
Book Review

Exploring EFL Fluency in Asia

Theron Muller, John Adamson, Philip Shigeo Brown, and Steven Herder, Eds. *Palgrave MacMillan*, 2014. (354 pages)

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What is language fluency? While seemingly simple on the surface, this question has driven second language researchers for decades, and it is this very question that drives the studies in the edited volume, *Exploring EFL fluency in Asia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). Edited by a quartet of Japan-based EFL teacher-researchers with decades of combined teaching experience among them, the volume contains the most comprehensive, up-to-date research concerning fluency as it pertains to language education. More than any aspect of learning a foreign language, the idea of becoming “fluent” has captured popular opinion: bookstores and Web sites abound with “learn X language in X weeks” and “how to become fluent in X” guidebooks. Some purport to use scientifically-proven methods of language learning, while others are little more than motivational “yes, you can” essays. *Exploring EFL fluency* stands out as a superb collection of both classroom-based research with practical tips for language teachers and detailed explanatory guides for theoretical aspects of fluency.

The title itself sets this book apart from others in three ways. First, fluency is treated as it applies (or, rather, as it rarely is applied) to the EFL context in Asian countries. Second, the concept of “fluency” is expanded upon from its typical meaning of speaking ability to the other three skills (writing, reading,

and listening). At the same time, the editors make pains to point out that they have “intentionally left it to the contributors to define fluency in a way that is meaningful to them in their contexts” (p. 4). Thus, from the opening introduction, it is clear that what is meant by “fluency” in this book is an extremely complicated linguistic phenomenon. Third, the studies contained in the book present an historically complicated and convoluted concept in a simplified yet not overly simple fashion for foreign language teachers to easily digest and use in their own teaching contexts.

The book itself is divided into five parts, with Part 1 dealing with definitions of fluency and its place within a larger language learning curriculum, and other parts dealing with each of the four traditional language skills. Each part consists of several chapters written by authors from across Asia, with each part preceded by a brief summary by the editors. Topics covered in the studies range from the relation of fluency-based activities to testing, to ways of assessing fluency, to the benefits of fluency training activities on language production and comprehension. Throughout the book, the emphasis is on the utility of fluency as a process of language learning, regardless whether the focus is on improving the memory retrieval of set lexical phrases, comprehending complex and sophisticated language, or producing more accurate sentences without pauses.

The major contribution this book makes to the field of EFL is the sheer scope of the fluency-related studies it covers. Researchers will find a great deal to examine in terms of definitions of fluency and its relationship to lexicon, linguistic coding, memory retrieval, and cognition. Teachers likewise will find several of the chapters a treasure-trove of practical ideas for lessons to help learners automatize each of the four skills. The clear presentation of classroom-based action research in many of the chapters demonstrates to practitioners how they themselves could also conduct such research with their own learner populations. Finally, the discussion of the “four strands” (Nation, 2007), the importance of autonomy, and the value of encouraging a more learner-centered, participatory framework in class may not be unique or new to all readers. However, having such related ideas and views of fluency placed in the same volume, and particularly in the same learning context, helps their mutual

connection and effectiveness for language learning become more transparent.

That said, there are a number of flaws to the volume, some of which are unavoidable given both the topic and the context. As a co-editor, myself, of an upcoming language education book that attempts to include studies in “Asia” (Apple, Da Silva, & Fellner, in press), I well understand the difficulties in finding representative samples from various Asia-based educational contexts. The present volume includes contributions from 20 authors (two of whom also served as editors) based in eight countries: 12 from Japan, and one each in Korea, China, Taiwan, Israel, Egypt, New Zealand, and the U.S. Considering U.S., New Zealand, and Egypt as Asian countries seems a bit of a stretch, and the lack of authors from other major EFL contexts in Asia (the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia) makes me wonder if *Exploring EFL Fluency in East Asia* might not have been a more appropriate title for the volume.

Additionally, while the chapters discussing the four strands of fluency, spoken fluency, reading fluency, and listening fluency are necessary to give the reader background information on the various theories and models of fluency, these theories are not necessarily relevant only to the EFL situation. The editors (and a few of the authors) contend that fluency-based curricula and courses are needed more than ever in Asian EFL programs due to a historical reliance on grammar-translation and rote memorization. However, there is no reason to believe that the same isn’t true of other language programs in other countries. My own experience in the U.S., for example, is of extensive translation and rote memorization in high school French and university German classes, and a family member who once taught both high school French and Spanish admitted that her yearly syllabus consisted primarily of memorization and translation for exams. The purpose of this volume is not comparative or cross-cultural analysis. However, language teachers based in Asian countries — who presumably are those most likely to find this studies volume of interest — may wish to take care not to overgeneralize from their own particularly local educational context to a larger “cultural” context of Asia, which may or may not exist as a single entity.

Finally, the lack of an overarching definition of fluency is both a strength and a potential drawback to the volume. Studies in second language acquisition

(SLA) have typically examined the relationship of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (often termed CAF for short); indeed, an entire special issue of *Applied Linguistics* was devoted to CAF. Although in that issue Skehan (2009) pointed out that the definition of fluency as “the capacity to produce speech at normal rate and without interruption” (p. 510) was frequently used, he and other authors called for consideration of lexicon and task difficulty level in determining fluency (e.g., Ellis, 2009). Others argued that CAF interact dynamically and are difficult to view independently (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2009). The strength of the present volume is not only that it treats only one aspect of the CAF (fluency) by expanding on the concept as it applies to all language skills (not just speaking and writing), but also that it tries to give the “big picture” of how fluency cannot and should not be measured or examined with a single measurement. Thus, the present volume could be seen as answering the call for fluency to be “rethought” (Skehan, 2009, p. 510).

On the other hand, the lack of a single definition of fluency, and the repeated insistence that fluency should be seen as including complex grammar structures, set phrases, pauses, self-corrections, and tasks within a certain time pressure, leads to the usage of fluency to mean virtually the same thing as “proficiency.” In addition, a few authors in the volume seem to equate fluency with “communicative competence,” which would necessarily involve socio-pragmatics and intercultural skills as well. The seeming desire to include as many voices as possible within the volume may have also resulted in slightly varying writing and research quality from chapter to chapter. One or two chapters begin with two or three introductory paragraphs that feel somewhat tacked on as an afterthought, or perhaps due to last-minute publisher demands.

Ultimately, this volume of edited papers provides a worthy addition both to the study of fluency in SLA and to the pedagogical concerns of the practically-minded classroom teacher. Available only as a hardcover or a Kindle edition, the price is a bit steep for the average teacher; interested EFL teachers and researchers who don’t have immediate access to institutional research funds may wish to inquire whether their departmental colleagues could recommend a copy or two for their institution’s library.

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