

## Speaking English fluently: What does spoken English *really* look like?

Fluency in speaking refers to how continuous the spoken production is and how effortlessly it flows. This worksheet looks at issues in the fluency of spoken English that make speech less fluent such as hesitations, repetitions of words and phrases or dealing with vocabulary gaps. Such features are often believed to be typical of learner language, indicating problems with the ability to keep an uninterrupted flow of speech. As a result, some learners may feel self-conscious about the presence of these disfluencies in their speech, making them less confident at speaking and less willing to take part in conversations. However, it is useful to realise that all speakers, whether native speakers or learners of English, are disfluent sometimes and that such disfluencies are very common in spoken communication in general. In this worksheet, we are going to look more closely at different types of disfluencies in the conversations of native speakers of British English. The tasks use data and examples from the British National Corpus 2014 and from the Trinity Lancaster Corpus of spoken L2 English to explore these typical features of spoken interaction and the reasons for their occurrence.

### Task 1

When we think about spoken language, fluency is often mentioned as an important component of successful communication. Discuss the following questions with your partner or your group.

- ✚ What do you think 'being fluent' in a language means?
- ✚ What are some ways in which we can tell whether someone is fluent or not?
- ✚ Are there any areas of spoken interactive English that you think are especially challenging for you?

### Task 2

Look at the following examples from conversations in English. Some of the examples come from native speakers of English in the British National Corpus 2014, others come from learners of English from the Trinity Lancaster Corpus. Try to guess which examples came from (a) native speakers and which from (b) learners of English. Discuss what factors helped you to decide between the two groups of speakers.

1. S1: and you could always tell which student was which department you know? so oh yeah yeah just I mean very erm oh gosh what's the word? very oh I'll I'll think of it in a minute S2: distinctive? S1: er well yeah that

3. S1: my computer scientist erm colleague person who was who was who really helped us out she's been doing a lot of analysis today this was her Wednesday off

5. S1: I don't know whether that is actually possible it probably is erm but yeah I mean this idea of surveillance you know from parents I mean I don't think it's surveillance I mean it's you know it's not surveillance it's supervision you know which is which is fine some people some parents are very strict with supervising their children

2. S1: I do er I don't go I don't go over forty knowing it er in into erm even like on any of the roads [discussing the usual speed of driving]

4. S1: mm well I think they should have allowed the big banks to go bankrupt and should not have rescued them what might have followed if er if the big banks had disappeared? S2: well I think that if the big banks have disappeared people will the econom the economy of a country will go down

6. S1: one of the directors of the school is the chair and then they have various other committee people but it's a lady in actually called who is who's been who's the director of studies in one of the schools in the and she's been doing it for about twenty years but

7. S1: what kind of er techniques do you apply with technology? S2: erm well I I I use I use it in in teaching all aspects of English spoken written er listening and yes so and pronunciation erm but I don't think it's always necessary to have the latest S1: right erm for er some people er it's necessary yeah but for me it's not necessary er because er my students are not er able to buy the latest technology in the world and but I think that they like to work with that do you think so?

### Task 3

Learners of a foreign language sometimes struggle to find the right word to convey what they want to say. This may result in pauses in conversation and in the need to reformulate the sentence or having to use a paraphrase to explain what they mean. Sometimes, learners may find these gaps in their vocabulary knowledge embarrassing. However, searching for the right word in spoken communication is not unique to learners; rather, it is a common feature of any unplanned spoken interaction. In this task, we are going to look at how native English speakers experience and deal with vocabulary gaps in their speech.

Go to BNClab and type in the following expression: **what's the word**. This will give you examples where speakers searched for a word they could not recall or didn't know. Answer the following questions:

- ✚ How many examples did you find?
- ✚ Go to the Usage button and note down some of the words that the speakers looked for. [Tip: Increase the number of words you can see to 40-50 using the line above the findings to get further context].

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### Task 4

Pauses and hesitation sounds are considered to be a very common feature in spoken learner English. Often, they are attributed to the fact that learners need to think more carefully about their grammar or vocabulary than native speakers do. However, some of the hesitation is just a normal feature of spoken language in which speakers interact with each other and produce language on the go.

Search BNClab for two common hesitation sounds, *erm* and *er*, using the following search term: **er OR erm** [this will search for both words at the same time]. After your search, discuss the following questions:

- ✚ How many examples did you find?
- ✚ Do you think hesitation is a frequent feature in spoken communication of native speakers of English?
- ✚ What function do hesitation sounds fulfil in people's speech? Use the Usage button to find examples to support your explanations. You can also use the Age button to see whether the frequency of hesitation sounds changes with age.

### Task 5

In this task, we are going to reflect on what are some common features of spoken interactive communication. Think about the examples of spoken language you have looked at in Tasks 2 to 4.

- ✚ Make a list of the various disfluencies typical for spoken interaction.
- ✚ Can you think of some reasons why these occur when people speak to each other?

Make a note of your ideas. When you are finished, compare and discuss them with your partner or a group.

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