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# STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FLUENCY AND ACCURACY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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*Accuracy and fluency are two factors which can determine the success of English language students in the future. Accuracy is the ability to produce correct sentences using correct grammar and vocabulary. Fluency is the ability to read, speak, or write easily, smoothly, and expressively. In other words, the speaker can read, understand and respond in a language clearly and concisely while relating meaning and context. Fluency generally increases as learners progress from beginning to advanced readers and writers. Language teachers who concentrate on fluency help their students to express themselves in fluent English. They pay more attention to meaning and context and are less concerned with grammatical errors. Balancing the accuracy and fluency should be the main aim of us as the English teachers. Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has always been a challenge for language teachers. This paper tries to answer the question which of these language capabilities are more important for the students.*

**Key words:** *Fluency, accuracy, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), meaning and form, needs analysis.*

## 1. Introduction

Accuracy and fluency are two factors which can determine the success of English language students in the future. Accuracy is the ability to produce correct sentences using correct grammar and vocabulary. We say that accuracy is relative, because a young child is not capable of the same level of accuracy as an adult. Teachers who concentrate on accuracy help their students to produce grammatically correct written and spoken English. Typical accuracy activities are: grammar presentations, gap-fill exercises, frame dialogues. Fluency is the ability to read, speak, or write easily, smoothly, and expressively. In other words, the speaker can read, understand and respond in a language clearly and concisely while relating meaning and context. Fluency generally increases as learners progress from beginning to advanced readers and writers. Language teachers who concentrate on fluency help their students to express themselves in fluent English. They pay more attention to meaning and context and are less concerned with grammatical errors. Typical fluency activities are: role

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plays, speeches, communicative activities, games. Balancing the accuracy and fluency should be the main aim of us as the English teachers. This paper tries to answer the question which of these language capabilities are more important for the students. The last few decades have seen debates in language teaching concerning the different opinions of whether teachers should concentrate and focus on accuracy and form as opposed to focusing on fluency and meaning. In this regard, it is also believed that the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners can speak more fluently and produce more fluent writing while they write essays requiring their topical knowledge in comparison with the essays requiring their general knowledge. One explanation can be the different purposes for which the ESP learners use the language. (Ahmadi, Meihami, 2017)

Accuracy and fluency are terms characteristic for a successful conversation. Scrivener (2005, 160-162) declares that accuracy is the ability to speak correctly without making serious mistakes and therefore a greater use of instant teachers' correction within a speaking activity is appropriate.

On the contrary, fluency is the ability to speak confidently without irrelevant pauses or hesitation, however, often with making major mistakes. It is often believed that in corrections made by the teachers could interfere with the aims of the speaking activities (Hutchinson, Waters, 1987).

Hutchinson and Waters also explore the importance of learning needs. They maintain that ESP main aim is to teach English as a subject related to the learners' needs and believe that what makes ESP different from General English 'is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need. The main concern of action-oriented approach to course design is to enable the learners to use the foreign language to accomplish just those tasks that are of most relevance for their professional lives. At this point needs analysis is called for. Vulić (2014) claims that an effective needs analysis determines what communicative tasks the learners have to accomplish and what discourses they have to know in order to function in their profession. Teachers should be aware of whether their main goal in a speaking activity is accuracy or fluency and adapt their role in class. The students' reason for studying the language will sometimes dictate the balance to some extent. For example, adults who learn English for non-academic reasons are likely to be more concerned with fluency, while young learners studying for exams think accuracy is more important. The grammar translation method is a method of teaching a foreign language where the rules of grammar in the foreign language are taught along with the vocabulary of that language. Not much time is spent dealing with the spoken form of the language. One of the major disadvantages of this method of teaching is that it often leaves students frustrated and bored. The students see the language as a bunch of vocabulary, with no particular comprehension. The method has two main goals: to enable students to read and translate literature written in the target language, and to further students' general intellectual development. The term "Communicative Language Teaching" (CLT) means different things to different teachers. To most teachers, it simply means a greater emphasis on speaking and oral activities in the classroom.

Eskey (1983:319) claims that fluency may cause the significant effect on accuracy, rewarding a learner's fluency may, in some cases, actually obstruct his or her achievement of accuracy. For example, in order to deliver the message, language learners find the words, but they

either pronounce them wrongly or put them together inappropriately. Such problem happens due to the fact that they speak English continually but express themselves poorly. Therefore, although accuracy is not enough by itself, it is still considered as necessary in language learning.

Vulić (2014) claims there are several elements that can influence accuracy and fluency. One of them is learner goals. A strategy guideline should be provided to assist teachers in determining what degree they ought to focus on. It should be emphasized that every individual learns in different ways. If the ESL learners are young, it is most likely that little grammar instruction is needed. However, if the students are adolescents or adults, focusing on form may be more important. It is also suggested by Vulić (2014) that education level is relevant to focus on accuracy or fluency. If adults are at the level of beginners with little formal education, then focusing on form will be less important while fluency is the top priority. On the other hand, if the learners are at the intermediate or advanced level and are well educated, accuracy may be required and it may be necessary for the teacher to provide some feedback relating to form correction in order for them to make progress. Therefore, focusing on accuracy is not enough, fluency still needs to be concerned in terms of learners' age, proficiency level and educational background.

Moreover, when teacher is teaching receptive skills, such as listening or reading, the emphasis on form will be less important, since these skills require. Nevertheless, this does not mean accuracy can be neglected, because when knowing grammatical structure, learners can build up logical connection between sentences.

On the other hand, if the teacher is focusing on productive skills, such as speaking and writing, then formal accuracy will become an essential concern.

Furthermore, if the learner's immediate need is survival communication, formal accuracy is less focused. On the other hand, if the learner wants to use the language in a professional field, such as writing an academic essay, then a high degree of formal accuracy is essential. "The higher the stakes, the more likely that accuracy will be important" (Eskey, 1983:318).

## **2. Aim**

This paper aims at exploring Croatian ESP students' beliefs and attitudes about the importance of accuracy and fluency.

## **3. Method**

The sample has been composed of 100 students from the Zagreb University of Applied Sciences, The Department of Electrical Engineering. The students are in their third semester of study.

Data on accuracy and fluency are collected by means of the questionnaire prepared for the purpose of this research. The questionnaire was written in Croatian, containing 21 statements, and it was administered during regular English language classes. The statements referred to the importance of grammar and communication in English learning activities and how students feel about the importance of fluency and accuracy.

#### 4. Results and discussion

All students expressed their belief in great importance of learning English both for their professional purposes but as well as for general use in every day life. Almost all (93%) use English in all aspects of their life (Internet for fun and educational purposes, communication with friends or acquaintances from abroad, professional literature).

Table 1. Situations in which English is used out of class

Internet only for fun and informal communication	45%
Internet only for educational purposes	2%
Internet only for business	9%
Internet for fun / educational purposes	15%
Internet for fun / educational / business purposes	29%

As shown in *Table 1* English is used by 45% students only as an instrument that facilitates entertainment and informal communication. However, approximately the same percentage (45%) of students uses English interchangeably for different purposes – entertainment, education and business.

More than 80% think English is very important for their future profession and a significant number of them (93%) think that a good English knowledge will increase their job opportunities.

Table 2. Learning and communication strategies

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Grammar is very important in the process of learning ESP.	75	6	7	2	10
6. I like to be pointed out my grammatical mistakes, which I then try to correct.	87	5	3	4	1
7. It is better not to speak until you are sure it is grammatically correct.	9	8	9	43	31
8. If mistakes are not corrected in time, it is difficult to learn to speak correctly later.	23	42	9	16	10
9. Language for Specific Purposes would be best mastered by translating from Croatian.	9	12	46	17	16
10. It is more important that the message is conveyed than that it is grammatically completely correct.	13	35	19	21	12
11. It is important to speak English fluently, with no pauses or hesitation.	31	39	21	6	3
18. Grammatical errors are acceptable in informal communication (so-called "small talk").	37	46	9	5	3

Note: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

When asked to comment the statement of importance of speaking fluently, without hesitating or making bigger pauses, in a professional context, many of them (70%) considered it very important. However, there are also a large number of them who were not sure about the answer.

There is one more statement, where their opinions differed. When asked if it was more important to communicate the message than to make it grammatically impeccable, most of them (48%) opted in favour of the communication. However, a significant number of them (41%) thought both were equally important. It can perhaps be explained with the fact that a majority of these students were once exposed to grammar translation method in primary and secondary schools, where a great importance was given to accuracy and grammar.

It was no surprise to see the high percentage (81%) of students who think grammar is very important in their English courses. 83% of students think grammar mistakes are acceptable in "small talk", but not (65%) in more formal communication (negotiations, conference talks etc.). They like to be corrected (92%) and many think that teachers should do that immediately (65%). However, they don't think that not being able to speak accurately should constrain them from speaking at all (74%). When asked if professional English should be mastered through translations, the opinions were diverse. There was an equal number of those thinking translations were necessary as of those who thought English could be taught without it. Here again, we see the strong influence of grammar-translation method.

## 5. Conclusion

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), courses should be designed to meet learners' needs. This may suggest that language teachers should note which learners need more attention on accuracy or fluency. Although ESP could solve the problem, and "custom-made" courses seem ideal and perfect, we should be honest and realistic and admit that this is rarely possible, especially in large groups, at universities or high school classes.

If we look at the results of the questionnaire we conducted to find out what students think about the importance of accuracy and fluency, we can say the results were anticipated. Our students think that speaking fluently is important, but also agree that accuracy should not be neglected. That means that it is up to the teachers to find the best possible method and solution for their students in order to achieve their goal.

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### Sažetak

#### **STAVOVI STUDENATA O ZNAČAJU TEČNOSTI I TOČNOSTI PRI UČENJU STRANOG JEZIKA**

*Točnost i tečnost dva su čimbenika koji mogu odrediti budući uspjeh učenika engleskog jezika. Točnost je sposobnost tvorenja ispravnih rečenica koristeći pravilnu gramatiku i vokabular. Tečnost je sposobnost da se čita, govori ili piše glatko, lako i izražajno. Drugim riječima, govornik može čitati, razumjeti i reagirati na jeziku jasno i sažeto, dok istodobno prenosi značenje i kontekst. Tečnost se obično povećava kako učenici napreduju od početnih do naprednih faza čitanja i pisanja. Nastavnici jezika koji naglasak stavljaju na tečnost time svojim učenicima pomažu da se izražavaju na tečnom engleskom. Više pažnje posvećuju značenju i kontekstu i manje se bave gramatičkim pogreškama. Pronalaženje ravnoteže između točnosti i tečnosti trebao bi biti osnovni cilj nastavnika engleskog. Podučavanje engleskog za posebne namjene je uvijek bio izazov za nastavnike stranih jezika. Ovaj rad traži odgovor na pitanje koja od ovih jezičnih kompetencija je studentima važnija.*

**Ključne riječi:** *Tečnost, točnost, engleski jezik za posebne namjene, značenje i forma, analiza potreba.*

