean fluency rating (mean=3.9) than the rest (mean=3.2). To sum up, there were some differences between those who significantly improved their read-aloud fluency and those who did not. However, when all the questionnaire answers were compared with the student's teacher-rated fluency after her stay, no statistically significant relationships were found (Independent Samples t-test). When the two groups (G1 and G2) were compared using Pearson's Chi Square test for each question, no statistically significant differences were found. However, this may also be due to a sample size not large enough to establish statistical significance.

The students who had significantly improved their teacher-rated fluency in the reading aloud tasks (in G1) responded more or less as expected in four questions. Positive responses to questions Q5 and Q8 perhaps reflect students' awareness of and interest in developing their pronunciation skills whereas positive responses to Q4 and negative to Q6 may reveal more about their "self-esteem" and confidence as language users. Not surprisingly, the results suggest that improvement may be connected both with an interest in learning oral skills and in seeking native-speaker contacts. However, half of the students in G2 claimed they had tried to develop their pronunciation independently. Nevertheless, their ratings did not improve significantly. Although the possible reasons for this cannot be examined in detail here, it may be suggested that an intensive focus on correct pronunciation may also result in disfluencies such as self-repairs and thus in lower fluency ratings.

The comparison between the teacher-rated mean fluency of the students and their answers to each question showed that the self-evaluations did correspond - to a degree - to the fluency evaluations of the teachers: those who said that their pronunciation had improved and who claimed to have no problems in producing intonation also received higher mean fluency ratings (Q2 & Q4). Further, those who showed interest in learning and practising - and wanted their teachers to correct them - were judged on average as more fluent readers (Q5, Q7 & Q8).

Conclusion

The fact that all the students saw themselves as more fluent readers after their stay suggests that staying abroad is experienced as an important factor in improving fluency. Also in the teachers' ratings the majority of the students significantly improved their fluency. These results further support the findings of previous studies that suggest a relationship between studying abroad and L2 fluency. Also, a relationship between the students' self-evaluations and teachers' evaluations was found: the students who were judged to have improved their fluency were those who reported that they had paid attention to their pronunciation skills and aimed at improving them; these students were possibly also more capable of self-assessment.

However, it needs to be said that, first, the current study deals with read-aloud speech only, not spoken interaction. Second, we understand the development of fluency as a complex process, where features of articulation (such as e.g. pausing or patterns of intonation) intertwine with other (e.g. grammatical, lexical, pragmatic) characteristics. All these may be used in perceptions and evaluations of what is 'fluent'. The present study is part of a series of studies (Ullakonoja 2008a, 2008b) focusing exclusively on phonetic features. Third, the study abroad context itself involves

various social and cultural factors that could not be explored here (Freed et al. 2004, Wilkinson 1998). Fourth, more subjects should be investigated to be able to generalise the results.

Finally, many factors that are typically involved in the stay abroad context (for a review on the effects of study abroad on L2 learning, see Collentine & Freed 2004) are also considered important research foci in current studies on second language acquisition and foreign language education. In staying abroad, but in other contexts as well, it is not only the quantity of L2 input that is important but also its quality and meaningfulness. The overall role of the social and cultural environment, the significance of participating in the social networks of the target culture and the experience of authenticity and 'ownership' in one's learning process should not be forgotten. While recognizing the importance of these factors, we nevertheless feel that the study abroad context provides an excellent opportunity for a learner to become more fluent in L2. This opportunity could also be more systematically taken into consideration in university language education, for example in coaching students for their exchange visits and thus in helping them to gain optimal benefit from the target language environment.

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