

# On How to Improve Oral Fluency in Technical English

Diana MARCU<sup>1</sup>

DOI: 10.52744/AUCSFLSA.2022.01.27

## Abstract:

*The present paper catches a glimpse of some of the issues involved when teaching English for engineers, more precisely the factors which are to be considered when working on the improvement of oral fluency in Technical English. The task of the teacher becomes challenging when designing activities that are meant to help them in the process of communicating in English. The aim of any English course or seminar is to prepare students for the future expectations and requests of the labour market. The paper discusses the concept of fluency and it proposes the 'step-by-step' practice approach meant to help students overcome anxiety of speaking and improve oral skills. Students' attitudes and expectations towards the learning of English as a foreign language, as well as some of the factors which hinder the development of speaking skills are presented based on the questionnaires and discussions with 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduates studying engineering at the University of Craiova.*

**Keywords:** *expectations; ESP; oral fluency; TE; speaking skills*

## 1. Introduction

The world nowadays is characterized by a stringent need to communicate, especially due to the rapid development of technology. English has become the main language of communication for those who need to perform in a society driven by globalization and internationalisation. More and more students and people start learning English for various reasons: it is taught in schools from early ages, it is further used at work especially in the case of multinationals, it is commonly spoken for leisure and travelling. Depending on the various reasons people start studying the language, they may embrace learning General English or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The present paper offers a glance at English for Engineering Purposes, more precisely Technical English (TE) with a focus on how to improve the speaking skills of students studying it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Universitatea din Craiova.



As it is the case of any ESL course, the goals of TE classes is to develop the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills of students with the difference of transforming the course into a vocational-oriented one. Thus, the syllabus, the learning objectives, the choice of materials as well as the didactic approach should be relevant to the future profession of engineers functioning in an international context. It is impossible to state a specific skill which would be of greater significance to engineers in their profession since, when it comes to using English, the future engineer needs to function as a whole – he/she might need to read, understand and interpret written messages or specifications, they might face the situation of listening to other speakers from other countries or making presentations in English in front of colleagues or people from outside their organization.

The university undergraduates specializing in engineering, be it power engineering, electro mechanics, computer engineering or aviation engineering at the University of Craiova, Romania, study English as a compulsory subject during their first two years of study, with an average of 1-2 courses a week. Teachers face a real and significant challenge when designing a TE course since they need to cover as many relevant aspects as possible in a relatively short period of time so that they meet the needs of both their students and of the continuously changing labour market. The aim of the course is to prepare them for the future expectations of the employers. And, in this picture, speaking, as an act of communication, plays an important role. A future engineer will not be restricted to written messages or presentations, he/she will have to orally communicate to others in different instances. Specifically, for this reason, teachers need to train them into the act of speaking in a foreign language, help them become better and better and break the barriers of fear and anxiety when they express themselves in English.

When it comes to communicative competence, one of its major characteristics is fluency. The oral fluency of students is manifested into their ability to speak freely, without hesitations, unnecessary pauses and with the use of a vocabulary range specific to their specialization. Fluency has been defined in various ways, as „the flow or smoothness of delivery when speaking” (Chambers, 1997), while De Jong and Pefetti (2011) refer to the main features of speaking, taking into consideration time, pauses, hesitations and repetitions. The same authors continue with a differentiation between what cognitive fluency represents compared to performance fluency. It is stated that cognitive fluency is „the efficiency of the operation of the cognitive mechanisms underlying performance” while the latter is described as „observable speech, fluidity and accuracy



of the original performance". Most research in the field of fluency focused on certain variables such as time limit, amount and frequency of hesitations, the capacity to produce speech acts between pauses, the frequency and length of pauses. Other researchers bring into discussion the appearance and relevance of formulaic speech units and multiword frames to the creation of fluency in learners' speech (Chambers, 1998). In terms of cognitive psychology, fluency is perceived as the ease of processing information, based on the recognition of familiar stimuli to which objects and experiences refer (Jacoby, Dallas, 1981; Reber et al, 2004). Making the distinction between fluency and accuracy, Lennon (1990) describes the process as one strictly based on performance, yet difficult to be assessed on other variables beside the temporal ones. He considers that, „fluency differs from the other elements of oral proficiency in one important respect: whereas such elements as idiomaticness, appropriateness, lexical range, and syntactic complexity can all be assigned to linguistic knowledge, fluency is purely a performance phenomenon, there is presumably no fluency 'store'. Rather, fluency is an impression on the listener's part that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently. Dysfluency markers, as it were, make the listener aware of the production process under strain" (Lennon, 1990:391). At the same time, fluency has become an issue of didactics, teachers and trainers being interested in how to enhance their students' fluency. Chambers (1997) sees it as a result of developed skills while Littlewood (1984) refers to both the cognitive and behavioral aspect when producing messages. So, special attention is paid to the way knowledge is organized in the students' minds to apply it efficiently in the future.

## **2. Students' attitudes and expectations**

As it was aforementioned, engineering students learn English during their first two years of academic studies. It is a compulsory discipline, with 1 or 2 sessions every week which is meant to help them acquire the necessary knowledge to perform successfully in this field. Yet, in order for any course or seminar to be lucrative, it must meet the needs of the participants. Starting from this, at the beginning, students are always given a questionnaire whose answers are of great help in designing the course. Most of the students, when being asked about their expectations out of attending the English class, answer that they wish they would speak better in English. Interestingly, many of them consider that they hadn't had the chance of freely expressing themselves in the foreign language when studying it at school and that much focus was offered to grammar rules and reading practice. Though they somehow know the rules of



sentence formation and correct tense use, when it comes to speaking, they do not feel confident and consider the rules are not of help anymore. Students' interests go towards speaking on general themes and also on specialized ones since their desire is to prepare for the future demands. As Boncea (2021) states, „a technical English programme should be centered on an assessment of aims, expectations and needs and the functions for which English will be used in the future technical career the students will embark on” (Boncea, 2021: 16).

At the same time, students' attitude towards speaking tasks differ, depending on their previous experience and the level of knowledge they have acquired. So, in front of the teacher there is a compact group, divided into three: there are some who speak with no hesitations, who seem confident on their level of language and speak easily and efficiently, then there are those students who speak quite well, yet with the need of improving aspects such as accuracy and pronunciation and peers who are afraid to 'open their mouths' so that they do not make mistakes or simply cannot find the words with ease and turn to their native language for communicating ideas. In this case we talk about a feeling of anxiety when they are asked to express themselves in the foreign language. Thus, the task of the teacher becomes challenging when designing activities that are meant to help them in the process of communicating in English. It is vital to consider the language that has already been taught to learners, to focus on meaning rather than accuracy, to teach students that a time limit is important in conveying messages, all based on sufficient input and output.

An important feature for the development of a successful oral communication process is represented by the cultural knowledge of students, a characteristic which attracted many of my students and arouse their interest in the process of communication. Being able to identify the cultural features of different nations they might have to interact with or the ability to switch the style from an informal to a formal one depending on the situation, are not only indispensable but also interactive and attractive to students. For engineers as well it is essential to be aware of and apply such knowledge in their future careers when faced with negotiations or meetings. My students' response to such instances of cultural awareness was a positive one.

When asked about the factors that hinder their development of speaking in English, students have mentioned several. Yet, the one that appeared on top of their answers is the limited exposure to oral interactions. Students have never had the chance of speaking in reality with foreigners except for the rare instances of travelling abroad and asking for information or ordering food or drink. At the same time, they



live and study in a non-English speaking country, so their interaction in English is limited. Social media or online computer games are the only instances they need to use English and this generally happens in a written form of communication. So, lack of interaction in English both inside and outside the academic environment has been listed as a major factor for preventing a good oral communication in the foreign language. Then, there is the fear of making mistakes when speaking which plays a major role in their desire of trying to express themselves in English. Students feel they do not have enough time to prepare the speech, they are afraid of using wrong tenses or inaccurate pronunciation of words, factors which lead to their unwillingness of speaking during classes. Thus, it stands in the power of the teacher to foster oral fluency as frequently as possible and advise students on what they may do in order to improve this skill in their free time, outside the classroom. Overall, students' attitude towards acquiring TE is a positive one since most of them are interested in improving their competence in the L2.

### **3. 'Step-by-step' practice**

It is the responsibility of the teacher to try to offer students opportunities for them to express orally in English. Though it might seem a difficult task, considering the available amount of time during meetings or the high number of students attending at one time, it is not an impossible chore as long as it meets their expectations. It is a good idea to implement speaking activities 'step-by-step', starting with simple general interactions and continuing with more and more complex ones the moment students become familiar with what spoken messages require. The topics of discussions should be drawn both from real life and should be relevant to their future professions as engineers. We, as teachers, should bear in mind that we prepare students for real-life situations and speaking activities are to follow this goal as well. At the end of a research conducted on how to enhance oral fluency during General English for technical learners, Gorkaltseva et al. (2015) conclude that, „oral fluency as a specific feature of verbal communication can be successfully developed by the cognitive-communicative approach, which provides multiple opportunities for real-life interaction. Creating situations for regular real-life communication is especially important for technical learners, who tend to appreciate practical activities” (Gorkaltseva, 2015: 147).

Introductions are one way to 'break the ice' of speaking in English. They help students perceive the task as a simple, enjoyable and real activity. Following patterns for introductions, students leave apart their anxiety of speaking in a foreign language and take courage in future



discussions. Teachers might ask those with a better level of knowledge and more self-esteem when speaking in English to turn the informal style of presenting themselves into a more formal one. It is an activity which suits both beginner and intermediate-level students. Then, from the language of introductions, we turn to role-plays and role-cards containing information to be used in their speech, an activity which most of the time is enjoyable to students since they interact to one another and are not stressed by what they should include in the message. As Bălănescu (2019) states, „the aim of a communicative activity in class is to create an information gap, and thus encourage students to exchange ideas, facts, opinions, etc., as to ensure realistic and meaningful interaction” (Bălănescu, 2019:63). The presentation of technical features of products and devices is a next phase in the improvement of oral fluency of students in engineering. When describing technical characteristics of devices, students relate to their knowledge and, using prompts, they feel at ease with conducting the presentation. Peers’ feedback is of high importance in this process as well. Debates on relevant topics represent somehow the next step in the development of their speaking skills, being an interactive and cooperative activity. They include preparation, collaborative work and great outcomes at the end. Oral presentations are the conclusive step in students’ development of speaking skills. As Codreanu (2015) states, „...the oral presentation functions as a quality regulator or a ‘speech-checker’ from the language, content and delivery point of view, wherein the student is double-checked throughout the presentation itself and throughout the questions-answers session followed by a written feedback” (Codreanu, 2015: 82).

#### **4. Conclusions**

The improvement of speaking skills in English is of high importance to students in engineering as well since, for them, not only the technical vocabulary is salient but also their future ability to orally interact in the foreign language. In their professional lives, engineers are faced with various instances of communicating orally to other people in the second language, be it for introductions, telephone conversations or presentations, so they need to prepare ever since academic studies for such situations. Students expect from the English seminars to offer them the possibility to speak more often and improve their communicative skills, so it is in the hands of the teacher to create the proper environment and select relevant activities and topics to help them develop in this matter. Practice will help students overcome anxiety and fear of making



mistakes. Fluency takes time and patience, but with the proper approach, students are able to progress.

## Bibliography

- Bălănescu, E.O. (2019). The fall of communism and its impact on English teaching and learning. In *Revue des Sciences Politiques*, No. 61, pp. 57-67.
- Boncea, I. J. (2021). Practical aspects in devising technical English vocabulary exercises. In *Annals of the University of Craiova*, XVII, 1/2021, Pro Universitaria.
- Chambers, F. (1997), What do we mean by fluency? *System*, 25(4), 535-544.
- Codreanu, F. (2015). Learning technical English through oral presentations. In *Acta Technica Napocensis, Series: Languages for Specific Purposes*, Vol. 15, UT Press, pp. 81-88.
- De Jong, N. & Perfetti, C. (2011), Fluency training in the ESL classroom: An experimental study of fluency development and proceduralization, *Language Learning* 61(2), pp. 533-568.
- Gorkaltseva, E., et all (2015). Enhancing Oral Fluency as a Linguodidactic Issue. In *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 206, pp. 141-147.
- Jacoby, L.L., Dallas, M. (1981). On the relationship between autobiographical memory and perceptual learning. in *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 110, pp. 306-340.
- Lennon, P., (1990) The advanced learner at large in the L2 community, *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*.
- Reber, R., et all. (2004). Processing fluency and aesthetic pleasure: Is beauty in the perceiver's processing experience? In *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8(4), pp. 364-382.
- Littlewood, W. (1984). *Foreign and second language learning: language acquisition research and its implementation for the classroom*, Cambridge University Press.