The Relation between Cognitive Fluency and Utterance Fluency in Second Language Spoken Fluency: Studying Fluency through a Psycholinguistic Lens

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Abstract : This study explores the aspects of second language (L2) spoken fluency that are related to L2 linguistic knowledge and processing skill. It draws on Levelt's 'blueprint' of the L2 speaker which discusses the cognitive issues underlying the act of speaking. However, L2 speaking assessments have largely neglected the underlying mechanism involved in language production; emphasis is given on the relationship between subjective ratings of L2 speech sample and objectively measured aspects of fluency. Hence, in this study, the relation between L2 linguistic knowledge and processing skill i.e. Cognitive Fluency (CF), and objectively measurable aspects of L2 spoken fluency i.e. Utterance Fluency (UF) is examined. The participants of the study are L2 learners of English, studying at high school level in Hyderabad, India. 50 participants with intermediate level of proficiency in English performed several lexical retrieval tasks and attention-shifting tasks to measure CF, and 8 oral tasks to measure UF. Each aspect of UF (speed, pause, and repair) were measured against the scores of CF to find out those aspects of UF which are reliable indicators of CF. Quantitative analysis of the data shows that among the three aspects of UF; speed is the best predictor of CF, and pause is weakly related to CF. The study suggests that including the speed aspect of UF could make L2 fluency assessment more reliable, valid, and objective. Thus, incorporating the assessment of psycholinguistic mechanisms into L2 spoken fluency testing, could result in fairer evaluation.